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THE RISK REPORT BY IAN BREMMER

China's fraught plan to end the war in Ukraine



WITH ITS 12-POINT plan to end the war in Ukraine, China has taken a significant step toward center stage in international politics.

In the past, it has avoided the risks and responsibilities that come with a leadership role on foreign policy questions that aren't directly relevant to China's national security. Now that Xi Jinping has consolidated vast power at home, he's ready to assert his country's influence in new ways. Yet, direct intervention in Russia's war on Ukraine is fraught with risk for China, its relations with America and Europe, and the entire global economy.

What's in China's peace plan? Despite Western suspicions that the proposal is designed mainly to help Russia, it calls for formal respect for Ukraine's sovereignty, protections for Ukrainian civilians, an end to interference with the flow of humanitarian aid into the country, and condemnation of the possible use of nuclear weapons. The plan also reflects the views of those around the world whose primary interest in the war is economic, by calling for a cease-fire, an end to sanctions, and the opening of peace talks that might help ease pressure on food and fuel prices.

Though Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky pledged to consider the plan, it has no chance of moving forward, because it does not require Russia's invading army to leave Ukraine, does not promise a return of Ukrainian land now

illegally occupied by Russian forces, and provides nothing tangible for reconstruction of the country. An immediate cease-fire would freeze Russian gains in place, forcing Ukraine to try to persuade Vladimir Putin to voluntarily give back land. In truth, no peace plan is likely to succeed at this stage of the war because neither the Russian nor the Ukrainian government can afford to lose.

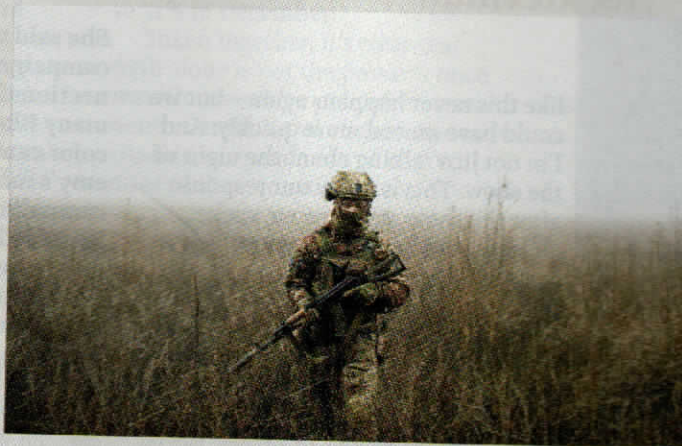
In addition, though Beijing has rejected the charge, Western governments continue to warn that China may still be thinking of providing weapons for Russia. Direct accusations from senior U.S. offi-

peacemaker with a blueprint most of the world can support. Though developing countries in Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East question Putin's motives, they see themselves more directly damaged by Western determination to make this war the most urgent priority in a world suffering from global crises like slow economic recovery from the pandemic, food and fuel inflation, unsustainable developing-world debt, refugees, and climate change.

CHINA'S PEACE PLAN implicitly presents the U.S. as a warmonger and NATO as the tool it uses to make an awful war last longer and cost more. It also allows Xi to interact with Putin—and even to visit Moscow in coming months—as a mediator rather than as an ally of the man who ordered the invasion. China may also be hoping to drive political wedges within America and Europe by creating an “off-ramp” for those on both sides of the Atlantic who question the wisdom of open-ended support for Ukraine.

China is playing a dangerous game.

Any provision of weapons to Russia would instantly make an already fractious U.S.-China relationship much worse. The aftershocks from that quake would be felt around the world. But even if China continues to limit its involvement to the role of Kremlin apologist and gadfly would-be peacemaker, the impact on tensions between America and China may help ensure the war in Ukraine continues to expand in ways no one can control.



A Ukrainian soldier on the front line in Donetsk Oblast, Ukraine, on Jan. 29

cial that China is considering the idea make clear that Washington is watching closely and that serious consequences will come if China presses ahead. For that reason, Beijing is unlikely to send Russia weapons or ammunition, but it surely hopes the threat alone will move NATO to push Ukraine to the negotiating table.

So what else does China hope its plan can achieve? It can promote China as a global problem solver and

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The View

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WORLD

DEAR UKRAINIANS

BY SEBASTIAN JUNGER

You have been at war for a year now, and death must have touched virtually every family in your country. Your struggle reminds me of Sarajevo, where I first experienced war as a journalist in 1993. The Bosnian Serb army had besieged the beautiful Bosnian capital, and ordinary citizens—many just teenagers—learned to use the tools of war to defend their families and homes.

INSIDE

CHINA'S PEACE PLAN TO END THE WAR IN UKRAINE

HOW RELIGIOUS AMERICANS FEEL ABOUT ABORTION RIGHTS

26 TIME March 13/March 20

Bootstrapped:
From the American
which this essay is
executive director of
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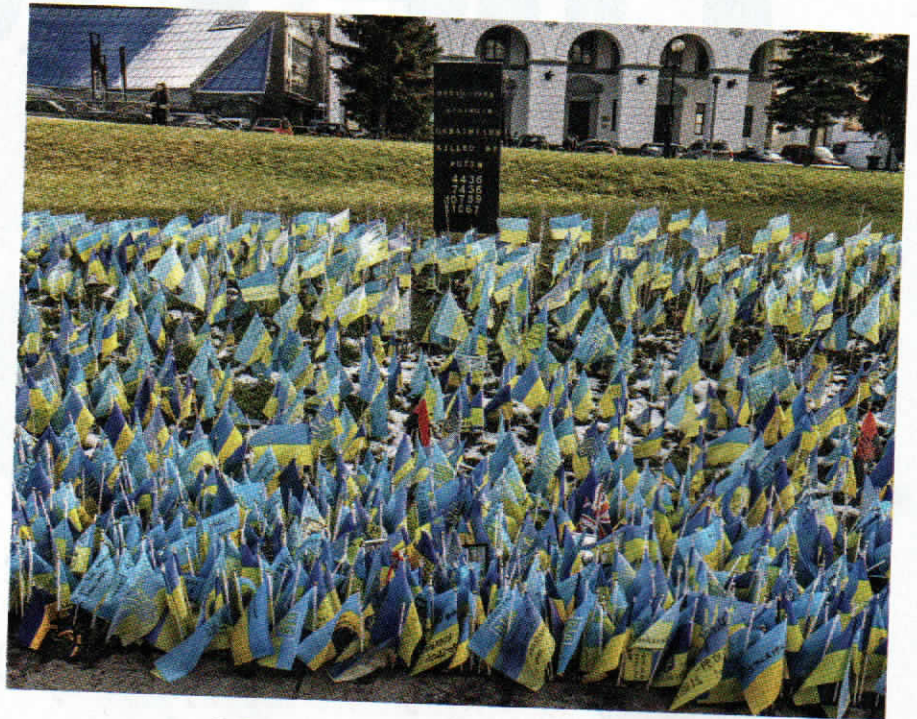
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The situation was both noble and tragic, inspiring and sad. It made me want to be Sarajevo. It made me want a great cause in my life that would require me to put others before myself. You seem to make yourself immortal when you do that; you seem to make yourself impervious to pain and fear and doubt. The reality is much more complicated, of course. But over and over throughout history, ordinary people defending their homes and families have found themselves capable of feats they never could have imagined.

My father was a refugee from two wars. In 1936 he and his family fled Madrid when the fascists came in under General Francisco Franco, and then fled again when the Nazis invaded France. It looked as if fascism was going to take over the world, but some people knew better. All of Western Europe's authoritarian regimes have collapsed since World War II. Of the Eastern bloc countries, only Russia and Belarus have slid back into authoritarianism. Europe is an overwhelmingly democratic continent because there are people everywhere who were and are willing to risk their lives defying evil.

Resistance fighters in France and other occupied countries joined Allied soldiers in World War II to crush the Nazi regime and eradicate fascism in Central Europe. The Ukrainian resistance is a direct descendent of these heroic citizens.

Like Hitler, Putin will fail in his endeavor—not only will he fail, but it will eventually destroy him. As a result, other dictators around the world will take note of the fact that smaller countries often win wars against invaders, and that invading a supposedly weak neighbor will probably end in failure. History is filled with inspiring examples. The Ottoman Empire invaded Montenegro over and over in the 1600s, outnumbering the Montenegrins by as much as 12 to 1. Each time, these mountain people drove out their invaders—often inflicting high casualties. And after the failed Easter Rising of 1916, Irish rebels eventually overthrew English rule despite the fact that they were hopelessly outnumbered and outgunned.



In Kyiv on Feb. 2, Ukrainian flags commemorate Ukrainian soldiers killed in the war with Russia

FREEDOM IS ONE of the few things that, throughout history, people have regularly been willing to die for. That can make invading a free society very costly. But a fight for freedom will not succeed without leaders who are willing to make the same sacrifices as everyone else. Without brave and selfless leaders, ordinary people will have little reason to believe that the society they are fighting for will be a fair one.

All free societies accord full rights and respect to women. A cause that sidelines women will probably fail for lack of popular support. Not only do women confer a kind of moral legitimacy to political causes, but women's social networks are often lateral rather than hierarchical—a huge asset for any underground movement.

Because of your success against Russian forces, China may hesitate to attack Taiwan, North Korea may think twice before declaring war on South Korea, and Russia may abandon claims to the Baltic countries. Western leaders clearly understand that the fight for Ukraine is a fight for peace and stability in all of Europe—if not the world. They have remained united in their commit-

ment to providing advanced weapons and ammunition, as well as tactical training by some of the West's most elite special forces. President Biden clearly wants to send Ukraine the maximum amount of military aid without triggering a catastrophic backlash by Putin. As the war continues to go in Ukraine's favor, many Americans hope that he will choose a moment to provide enough arms for a decisive victory.

In human societies, it's possible for a smaller individual or group to defeat a larger one—otherwise, the world would be dominated by fascist megastates, and freedom would not be possible. But that is not what the world looks like. Smaller countries like Ukraine can stand up to the powerful dictatorships and fight them to a standstill—particularly when they have access to advanced weapons and tactics. If Ukraine remains free, other countries will remain free as well, because fascist leaders around the world will be forced to understand that power does not always triumph. In fact, as often as not, it fails.

Junger, a journalist and filmmaker, is the author of the books *Tribe*, *Freedom*, and *War*

KYIV: ROMAN PILIWEY—GETTY IMAGES; DONETSK: MISHINA CFTO—ANADOLU AGENCY/GETTY IMAGES

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MASIH Alinejad

A VOICE
FOR
IRANIANS

BY ASTHA
RAJVANSHI

IT'S BEEN 13 YEARS SINCE MASIH ALINEJAD hugged her mother. That realization hits her during a TIME interview in early February, followed by another one: "Oh my God, I forgot my mom's face," she says, wide-eyed and shaking her head in disbelief. She stops and composes herself. "Look, I don't want to cry on camera."

Alinejad, 46, understands the power of her platform. Exiled from Iran since 2009, the journalist and activist has long spoken out against Iran's restrictions on women, calling the compulsory hijab "the Berlin Wall" of the regime. Her campaign alarmed Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who not only rails against her in speeches but even sent his minions to kidnap her in July 2021. One year later, a similar plot was to end in assassination, according to a U.S. Justice Department indictment. "Women of Iran are his biggest enemy," Alinejad says. "He's scared of us more than anything."

And the women of Iran are angry. Months-long, nationwide protests have roiled the country after a 22-year-old woman, Mahsa "Jina" Amini, died in September in the custody of the notorious "morality police" who roam public spaces to enforce Islamic dress and behavior.

Still, Alinejad arrives in surprisingly good spirits at TIME's New York City studio, coming from the FBI safe house where she is in hiding with her husband and son. She understands that attention feeds a rebellion built on the slogan

"Woman, life, freedom." Regime forces have killed more than 500 protesters and detained thousands more; the streets have grown quieter in recent weeks. But the depth of her connection with Iran's young people—she has nearly 9 million Instagram followers—tells her the Islamic Republic is living on borrowed time. As the photographer works, she sings. "The words mean: because I am a woman, I blossom through my wounds."

Share chapter

ALINEJAD GREW UP in a tiny village near the Caspian Sea, where her father was a sharecropper. She found purpose as a newspaper reporter in Tehran but left Iran for good in 2009 after running afoul of the regime for, among other things, reporting that lawmakers had not taken a pay cut they'd claimed. "I asked too many questions," she recalls.

When she first began speaking out in New York, her only weapon was social media. In 2014, she launched a campaign called My Stealthy Freedom, asking women inside Iran to record themselves without hijabs; she would upload their videos to her Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook accounts. Thousands of women have obliged over the years, the campaign branding itself with the hashtag #WhiteWednesdays.

"Iran is inside me," she says. "I am there every single day through my social media." The videos and social media connections remain a way for her to connect with her homeland, where her elderly mother still resides.

In November, French President Emmanuel Macron, seemingly moved by a meeting with four Iranian women—including Alinejad—declared the protests a "revolution." She has also briefed U.S. National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan and met with other exiled Iranian dissidents to discuss ways of uniting a fragmented opposition. And she has asked female politicians to stop donning the hijab. "I am asking all Western feminists to speak up. Join us. Make a video. Cut your hair. Burn a headscarf. Share it on social media and boost Iranian voices. Use your freedom to say her name," she wrote last year.

As she speaks, Alinejad looks around the studio. For once, her own phone isn't in her hand. She has just been talking about young girls—16-year-old Sarina Esmailzadeh and 17-year-old Nika Shakarami, both beaten to death in protests last year—and she wants to put faces to their names by showing TIME photos and videos of them.

When these girls were killed, she says, "suddenly they became heroes. Why don't people pay attention to women when they're alive?"

PHOTOGRAPH BY CELESTE SLOMAN FOR TIME

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NATION

Welcome to the new American Dream

BY ALISSA QUART

THE CLASSIC LEATHER BOOT HAS HAD MANY NAMES over the years—lace-up, cowboy, congress, pale rider. To get your work boots on your feet 200 or so years ago, you would stand up and grab two small leather flaps on the sides, known as bootstraps, and pull the boot up. From this everyday activity, the idiom “to pull yourself up by your bootstraps” was born—and with it, a torturous myth that true success meant getting ahead on only your energy and steam, without help from your family, government, or community. While it was initially understood to be an absurdity, over time it became a phrase that millions of people take seriously. The phrase is now, arguably, the basis of the American Dream and its embrace of an individualism that shades into a brittle self-sufficiency.

For years, I have been struck by how much the self-made myth shapes public opinion and policy. As a reporter focused on inequality, I frequently see this relentless individualistic stance, even in the messages I receive from readers about how the poor are responsible for their own scarcity, strangers wagging their proverbial fingers at “single mothers” or people who’ve been evicted. They are following decades of instructions that Americans have to accomplish everything on our own, from poor women being called “welfare queens” during the Reagan era to today’s Republican politicians opposing college-debt relief as “a debt-transfer scam.”

But there is also a very different version of the American Dream from this one. It’s closer to what was first imagined by James Truslow Adams in his 1931 book on the subject—more inclusive, more communitarian, and less singular. It’s catching on. You can see it in the rise in the number of people joining—or attempting to create—new unions, and in the range of citizens now helping decide the budgets of their local governments. These are just two examples of the new American Dream—

ers that taken together show that collective action and community-focused activity are growing in popularity. Their numbers include people who are joining psychological subcultures that operate like mutual-aid networks of the mind, with what one practitioner called “survivor-centered and survivor-aware care.” Cissy White, one counselor in a kind of new peer-to-peer counseling community, was a trauma survivor herself. She led webinars during the pandemic, sharing memories of her extreme poverty and neglect as a child, including the father she knew living unhoused. But while all of this suffering could have hardened her toward those less resilient and made her self-focused, it had instead made White more rigorous in her generosity.

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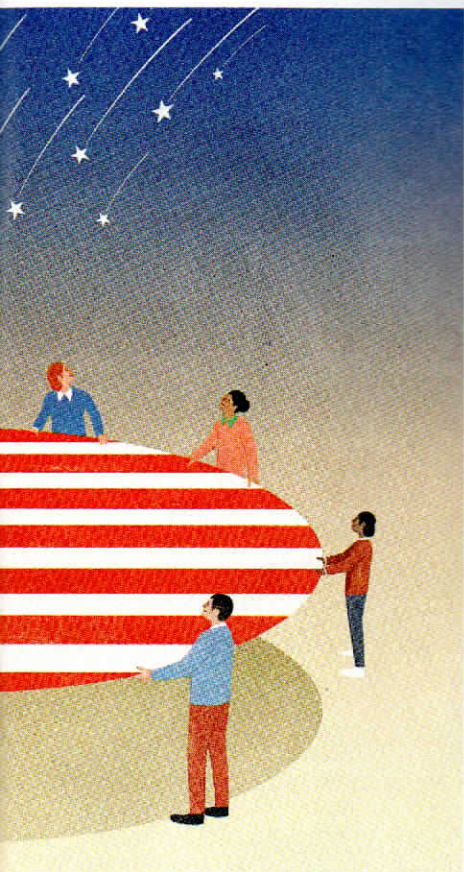
Mutual-aid groups rethink charity and create spaces where the giver and receiver are more aligned



Another woman spoke of her own abject poverty in childhood and young adulthood, how she once spent her days “drinking so much I was dying.” White nodded in acceptance. A chorus of attendees also responded.

While the need for mental-health care is often cast as an individual failing, those who are rethinking mental-health care believe we shouldn’t have to hustle to access assistance or attempt to get healthier through self-help alone.

The fight for this new American Dream tends to require both social smarts and organizational abilities. For example, that’s what people needed to participate in the mutual-aid groups that have risen up around the country since the pandemic. Local strangers connected by Google Groups, Google Calendars, and calling trees to bring groceries, eyeglasses, and medication to one another; they placed fridges in urban areas with complimentary food inside. In 2021, there were an estimated 800 such groups nationwide, but informally, scholars who study voluntarism told me there were many more. Near my apartment in Brooklyn, a volunteer group was organized by



community activist Crystal Hudson, who today occupies New York City's 35th District council seat, to help the aged and the financially stressed in our neighborhood, including her own mother, before she passed away. The result of that group was that creatives in their 20s were buying chicken feet and pig feet and taking them to the doorsteps of elderly Caribbean Americans. It meant that Hudson herself heard "people cry on the phone when I asked them what they want us to buy. They told me, 'No one has ever asked me what I want to eat before.'" Mutual-aid groups can rethink charity and create spaces where the giver and receiver are more aligned.

THE NEW AMERICAN DREAM can also be seen in alternative labor organization meetings or people rallying for higher salaries after a hard day as an underpaid adjunct professor or a low-wage restaurant worker. Think of the wave of protests by workers at universities and museums in 2022. These new brain-worker labor activists realize that advancement comes from better wages and benefits, not just from

their creative endeavors. They certainly won't get it from the person at the top making over a million dollars a year. At one college recently, even the students joined, occupying the main glass building to insist that their adjunct professors, who are often paid poverty wages, get adequate raises and insured health care. In late 2022, faculty and graduate students in the massive University of California system marched and even ^{Kayak} kayaked to demand living wages, while in New York's Hudson Valley, sculpture-park workers picketed in front of a private club hosting an event for their trustees. These are not the typical union activists. Instead, they are culture workers banding together to address how they are underpaid and insecure. Even though they work in fields that tend to be highly individualistic, one of the striking adjuncts told me they had found new strength by bonding together: "We are woven together more tightly with our new social capital: that of raised awareness."

The dream also means workers entering their workplaces on different terms. This includes worker-owners of today's rising number of worker cooperatives, like the people who make up western North Carolina's Opportunity Threads, a worker-owned cut-and-sew factory that specializes in customizing patterns. I've spoken to a dozen workers at different worker-cooperatives and in their communal efforts—in these cases, the workers own their own farms and also work the land, or they co-own their own catering company and cook the food that's delivered as well—and they all describe a feeling of collective strength in their work, that their labor is offering a livelihood rather than just earning them their keep. According to the nonprofit U.S. Federation of Worker Cooperatives, there are now 465 verified worker-owned co-ops in the country, up 36% since 2013, with about 450 more are starting up. Worker-owners are often better paid too, according to the Democracy at Work Institute.

Finally, the new American Dreamers include people who have joined participatory budgeting citizens' groups in cities around the country.

These are residents who are holding their municipal governments accountable, learning the ins and outs of their local governments and proposing to put civic money into improving park spaces or creating accessible paths to the public beach for the disabled. As one participatory-budgeting attendee said, they're allocating money in ways that were not how "government money was usually spent." The neighborhoods' inhabitants then vote on these citizen proposals at city-council offices or even at a folding table in front of the local grocery store.

An estimated 150,000 Americans have taken part in them since the practice was imported to the U.S. from Brazil over 10 years ago.

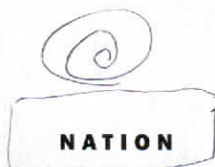
Despite the inspiration these pioneers show, many are still under the sway of the old bootstrap myth. A recent Center for American Progress study found that 60% of Republicans agreed with the statement "People get stuck in poverty primarily because they make bad decisions or lack the ambition to do better in life." Others polled by Pew Research Center in 2020 supported the idea that people are poor because "they have not worked as hard as most other people."

Opinions like these are why alternative community efforts must continue. National prosperity requires "community support as well as individual effort," as business historian Pamela Laird reminds us in her book *Pull*. The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "It's a cruel jest to say to a bootless man that he ought to lift himself by his bootstraps."

We must internalize these words and actions as elements of the new American Dream. It can emerge only out of heterogeneous communities, in which members help one another, if we are ever to escape the ~~Bootstrap Society~~ ^{jest} ^{bootless}. Taken together these group efforts radiate outward, burning away the toxin of our relentless individualism.

Quart is the author of Bootstrapped: Liberating Ourselves From the American Dream, from which this essay is adapted. She is the executive director of the Economic Hardship Reporting Project

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Our Enduring Discontents

HOW TO UNDERSTAND AMERICA BY ISABEL WILKERSON

**How did our country arrive
at this moment of rupture
and fury? How is it that
mass shootings, even
of children in their
classrooms, and police
killings of unarmed citizens
of color like Tyre Nichols
have become a feature
of our days?**

ARTWORK BY LAVETT BALLARD FOR TIME;
PHOTOGRAPHED BY ERIC JAMES MONTGOMERY

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HOW IS IT THAT POLITICIANS ARE BANNING books in a country whose founding First Amendment protects the right to free speech? How is it that the U.S., despite its wealth and technology, leads the world with more than 1 million deaths from COVID-19—more than any other nation on earth?

How is it that insurrectionists could storm the citadel of American democracy in a crusade to overturn a presidential election? How is it that we actually saw a Confederate flag inside the U.S. Capitol—that a rioter, in our era, could deliver the Confederate flag farther than Robert E. Lee himself?

In the two years since the global concept of caste entered the national conversation with the initial release of *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*, recent events have lamentably only affirmed its observations: that the will to maintain the caste system would drive some people to trample democracy itself, as we saw on Jan. 6; that powerful forces would seek to reverse the rights of the marginalized and less powerful, as we have seen in recent Supreme Court rulings; that these turns of events are a natural consequence of our unreconciled history. Because, all told, our country is not terribly unlike a patient with a pre-existing condition like heart disease, and if ever a heart patient, without treatment or intervention, has a heart attack, it should come as no surprise to anyone.

When we open our eyes to it, the ancient lens of caste helps explain most every regression we are now undergoing. It accounts for oppression of all kinds across time and space, allows us to understand the human impulse toward tribalism and domination and the ways in which the restrictions on those least valued in a hierarchy radiate outward to everyone and endanger our planet.

Caste is essentially an artificial, arbitrary graded ranking of human value, the underlying infrastructure of a society's divisions. Any number of random metrics could be used to divide and rank people in a caste system—ethnicity, lineage, religion, language. In our case, the early colonists took otherwise neutral, physical characteristics that comprise what we now see as race, a relatively new concept in the span of human history, and used this to determine who would be enslaved or free, who would have rights or none at all, and assigned groups to an inherited

role in a hierarchy that has persisted to this day.

For as long as there has been a United States of America, people of European descent, people who looked like the early colonists, have been the majority and the dominating caste. What happens if the demographic configuration that Americans have grown accustomed to transposes to a distribution the country has never known? What happens at merely the thought of a reconfiguration, the looming prospect of 2042, or 2045—the years the census has alternately projected as the point of a demographic sea change?

These were questions that originally propelled me as I trained a light on the stress cracks in this old house, our country, and its foundation. Then, in 2021, a year after *Caste* was first published, the Census Bureau made a startling announcement in alignment with an underlying premise I foreshadowed in the book: for the first time in American history, the white population showed a numerical decline—the only racial or ethnic group to do so, falling by 8.6%, from 223.6 million in 2010 to 204.3 million in 2020—as the white birth rate lagged that of the Black and Latino population and as white deaths exceeded white births. While still in the majority, the share of the dominant caste who identify as white alone in the population of the U.S. had fallen from 63.7% in 2010 to 57.8% in 2020, “the lowest on record,” the Associated Press reported.

This was seen by some Americans as an alarming development. A Pew Research Center study found that while the majority of respondents said they were neutral about an impending demographic shift, nearly 4 in 10 conservatives said that a declining white population was “bad” or “very bad” for the country, as did 1 in 4 white respondents overall.

It was in this atmosphere that the language of replacement theory—the belief in a left-wing campaign to subsume the white majority with immigrants and people of color, leading to white extinction—entered the mainstream and that powerful forces took dramatic steps to fortify the numbers and primacy of the historic majority.

Thus, with the caste system under threat, we are witnessing desperate efforts to impose the will of



a diminishing but dominant subset of Americans onto the rest of the country. What could account for the convergence of fixations on controlling the population in the most intimate of spaces—in the push to ban abortion and deny autonomy in how and when to build one's family; in the push to restrict immigration from south of the border; in the push to restrict LGBTQ rights, which amounts to denying unions seen as less likely to produce children and forbidding people to be who they are and love whom they wish?

From a caste perspective, recent developments boil down to this: while many opponents of abortion rights may surely be acting out of sincere religious convictions in matters of childbirth, rulings that ban abortion and restrict voting rights serve to enshrine the objectives of a conservative minority and to shore up the caste system for generations to come. A rise in birth rates and thus a rise in the population in the red states—those that most readily enacted abortion bans—could grant those states, and conservative policies in general, a greater weight in Congress and in national affairs, even as the majority of Americans, polls show, do not agree with these rightward extremes, even in states most affected by them. One state, Georgia, has already elevated embryos to virtual

citizens by permitting people to claim them as dependents on their tax returns after six weeks of gestation and by allowing the state to include fetuses in its population counts, potentially bolstering the state's numbers.

Bans on abortion would seem to open the door to a disproportionate number of Black and brown births, but the caste system, throughout our history, has shown that it can mutate to sustain itself when under threat. In addition to immigration restrictions to control the Latino population overall, some Latinos, the white-adjacent middle-caste subgroups already being courted by conservative elites, could conceivably be folded into the white population to shore up dominant caste power, as with the Italians and Irish in previous generations. Failing all else, the caste system can resort to violence against those in the middle and subordinated castes, as we have seen in the shootings of Asian women in Atlanta, of Black shoppers in Buffalo, N.Y., and of Latinos in El Paso, Texas, with the Buffalo shooter declaring that his motive was to prevent "eliminating the white race."

The system has already created structural limits on the growth of the subordinated caste. Mass incarceration for nonviolent crimes, often on charges for which the dominant caste receives

lesser sentences, keeps a disproportionate share of Black men from the reproductive pool for long periods of time. The school-to-prison pipeline, harsher punishment of Black schoolchildren, and high rates of police brutality continue to threaten the subordinate caste population.

But perhaps most directly, widespread bias, documented in study after study of the health care system, prevents many pregnant women in the subordinated caste from getting the treatment they need, their humanity and symptoms often dismissed, imperiling the lives of Black mothers and children, as in the near tragedy faced by Serena Williams. One of the most decorated women in tennis history, who had access to the best medical care available, nearly died after giving birth to her daughter in 2017. She suffered paralysis in her legs and back and struggled to breathe; yet hospital staff at first paid little heed when she alerted them to symptoms she recognized as a recurrence of blood clots that had nearly killed her years before. She asked for a heparin drip to thin the blood and wondered why they had not started one already, given her medical history; she requested a CAT scan to locate any clots. But a nurse told her that "all this medicine is making you talk crazy" and that she just needed to rest. "No, I'm telling you what I need," Williams told the nurse. "I need the scan immediately, and I need it to be done with dye." Williams persisted and finally got a CAT scan. "Lo and behold," Williams recounted in *Elle* magazine, "I had a blood clot in my lungs, and they needed to insert a filter into my veins to break up the clot before it reached my heart."

Mothers and babies from the subordinated caste are more likely to die from complications of childbirth than any other group in America. The Black maternal death rate is three times that of white women overall, and, not surprisingly from a caste perspective, the death rate is five times higher for college-educated Black mothers than for college-educated white mothers. The disparities are so wide that a college-educated mother from the subordinated caste is more likely to die from childbirth than a dominant-caste mother who did not finish high school.

The inequities continue to the newborns themselves. The Black infant mortality rate (IMR) is twice that of white babies, and "Black women with doctorates and professional degrees have a higher IMR than white women who never finished high school," according to the authors of a 2018 Duke University report. "Not only does the Black-white disparity for infant mortality exist at all educational levels, it is greatest for those with a master's degree or higher. Further, the IMR is highest for Black women with a doctorate or professional degree."

These counterintuitive outcomes reflect both the long-standing resentments, unconscious biases, and pressures faced by those who defy their expected place at the bottom of the caste system and the toll on the bodies of those who may experience "weathering"—the dangerous shortening of the telomeres at the ends of the cells—as they, by their ambitions and achievements, find themselves in continuous contention with the boundaries of caste. All of these factors, undergirded by caste, keep Black childbirth structurally under assault. Further, if these abortion bans were solely about the sanctity of life, then visibly pregnant women in the subordinated caste would not be attacked or killed by the authorities at a time of declared urgency over the fate of the unborn, leading up to the reversal of *Roe v. Wade*, as in the case of a pregnant woman shackled in New York City while in active labor and of a pregnant woman thrown facedown with an officer kneeling on her back in Kansas City, Mo. The hazards of being forced to carry pregnancies to term could lead to more tragic outcomes and deaths for Black women and babies, with a 2021 study by the sociologist Amanda Jean Stevenson finding that the death rate for Black mothers will rise by as much as a third under these abortion bans. Thus, given the risks to the subordinated caste, forced reproduction suggests an underlying will to curate the American population to forestall the day that the dominant caste might be in the minority, and in the process puts the rights of most everyone in peril.

In what seems a single-minded mission, leaders on the far right have pursued a range of unimaginable measures to ensure maximum births. Anyone who performs an abortion in Texas faces a penalty of \$100,000 per procedure and up to 20 years in prison. Texans can sue anyone suspected of helping a patient get an abortion. Far-right policymakers have been seeking to target people in free states with potential lawsuits if they help patients from restrictive states who cross state lines for the procedure, a proposal that calls to mind the bounty hunter mechanisms of the Fugitive Slave Acts before the Civil War.

No one is spared. Patients in the traumatizing throes of miscarriage, a fate besetting 1 in 10 women in her lifetime, have been turned away in the affected states as hospitals fear running afoul of abortion laws, leaving patients to fend for themselves against potential life-threatening hemorrhage and sepsis. Even groups not inclined to see themselves as marginalized—men of all backgrounds who may not be ready to be fathers, for instance—are getting swept into the undertow of the drive for a higher birth rate that could help

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5/18/23

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Autism
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stanch the losses in the numbers of the dominant caste. These developments have taught us that in the perhaps unrecognized drive to maintain caste, the rights that many considered established for all time and had perhaps planned their lives around were in fact provisional—hard-fought and short-lived, wholly dependent on who happens to be able to wield power.

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CASTE, THE INVISIBLE HAND beneath our fears and discontents, diminishes us all. It turns neighbor against neighbor, makes spies of ordinary people incited to surveil those targeted by the caste system, forces patients and couples to go underground at a time of personal crisis, crossing borders in secret as people were forced to cross the Iron Curtain or to flee the Jim Crow South.

The tragic case of Tyre Nichols, fatally beaten in Memphis in January by five police officers who, like him, were Black, reminds us that caste is not about Black vs white. It is about enforcing the hierarchy. It is about the deadly dehumanization of the subordinated caste that allows almost any atrocity to be inflicted upon them—by anyone in any group, including their own, in order to uphold the caste system and to maintain one's own place, however marginal, within it. This is why racism alone can at times seem an incomplete term to describe the challenges we face as a nation. I wrote in *Caste* in 2020: "The enforcers of caste come in every color, creed, and gender. One does not have to be in the dominant caste to do its bidding. In fact, the most potent instrument of the caste system is a sentinel at every rung, whose identity forswears any accusation of discrimination and helps keep the caste system humming."

This era is the country's karmic moment of truth. The question now, as it has always been, is: What kind of country do we want to be, and what are we willing to do to achieve it? Here we are, having to come to terms with the fact that during a global pandemic, the U.S. has led the world in the grimme of distinctions. Not only has the U.S. exceeded all other countries in the number of recorded COVID-19 deaths, it has led the world in the number of confirmed cases, millions more

than the nation with the second highest outbreak—India. The numbers in the U.S. are in line, not with our peer nations, but with the developing world.

How is it that these two very different countries, the presumed oldest democracy and the largest democracy, have been stricken with these numbers? One country has the world's oldest caste system, the other has a less recognized one. A caste system relies on strife and inequity to sustain itself. It programs people to believe they have no stake in the well-being of those they have been told are beneath them, those they are told are unworthy, undeserving. It makes for a less magnanimous society, a built-in us-vs.-them distance between groups. Because of the caste system, we more readily turn against one another. Because of caste, we insufficiently protect one another. Because of caste, along with other breakdowns in society, our democracy is in danger.

Over the decades, political scientists have found ways to measure the health of a democracy and to define the characteristics of a country on the brink of unrest and civil war. It is in the liminal space between the twin poles of democracy and autocracy that civil wars are more likely to arise, and not from the ranks of the people at the bottom, but rather from those fearful of losing the status to which they had grown accustomed, according to the political scientist Barbara F. Walter. After the turmoil over the 2020 election and the resulting insurrection in January 2021, the U.S. dropped to its lowest democracy score since 1800, and for a time entered the uncertain space in between, known as anocracy—a partial democracy characterized by freedoms that can lull people into complacency, alongside erosions on suffrage, elections, or other democratic norms. The attempt to overthrow a presidential election was a disruption to more than 200 years of precedent.

We are in an unspoken state of emergency. We have learned that freedom and democracy are not a destination nor a settled state of being but a fragile proposition, and their preservation is an ever present duty of each and every one of us who cherishes liberty. There is no time for infighting or tribalism or self-centered egotism or internal division. We need a clear-eyed focus on the threats to our democracy. The circumstances in which we find ourselves require us to step out of the presumed safety of our isolated corners and to do all that we can in our spheres of influence to make this a fairer world, to educate ourselves and our children about our true and full history, to alert legislators and policymakers to the depths of what they, and we, are up against.

I pray that one day we will transcend the origins of our discontents, the divisions of caste that led to this perilous hour, starting with the fact that the

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For most of our history, from the very first census in 1790 through the one in 1950, a person's race was determined by whatever a given census taker happened to think, based upon what people looked like or were perceived to be

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very foundation of how we have been trained to see ourselves is based on the lies of enslavers. Every 10 years, the census struggles to measure and define a fable, reworking 400-year-old slavery-era mythologies into race labels that change with every census, trying to shoehorn a complex species into tidy categories that are anything but.

For most of our history, from the very first census in 1790 through the one in 1950, a person's race was determined by whatever a given census taker happened to think, based upon what people looked like or were perceived to be. Census enumerators thus became the unwitting arbiters of a central pillar of caste, defining and protecting the purity of the dominant majority, leading to inconsistent classifications that persisted even after people were allowed to check a box for themselves.

In 1790, the race categories were free whites, free others, and slaves. By 1850, so many subordinate-caste women had been raped by their enslavers or other dominant-caste men that the census added a new category, "Mulatto." Over time, ethnicity, nationality, and color merged into an unscientific, evolving designation of race, such that the same person with origins in India, for example, would have been categorized at least four different ways in the past century. They would have been "Hindu" from 1920 to 1940, "other race" in 1950 and 1960, "white" in 1970, and "Asian Indian" in 1980.

If race were truly the lode-star defining element of human categorization, these labels would never change, and yet they do constantly, the poles always clear despite the name changes, but the middle castes shifting and fluctuating as humans complicate things by being ourselves, by loving, mating, procreating beyond the containers in which society has attempted to confine us. How well have the lens and the language of enslavers served us all these centuries?

Caste is so deeply embedded in the human subconscious that even when laws are passed and proclamations made to protect against it, statutes may be no match for its endurance. Laws can be reversed if there is not the common will to uphold them. Even when the formal barriers are removed, caste can persist in the human hunger to be better than someone else, to assure our place in society, to quell our fears and insecurities. The structure of

caste is maintained by the people within it, up and down the hierarchy, and thus the solutions must account for both the structure that holds inequality in place and the individuals who keep it running. As we have seen in recent years, and as occurred after the 1965 march in Selma, for good, or after the 1915 release of *Birth of a Nation*, for ill, Abraham Lincoln's words still hold true: "Public sentiment is everything," he said in 1858, referring essentially to the dominant caste of his era and ours. "Whoever can change public opinion can change the government."

I pray that we will harness both structure and sentiment to solve our collective, overlapping crises. We have seen the limits of legislation, vital and necessary though it is, and the insufficiency of politics. We have seen the abuse of power by those entrusted with our lives and futures. The challenges we face require a lasting and meaningful reconstruction of our society. These challenges call for a massive re-education of our citizenry to lay bare the full history of this country so that every citizen can know the ways in which the state has systematically favored some groups and excluded others and can become aware of the urgent, long-overdue need to atone for past and current injustices and rectify continuing disparities for the collective healing of our nation. I have long believed that if the majority of Americans knew the true, full history of what was sacrificed to create this country, they themselves would be calling for reparations. Of course, the greatest corrective of all would be ending the caste system itself.

If we truly want to end caste, each of us, every single one of us, needs to search our souls for the ways in which we may be complicit in upholding caste and stereotype and hierarchy, as our society has so cleverly trained us to do, and to consciously work against this programming in our everyday lives if we are ever to overcome it. One reason why we haven't ended caste is that too many people benefit from it and not enough people understand it or see reason enough for it to end.

If Census projections hold, we have 20 years to prepare for an impending demographic sea change that the country has never seen before. We have the opportunity to set a standard for how to work together to create a truly egalitarian, multiethnic democracy, a stronger, all-encompassing, reconstituted version of ourselves as a society, and to prove to ourselves and to the world that the divisions we have inherited do not have to be our destiny.

Wilkerson, a Pulitzer Prize winner, is the author of Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents, from which this essay is adapted; out in paperback on Feb. 14. Copyright © 2020, 2023 by Isabel Wilkerson