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## Don't Just Impeach Trump. End the Imperial Presidency.

His threats against North Korea expose the many dangers of the White House's post-9/11 powers. Here's what Congress must do.

**BY JEET HEER**

August 12, 2017

President Donald Trump's domestic agenda is a shambles, and his administration is besieged by scandal. He has been badgering Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell all week for failing to repeal and replace Obamacare, a futile exercise in browbeating. The good news is that, as *Washington Post* columnist Charles Krauthammer noted recently, institutions have proven willing to stand up to Trump, ranging from the military (which won't carry out his ban on transgender people serving) to the Senate (which defended Attorney General Jeff Sessions from Trump's attempt to elbow him out of office) to the Boy Scouts (which criticized the president for politicizing his appearance at their annual jamboree). "The institutions of both political and civil society are holding up well," Krauthammer wrote. "Trump is a systemic stress test. The results are good, thus far."

But the more ineffectual Trump is in domestic politics, the louder and scarier he is on the international stage. Even if we accept Krauthammer's contention that the "guardrails" of political and civil society are preventing Trump from fundamentally damaging American society, Trump still enjoys enormous unchecked power abroad. Perhaps precisely because he is thwarted at home, Trump is now more prone than ever to lash out against foreign foes. This week, he used the incongruous setting of a photo op at Trump National Golf Course in New Jersey to threaten North Korea with nuclear annihilation. "North Korea best not make any

more threats to the United States,” he warned. “They will be met with fire and fury like the world has never seen.” He doubled down on those remarks on Friday, tweeting:



What makes these words terrifying, even if we make every allowance for Trump’s bluster, is that he has the power to make them true. America’s nuclear chain of command grants a president absolute authority to launch preventive nuclear strikes whenever desired. In 1974, as his presidency was capsizing, Richard Nixon reflected that, “I can go into my office and pick up the telephone, and in 25 minutes 70 million people will be dead.” Trump enjoys that same power.

Much has been made of Trump’s manifest authoritarian tendencies: that he sees politics only in terms of domination, his habit of praising extrajudicial violence, and his proclivity for breaking norms. Yet Trump’s authoritarian tendencies would not get him very far without a mechanism for enacting his wishes, and his nuclear threats make clear what that mechanism is: the Imperial Presidency. The powers of the office are not just those enumerated in the Constitution, but the extra-constitutional powers the presidency has acquired over the decades—especially the ability to start wars at whim. It’s taken someone as frightening as Trump to make plain that Congress must act to restrain not just the sitting president, but the office itself.

## **Historians and political scientists often use the term “Imperial**

**Presidency”** to refer to the fact that the American president, at least since the dawn of the Cold War in the 1940s, has war-making powers closer to that of an absolute monarch than an officeholder in a republic who is bound by the rules of law. If we are worried about Trump inflicting great harm on the world, it’s the powers of the Imperial Presidency that enable him to do the most damage.

The Imperial Presidency rests on an ambiguity in the Constitution. In theory, the president is coequal to Congress and to be held in check by it. But in times of war, the requirement of

national unity almost always leads Congress to defer to the president. As Alexander Hamilton noted in “The Federalist 8,” “It is of the nature of war to increase the executive at the expense of the legislative authority.” Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the American political system seesawed: in times of war, the presidency was dominant; in times of peace, Congress was.

The permanent emergency of the Cold War created an unrelieved wartime footing in which presidents entered America into large conflicts, like the Korean War and the Vietnam War, without a formal congressional declaration. The emergence of nuclear weapons further centralized power in the hands of the president. Under the nuclear deterrence theory that America adopted in the 1950s, a president had to be prepared to launch an attack immediately, which meant no time to consult Congress.

The consequence, as the historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. wrote in his classic study *The Imperial Presidency* (1973), was “the all-purpose invocation of ‘national security,’ the insistence on executive secrecy, the withholding of information from Congress, the refusal to spend funds appropriated by Congress, the attempted intimidation of the press, the use of the White House as a base for espionage and sabotage directed against the political opposition—all signified the extension of the imperial presidency from foreign to domestic affairs.” The end result was “by the early 1970s the American President had become on issues of war and peace the most absolute monarch (with the possible exception of Mao Tse-tung of China) among the great powers of the world.”

Schlesinger was writing during the Watergate scandal. The Nixon presidency was both the height of the Imperial Presidency and also the beginning of its decline, at least for a few years. In the wake of Nixon’s abuses, Congress pushed back. In 1973, over Nixon’s veto, Congress passed the War Powers Resolution, which limited a president’s war-making ability, requiring the White House to notify Congress about the use of force and forbidding deployment beyond 90 days without a congressional authorization for use of military force. Other measures of the period include The Congressional Budget and Impoundment Control Act (1974) which reasserted congressional control of spending.

Writing in *The Wilson Quarterly* in 2002, Donald R. Wolfensberger, then director of the Congress Project at the Wilson Center, listed other examples of Congress rolling back the Imperial Presidency:

The Federal Election Campaign Act of 1974 was supposed to eliminate the taint of big money from presidential politics. Subsequent years witnessed a spate of other statutes designed to right the balance between the branches. The National Emergencies Act (1976) abolished scores of existing presidential emergency powers. The Ethics in Government Act

(1978) authorized, among other things, the appointment of special prosecutors to investigate high-ranking executive branch officials. The Senate, in 1976, and the House, in 1977, established intelligence committees in the wake of hearings in 1975 revealing widespread abuses; and in 1980 the Intelligence Oversight Act increased Congress's monitoring demands on intelligence agencies and their covert operations.

As Wolfensberger noted, these restraints on the Imperial Presidency were only partial and often ineffectual, as post-Nixon presidents found ways to work around them. The Reagan administration, with the pretext of a renewed Cold War, tried to undermine congressional limits on aid to the Contras by using funds from secret arms sales to Iran. President George H. W. Bush tried to finesse the issue by getting congressional authorization for the Gulf War, but also saying that it wasn't necessary. President Bill Clinton bombed Kosovo with support from a Senate resolution that failed in the House of Representatives.

Whatever limits there might have been on presidential power ended with 9/11. After President George W. Bush delivered a stirring speech in the weeks after the attack, presidential historian Michael Beschloss cheered on television that "the imperial presidency is back. We just saw it." Under the auspices of the unitary executive theory promulgated by Vice President Dick Cheney, the U.S. entered the era of warrantless wireless searches, the kidnapping and torture of terrorist suspects held indefinitely in secret prisons, and an undefined and undeclared global war on terror.

While President Barack Obama might have tried to bring some semblance of legality to Bush's expansion of presidential power, there was no real curtailment of it. Instead, with his use of drones and assassination of Osama Bin Laden, Obama's goal was to act as a more efficient and focused Imperial President. As Alex Emmons noted earlier this year in *The Intercept*, Obama left behind a presidency with vast, unchecked powers that could easily be abused by Trump. "President Obama has spent much of his time as commander in chief expanding his own military power, while convincing courts not to limit his detention, surveillance, and assassination capabilities," Emmons wrote. "Most of the new constraints on the security state during the Obama years were self-imposed, and could easily be revoked."

**Trump is not just the heir to the Imperial Presidency; he represents a** new crisis of it. His blatant incompetence and instability demonstrates the dangers of investing so much power in the hands of one person. At the heart of the Imperial Presidency is the "thermonuclear monarchy" enjoyed by the president, who has the ability to launch a nuclear war at will. Writing in *Politico Magazine* on Friday, Garrett Graff outlined how it works: "That the president has almost unlimited and instantaneous authority to push the

[nuclear] button. It's undoubtedly the most powerful unilateral action that a commander in chief can take. Whereas there are careful multi-branch checks on most presidential powers, over many decades the U.S. carefully honed its nuclear launch procedures to strip away any check or balance that could delay or stymie a launch."

The journal *Scientific American* has just published an editorial in its August issue, calling for an end to the the president having sole power over nuclear weapons:

With the exception of the president, every link in the U.S. nuclear decision chain has protections against poor judgments, deliberate misuse or accidental deployment. The "two-person rule," in place since World War II, requires that the actual order to launch be sent to two separate people. Each one has to decode and authenticate the message before taking action. In addition, anyone with nuclear weapons duties, in any branch of service, must routinely pass a Pentagon-mandated evaluation called the Personnel Reliability Program—a battery of tests that assess several areas, including mental fitness, financial history, and physical and emotional well-being.

There is no comparable restraint on the president. He or she can decide to trigger a thermonuclear Armageddon without consulting anyone at all and never has to demonstrate mental fitness. This must change. We need to ensure at least some deliberation before the chief executive can act.

One alternative to the thermonuclear monarchy is to require the president to have the support of high-ranking members of Congress before he can call for nuclear strikes. Graff suggested that America consider "whether our nuclear command system should include a second voice, either from the vice president, the secretary of defense or a congressional leader." In this new system, there would be a "two-person rule" from the top of the chain of command to the bottom. An order to launch an attack would require the authorization of the president and a second person. Making that person the speaker of the House would be more in keeping with the original balance of the Constitution, restoring to Congress a say in war-making decisions.

Stripping Trump of sole control of nuclear weapons should be part of a larger rollback of the Imperial Presidency, one that could take lessons from the laws enacted by Congress in the 1970s and indeed go even further. Beyond nuclear weapons, the heart of the current Imperial Presidency is Authorization for Use of Military Force that Congress passed three days after the 9/11 attack. The AUMF is the blank check that allows U.S. presidents to wage an endless global war on terror, a war without border and without any foreseeable conclusion. Democratic Representative Barbara Lee has been waging a lonely battle against the AUMF, calling for its repeal.



Trump's unstable behavior should worry all of Congress, both Republican and Democrats. He often blurts out threats—sometimes, as in the case of his rant about North Korea, saying things that are contradicted by his own secretary of state and secretary of defense. Trump's erratic actions show how dangerous the Imperial Presidency can be when the president is a madman. The power he enjoys is far beyond what any one person should have in a democracy.

The remedies for Trump have to be institutional rather than just personal. It's not enough for Trump to be impeached and removed; Congress must address the fact that the presidency has too much foreign policy power. The thermonuclear monarchy must end, the AUMF should be repealed, the drone program should only continue with congressional approval, and the NSA surveillance program should be tightly monitored by Congress. The courts are doing their part to check the White House. It's time the other co-equal branch of the government do the same, and put an end to the Imperial Presidency for good.

Jeet Heer is a senior editor at the *New Republic*. [@HeerJeet](#)



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## Arresting Disabled Bodies

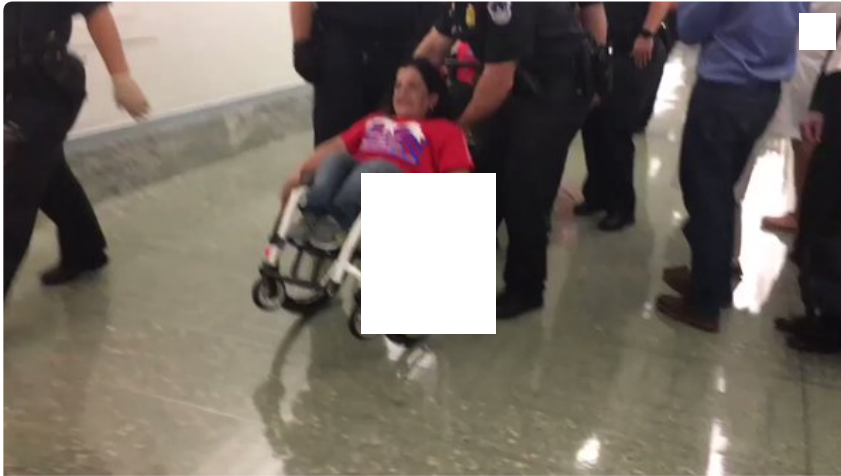
How disabled activists turned the fight for Medicaid into a battle for civil rights

**BY SARAH JONES**

September 28, 2017

The woman in the wheelchair is resolute. Her voice does not waver; her message does not change. “No cuts to Medicaid!” she shouts. “Save our liberty!” She is a rock, borne away by a

police officer who grips the handles of her wheelchair. Behind her, another activist follows, with the same chant, with the same resolution on his face. “Save our liberty,” they say, and it is not a plea. It is a demand.



**Andrew Kimmel**  
@andrewkimmel

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Shortly after this, press was moved around corners making it impossible to cover many of the arrests of disabled activists. [#GrahamCassidy](#)

9:08 PM - Sep 25, 2017 · Washington, DC

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This is one moment, but recently there have been many like it, constituting some of the most effective protest imagery in recent memory. The woman in the video is an activist with National ADAPT, a group that has harried Congress with one legislative objective: to defeat every iteration of Obamacare repeal that Republicans propose. So far, they’ve won, but in many ways the war has just begun. ADAPT’s protests aren’t designed just to defeat legislation, but to defeat the ideology that inspires this legislation. And so they ask you to consider other questions. They ask you to think about yourself.

In form and in function, ADAPT’s recent protests resemble the Capitol Crawl in 1990. That protest, accomplished by activists who pulled their bodies up the steps of the U.S. Capitol, helped force the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act. ADAPT was a part of the crawl, and had been participating in such direct actions since the 1970s. Dominick Evans tells me that ADAPT’s confrontational tactics are modelled after those deployed by the civil rights movement. “It’s very effective at getting the message out,” Evans explains. “They can’t ignore it if they’re constantly arresting disabled bodies.”

ADAPT’s protests simultaneously acknowledge and subvert the spectacle that able-bodied people make of disability. “Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the

well and in the kingdom of the sick,” Susan Sontag wrote in “Illness as Metaphor.” Though Sontag chiefly examined cancer and tuberculosis, society implies a similar bifurcation between individuals who have disabilities and those who do not. Living with an inherited disease, I learned long ago that people who dwell in the kingdom of the well impose their own meanings on the kingdom of the sick.

When people look at a woman in her wheelchair, they may experience pity. To them, people with disabilities exist either to demonstrate the mystery of God or the capriciousness of biology. But their pity is driven by the deeper fear that some accident or onset of permanent disease will shunt them into this shadow kingdom and there will be no escape.

ADAPT’s activists don’t want pity. Pity reduces, dehumanizes. Pitiful people are objects and objects cannot fight. When people with disabilities protest, then, in public and physical ways, they grab hold of old stereotypes and point them back at their creators. “We are putting our bodies and our lives on the line for this, but we know what we’re getting into,” says Anita Cameron, an ADAPT activist who participated in the Capitol Crawl. “I think that’s the message that needs to be sent out, because everybody looks at, ‘Oh, those poor disabled people, getting arrested! Oh, those poor disabled people, being pulled out of their wheelchairs.’ No, we’re not those poor disabled people. We are strong, fierce activists fighting not only for ourselves, but for others too.”

The goal of these protests is not to replace one spectacle with another. Integration is one of ADAPT’s original, enduring aims, which means they hope to create a world that treats disabilities as if they are banal. “When I say live, I mean to truly live. To live in the community, to work, to raise a family, to have cats and eat a ridiculous amount of pizza rolls and cheeseburgers like I like to do,” one activist recently wrote in Vox. Disability isn’t a superpower any more than it’s evidence of innate inferiority. “I don’t think any of us want people to be thinking about our bodies in general,” Evans says. “What they need to be thinking about is that people are going to die. It’s life or death.”

In the United States, disabled bodies are disposable, a guarantee of perpetual second-class status. Whether via institutionalization or sterilization or a lifetime spent bearing “pre-existing condition” about the neck, living as a disabled person in this country has historically meant living subject to a specific bureaucratic evil. Our market-based health care system is concerned with profit, and it long ago decided that disabled bodies are not worth very much. Whenever that paradigm has shifted, it is because the people who own these bodies have jammed the gears. And they will continue to do so until we collectively agree that health care is a human right.



Every arrest, every dragging, every shout, displays strength and not weakness. They merit neither pity nor worship—only respect, and your dedication to a different, fairer world.

Sarah Jones is a staff writer for *The New Republic*. [@onesarahjones](#)



Win McNamee/Getty Images

## The GOP's Struggles to Re-Authorize CHIP Is a Devastating Indictment

Jeopardizing the insurance of nine million children isn't just abhorrent—it also underscores the party's utter inability to govern.

**BY CLIO CHANG**

September 28, 2017

On Tuesday, health care activists and Democrats celebrated the defeat of Graham-Cassidy, the GOP's third attempt to repeal Obamacare since President Donald Trump's inauguration. Thanks to reams of bad press and highly visible protests in the Capitol led by groups like ADAPT, Maine's Susan Collins on Monday became the third senator to oppose the bill, effectively making it dead on arrival. The following day, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell decided to shelve the bill without putting it to a vote.

But the last-ditch repeal effort, meant to be passed by a September 30 deadline, may have another cost: the health insurance of nearly nine million children. What's more frustrating still

is that there is no reason for it to have gotten to this point, the latest evidence that the GOP has become incapable of governing responsibly.

Senators Lindsey Graham and Bill Cassidy unveiled their health care repeal bill five days before Senators Orrin Hatch and Ron Wyden introduced their bipartisan legislation to reauthorize the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), which would extend the program for five more years. CHIP is set to expire on September 30.

Should CHIP expire, most states have enough funding to maintain the program for a few months. But ten states would run out of funding by the end of the year and Minnesota would run out by the end of October. According to an analysis by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, "When their federal funding runs out, states with separate CHIP programs (rather than CHIP-funded Medicaid expansions for children) may be forced to impose enrollment caps or freezes, or shut their programs entirely."

Furthermore, there would be numerous adverse consequences that would begin immediately. States would have to start shifting costs to cover administrative tasks necessary for ending the program, such as sending parents notices in the mail. And the lack of assurance that the program will exist in the future makes it impossible for states to budget and plan. Basically, states would have to focus on a variety of things completely unrelated to the program's intent of expanding access to and improving children's health care.

CHIP is one of the few programs left in Congress that is considered truly bipartisan. It was originally co-sponsored by Hatch, a Republican, and the late Ted Kennedy. There have been policy disagreements between the two sides, such as in 2015, over whether to preserve a 23 percent bump in federal matching rates installed under the Affordable Care Act. And in 2007, Congress failed to reauthorize the program because George W. Bush vetoed the bill twice, until an extension was finally passed at the end of the year.

But most Democrats and Republicans agree that the program is a successful one. A huge majority of Americans—75 percent—polled by the Kaiser Family Foundation said that they thought it was "extremely" or "very" important to reauthorize CHIP before its funding ran out. Only 47 percent said the same about repealing and replacing Obamacare.

Which is why it's especially egregious that the Republican-controlled Congress has been unable to reauthorize CHIP in time. Instead, the GOP has been obsessed with numerous Obamacare repeal efforts, punting necessary legislation like CHIP down the line. In March, state Medicaid directors were already warning about the harmful effects of congressional inaction, writing in a letter to senators that "as the program nears the end of its congressional

funding, states will be required to notify current CHIP beneficiaries of the termination of their coverage. This process may be required to begin as early as July in some states.”

In May, a Finance Committee hearing on CHIP was canceled at the request of Democrats who feared that Republicans would use the program as leverage for their ongoing Obamacare repeal effort. But the responsibility for failing to authorize the program falls squarely on the GOP, after Graham-Cassidy drowned out any discussion of the legislation.

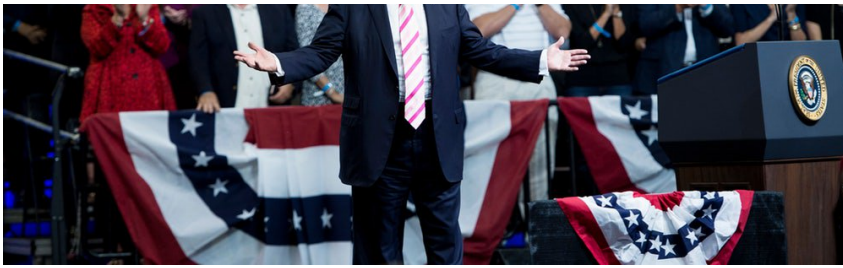
As Bruce Lesley, president of First Focus, a children’s advocacy group, told the *New Republic*, “There was growing attention and movement towards getting this done and then Graham-Cassidy came up and everyone stopped talking to us about it. It was hard to get meetings after that, to talk to people about [the Hatch-Wyden bill]. People were like, ‘No we’re 24/7 on Graham-Cassidy.’”

As time goes on, reauthorizing CHIP should be a relatively painless process, especially as the program becomes more entrenched. Even though the two parties battled over numerous policy details in 2015, Congress reauthorized the program in April of that year, five months before it was set to expire. The GOP’s lack of action in ensuring seamless funding for the program reveals the party’s deep incompetence when it comes to governing. None of this is due to “bipartisan gridlock”—it is solely the failure of the Republican Party, which has left all other legislative priorities by the wayside in its cruel and hapless attempts to repeal Obamacare.

Most damningly, this program should be an easy political win for the GOP, which has a glaring lack of legislative accomplishments under its belt. “It just dumbfounds me that they’re not doing this,” Lesley says. “It’s a no-brainer.” CHIP is a good way to measure the health of our government, revealing that it struggles to pass uncontroversial legislation on time that exists to help children, possibly the last group of citizens who can muster universal sympathy and support. And there is only one party to blame.

Clio Chang is a staff writer at *The New Republic*. [@cliomiso](#)





BRENDAN SMIALOWSKI/Getty Images

# The Pathetic Truth About Trump's Culture Wars

The president's rant against kneeling athletes is a sign of things to come.

**BY JEET HEER**

September 28, 2017

Donald Trump is at home on the cultural battlefield, as shown by his legendary feuds with everyone from Rosie O'Donnell to Alec Baldwin to Meryl Streep. The more sober members of the press treat Trump's cultural wars as a diversion, perhaps intentionally, from his political failures. Yet it is hard to ignore how central cultural strife is to Trump's presidency after his latest incitement, attacking Colin Kaepernick and other football players who have kneeled during the national anthem to protest police brutality. At a rally in Alabama on Friday—ostensibly to support Senator Luther Strange, who nonetheless lost in Tuesday's special election—Trump's most passionate moment came when he fantasized about punishing politically outspoken football players: “Wouldn't you love to see one of these NFL owners, when somebody disrespects our flag, to say, ‘Get that son of a bitch off the field right now. Out! He's fired. He's fired!’”

Trump is a strenuous cultural warrior, but it's not always obvious what he hopes to achieve with the fights he picks. He clearly gets a rush from riling up his supporters, both in person and online. According to a report from Glenn Thrush and Maggie Haberman in *The New York Times*, the football tirade was “the one part of the trip that cheered him up” and he especially enjoyed the “rallygoers' thunderous approval of his attack on Colin Kaepernick.” By their account, Trump isn't just seeking an ego boost, but strategically is solidifying his bond with his most passionate fans:

In private, the president and his top aides freely admit that he is engaged in a culture war on behalf of his white, working-class base, a New York billionaire waging war against “politically correct” coastal elites on behalf of his supporters in the South and in the Midwest. He believes the war was foisted upon him by former President Barack Obama and other Democrats — and he is determined to win, current and former aides said.

This account only seems partially accurate. It defies belief that the culture wars were “foisted” on Trump, since he’s been eagerly engaging in them for decades in various forms, going back at least to 1989 when he took out a full page ad in the *Times* calling for the execution of the Central Park Five (a group of non-white teens who were accused of a brutal rape, which they were later exonerated of).

Moreover, it’s not at all clear that Trump is “determined to win” the culture war. In politics, victory usually involves some element of persuasion—convincing skeptics and even opponents to accept, even if reluctantly, your point. Trump isn’t pursuing victory of that sort. Rather, he’s simply ensuring that both sides become even more firmly entrenched in their prior positions. He launched his anti-kneeling cause at a partisan rally of overwhelmingly white Southerners. It’s hard to imagine a venue better suited to the racial subtext of his stance—and thus, equally well suited to ignite a backlash, which Trump got. By Sunday, dozens of players were taking the knee, with many more registering more moderate forms of protests of locking arms.

If the goal was to stop players from taking the knee, Trump failed. If the goal was to hijack Kaepernick’s protest against police brutality and turn it into another Trumpian carnival with himself as both ringmaster and star of the show, then the president succeeded.

*Times* columnist Ross Douthat makes a useful distinction between good and bad cultural wars. “A good culture war is one that, beneath all the posturing and demagoguery and noise, has clear policy implications, a core legal or moral question, a place where one side can win a necessary victory or where a new consensus can be hashed out,” Douthat argued. “A bad culture war is one in which attitudinizing, tribalism and worst-case fearmongering float around unmoored from any specific legal question, in which mutual misunderstanding reigns and a thousand grievances are stirred up without a single issue being clarified or potentially resolved. Unfortunately for us all Donald Trump is a master, a virtuoso, of the second kind of culture war—and a master, too, of taking social and cultural debates that could be important and necessary and making them stupider and emptier and all about himself.”

But Trump isn’t likely to stop doing it; he doesn’t have many other arrows in his political quiver. Working with the Republicans has become a chore, since they can’t get anything done. He has so little regard for the GOP that he childishly mocks senators Mitch McConnell and John McCain in private. Roy Moore’s triumph over Strange in the Alabama primary this week shows that Trump’s power is limited even among his own followers. Foreign policy is proving too complicated, so he’s delegating decision-making to the military and the former generals working for him. The ideological foot soldiers of Trumpism, notably Steve Bannon and Sebastian Gorka, have been forced out of the White House. And Trump’s protectionist agenda has been derailed, with trade hawk Peter Navarro now in the humiliating position of serving under free-trader Gary Cohn. Day by day, Trump is losing power.



Trump, largely because he has no interest or experience in governing, is being boxed in by the Washington establishment he hates so much. But he is more than capable of waging culture wars; indeed, it's one of the few things at which he's genuinely expert. It doesn't matter to him that his culture wars won't deliver policy victories. The fight is the means *and* the end. As Alfred Pennyworth tells Batman in *The Dark Knight*, "Some men just want to watch the world burn." The president of the United States is one of them.

Jeet Heer is a senior editor at the *New Republic*. [@HeerJeet](#)

## Sunken Pleasures

Jennifer Egan disconnects from the fractured nature of modern life.

**BY MICHELLE DEAN**

September 28, 2017

Even the best novelists are rarely congratulated on the quality of their observations about contemporary life. Realism is all well and good, but, it seems, there can be too much of it. There is something a little vulgar about writing a novel that is *too* close to the present, too concerned with current events, too eager to critique technological advancements. Imagine, if you will, a novel that was actually, directly, about Donald Trump. Too on the nose, we reviewers would sniff. Too much like an internet think piece.

Jennifer Egan has invariably escaped such critiques. Her last three novels have all, to some extent, presented commentaries on technology and its discontents. *Look at Me* (2001) explored the psychosis inherent in the reality TV era's obsession with public image, while *The Keep* (2006) kicked off its refashioning of the Gothic with the loss of a protagonist's portable satellite dish. And, if you believe the reviewers, the entire achievement of her last book, *A Visit From the Goon Squad* (2010), lay in its perfect rendering of the fractured conditions of modern existence.



Illustration by Emiliano Ponzi



*Goon Squad*, a decentralized, nonlinear book in which an entire chapter took the form of a PowerPoint presentation, distilled the very essence of a culture that—we know now, we didn't know then—was about to find a dreadful new level of meaning in the term “disintegration.” Marrying the splintered format of the novel to the intelligence of her narration and the gracefulness of her prose, Egan achieved something of a paradox: She elegantly presented the inelegant, the confusing, the vulgar, and the cheap. She has a way of sending up the flimsier aspects of modern life without seeming glib. Her novels take on the disconnection of online connectedness, the mismatch of fame and meaning without—a problem that seems to plague your average, isolated novelist—sounding totally disconnected from or condescending toward the phenomenon being described. *Goon Squad* includes, for instance, a fake celebrity profile that at once lampoons the form and pays tribute to the slavering a journalist must do in order to write one. At the outset, the starlet is described as “human bonsai,” about as good a metaphor for female celebrity as I've ever read. By the end of the interview, she's stabbed the journalist with a Swiss army knife.

So it comes as a surprise that Egan's new novel, *Manhattan Beach*, contains not one tiny measure of any of the things described above. It is set mostly in the 1940s, before any of these problems of fractured meaning seemed as striking or urgent as they do now. It begins at the beginning, with a girl headed to the Atlantic Ocean, and ends at the end, with the same girl headed towards the Pacific. Whereas her other novels invited comparisons to the postmodernists—say Don DeLillo—here we're closer to the realm of lyrical realism, something more like a novel by Colm Tóibín that quietly works through Egan's particular concerns. While there are breaks and loop-backs in its narrative timeline, Egan has put together a rather uncharacteristically *ordinary* book.

***Manhattan Beach's* Anna Kerrigan is twelve when we meet her, and we** are told, right off, that she comes from a deprived background: In the novel's opening pages, she can't help but covet the doll of a rich little girl she has just met in a home steps away from the titular beach. She is accompanying her father on a mission to this house for reasons that aren't revealed to us. But it is made clear that Eddie Kerrigan is involved in shady business and that, as the Depression slides towards World War II, his ability to meet his obligations is slipping. Anna has a disabled sister, Lydia, whom Eddie can barely stand to look at. Lydia cannot speak or care for herself and her illness inspires revulsion in him. When she hypersalivates, he feels “a flash of fury, even a wish to smack her, followed by a convulsion of guilt.”

A couple of chapters in, Eddie does what men in romantic novels always do when they face an

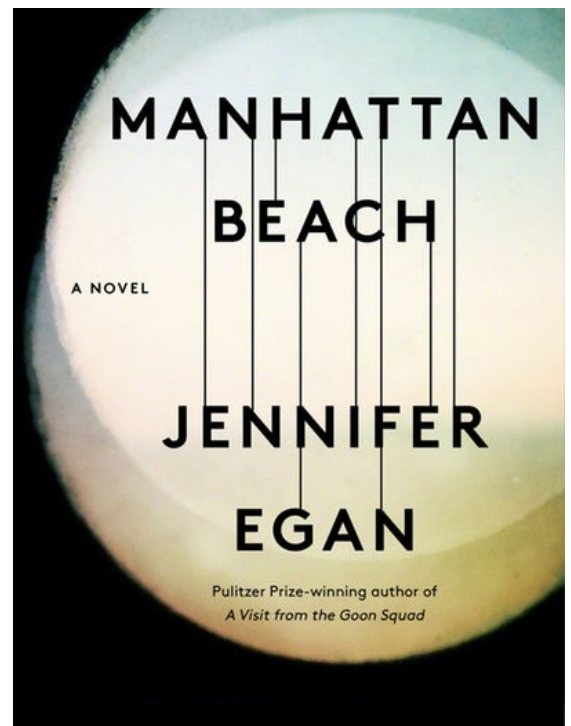


emotional challenge they can't easily resolve: He flees the scene. Anna and her mother are left to care for Lydia, largely on their own, laboring under the presumption that Eddie is dead, and surviving on money periodically doled out by Eddie's wayward spinster sister. When World War II arrives, 19-year-old Anna finds gainful employment in the Brooklyn Navy Yard. We get an introduction to the training procedures for new hires—"six weeks of instruction"—and we are also immediately informed that Anna is special, singled out by her boss for special responsibilities in the Yard. It's not clear why she might be so.

In these early portions of the book, Egan finds much pleasure in looking around the Yard itself. She presents the setting as a fantastical place, as well-ordered as clockwork, and seems to delight in depicting all the moving parts of this world. When Anna goes to lunch, Egan observes how she "synchronized her wristwatch with the large wall clock." The bike Anna borrows from a friend is not just a bike, but a spur to her imagination: "Motion performed alchemy on her surroundings, transforming them from a disjointed array of scenes into a symphonic machine she could soar through invisibly as a seagull." Anna eventually finds her way onto a diving team, and the intricacies of early deep-sea diving form a central part of the book. As she fits into the heavy "dress" that allows her to breathe hundreds of feet underwater, she relishes the qualities of the equipment, finding transcendence even in the gloves, "her hands delivering her to a purely tactile realm that seemed to exist outside the rest of her life."

Egan has always been something of a sensualist, an unusual characteristic in a novelist who is also frequently deemed "cerebral." Her lush use of language has often distinguished her from DeLillo or Pynchon, as well as other writers who share her concerns and interests. Her characters have a habit of getting lost in their feelings, as when the protagonist of her first novel, *The Invisible Circus*, becomes sexually enthralled by her dead sister's boyfriend. Even when the experience is not pleasurable, Egan often describes it as though it were. The car crash that opens *Look at Me* is like a fairground ride, "a slow loop through space like being on the Tilt-A-Whirl."

In *Manhattan Beach*, there's pleasure—but it comes less often from the visceral experience of the characters than from their experience of the technology they are using. For a while, it works. It's relatively easy for us to marvel over the brass bolts of a 1940s diving dress or the



**MANHATTAN BEACH** by Jennifer Egan Scribner, 448pp., \$28.00

wheels of an ancient Schwinn. We have none of the qualms about those objects that we might have, say, about a smartphone. There is something wondrous about the technologies that the characters in *Manhattan Beach* have at their disposal. They don't seem to carry any real costs.

That, of course, is the rub. The novel so elegantly represents the past that it doesn't have any sense of friction or edge. The social conditions are scarcely fleshed out, with little sense of how race and class shape the characters and their wartime work. Gender is clearer: Unmarried but sexually active, Anna inevitably gets pregnant. She has had to fight to get her spot on the diving squad. But we never learn the real purpose of the diving operation at the Navy Yard. No one worries much about rations. And we hear little about the war or anyone actually fighting at the front. Egan's polish can come off as the kind of gloss Hollywood likes to layer on a historical film, removing layers of dirt and grime and, above all, moral complication.

### **Yet Egan doesn't suffer the ailment that typically afflicts literary**

novelists who venture into history: She isn't *nostalgic*. Nor is she vague, not exactly. You will leave *Manhattan Beach* knowing a lot about diving equipment. One gets the impression that Egan found herself with piles upon piles of research. The acknowledgments explain that she has been researching the divers and the Navy Yard since at least 2004—which would mean she started this project before her last two novels were published—and then had difficulty knowing how to turn all that information into fiction. Research can be a boon to a novelist—there are more things in heaven and Earth than can be dreamt of in a single writer's philosophy—or it can become a hindrance, a thick layer of algae that weighs down the storytelling. Egan's wartime divers, for all their breathing apparatus, threaten to sink *Manhattan Beach*.

After we've learned everything there is to know about diving, the focus shifts to Eddie Kerrigan. His disappearance gives Anna something to long for, an explanation to seek. Gradually, predictably, she finds herself caught up with the same gangsters who ensnared Eddie. One dashing man, who goes by

the 1940s-noir name Dexter Styles, may be able to tell Anna what happened. And if the climax of her entanglement with Styles feels a little neatly assembled—the diving dress is involved, and a boat anchored off Staten Island in the middle of the night—it comes as a relief to see that all that stuff we learned about the equipment has a narrative purpose, not just an expositional one. A lesser writer would have frozen up.

**Research can be a boon to a novelist or it can become a hindrance, a thick layer of algae that weighs down the storytelling.**

But it is barely clear what any of this is about, in a way unusual for an Egan novel. She likes to have a big, overarching purpose going, some governing metaphor, even if it's executed in fragments and dazzling bits of narrative fireworks. Much of her work sustains itself not so much on the kind of cinematic structure and imagery we're given here, as on the quality of her insights into the conditions of modern life. And Egan seems to have known she wanted or needed to do something like that here. In 2011, when *Goon Squad* won the Pulitzer and Egan was at the top of the literary world, she gave an interview to *The Guardian* about her next novel, clearly *Manhattan Beach*. "One big question I have with the book is how to write a historical novel in a way that's more playful than just setting it in the past," she said. "That doesn't work for me. I'm going to have to mix it up a little more."

Here we have no playfulness, only the deep and the ocean. An epigraph from Herman Melville opens the book: "Yes, as every one knows, meditation and water are wedded for ever." The deep sea is indeed very quiet, an oasis from all the activity on the surface, a place where the normal rules of movement, and even of breathing, don't apply. The slow, meditative pace of *Manhattan Beach* was perhaps meant to mimic this, the entire book a vacation from the frantic everyday onslaught of disconnected information that Egan has usually been so eager to chronicle. But maybe that's it: Maybe Egan, in this book, needed a break too.

Michelle Dean is a contributing editor at *The New Republic* and author of the forthcoming book *Sharp: The Women Who Made an Art of Having an Opinion* [@michelledean](https://twitter.com/michelledean)



Scott Olson/Getty Images

## Why Democrats Should Throw the Kitchen Sink at Roy Moore

Moore will likely be Alabama's next U.S. senator. But investing in his Democratic opponent will pay other dividends.

**BY ALEX SHEPHARD**

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Roy Moore, who defeated Senator Luther Strange in Tuesday's Alabama primary, is a nutcase. He has equated homosexuality with bestiality, and declared that it should be illegal. He told Vox's Jeff Stein that there are communities in Illinois living under "sharia law." He said that 9/11 was divine retribution for removing Christianity from public life, and refused to obey a federal order to remove a 5,280-pound granite block inscribed with the Ten Commandments that he had installed outside Alabama's judicial building. He has said that Muslims shouldn't be allowed to serve in Congress and that Islam is a "fake religion." He was suspended from Alabama's Supreme Court for refusing to recognize gay marriage, even after bans on gay marriage had been overturned by the U.S. Supreme Court.

And come December, he will almost certainly be Alabama's next United States senator.

But that doesn't mean that Democrats should throw in the towel and leave his Democratic opponent, Doug Jones, in the lurch. Jones is a career prosecutor who won murder convictions against the KKK members who bombed a Birmingham church in 1963, killing four black girls. He is new to electoral politics, has only raised \$300,000 so far, and is competing in a deeply conservative state that Donald Trump won by 28 points—but he has the advantage of not having said things like "9/11 was divine retribution." That Alabama Republicans have been undercut by a string of scandals only makes Jones's sane, good government approach more appealing.

There are moral reasons for mounting a robust opposition to Moore, whose viewpoints are alarming and have no place in the Senate. An appalling hybrid of Donald Trump and Mike Pence, Moore's theocratic leanings should terrify anyone concerned about a Republican Party that is only becoming more extreme. There's a reason why Republican Senator Richard Shelby compared Moore to George Wallace.

But there are also very good political reasons to invest in the race. While they rally to his side after his primary victory, Republicans would prefer if Moore didn't exist. Investing in Alabama will force them to play defense on what would normally be safe territory, in large part because Moore's seat is so important: With a slim Senate majority and a sick John McCain, every vote counts. Ideally for Republicans, Moore will walk to victory without much fuss. Under no circumstance should Democrats let this happen. Instead, they should do everything they can to force the Republican establishment to defend Moore, while raising the temperature of the

race itself. Every time Moore talks, he gets himself in trouble. Democrats should do everything in their power to make sure Republicans get in trouble, too.

Of the many mistakes made in the 2016 election, one of the biggest was the refusal to call Donald Trump a Republican. The Clinton campaign, seeking to shoot the moon, wanted to make a big showing among white, college-educated Republicans. It attempted to graft the worst aspects of conservatism and the recent history of the Republican Party onto Trump, in an attempt to woo voters who might feel misgivings about voting for a racist demagogue. But in surgically removing Trumpism from the Republican Party, Clinton gave swing voters in key states a chance to switch sides with minimal second-guesses.

This turned out to be a big miscalculation. It treated Trump like an aberration when he was, in fact, the culmination of decades of Republican evolution toward anti-government extremism. Even if Clinton had won the general election, this strategy would have come back to haunt her in the form of a right-wing Republican legislature out to undermine her at every turn.

Thankfully, the stakes in Alabama are much lower than they were in the Trump-Clinton election. But there's a big opportunity here for Democrats. Roy Moore stands for what establishment Republicans—a rapidly dwindling caste—don't want to publicly acknowledge that their party stands for, and he does so in particularly flamboyant ways. It is not only that he is dogmatically anti-Muslim and anti-gay, but has repeatedly flaunted federal laws in defense of unabashedly bigoted beliefs.

Democrats already have one good foil in Donald Trump, but there's no reason to stop there. Democrats should force Republican senators, governors, and other officials to take a stand on Moore's most controversial beliefs, making him a kind of litmus test for the party. In the past, a figure like Moore could have been characterized as an outlier, but in the Trump era, he is evidence that Trumpism is a cancer metastasizing within the Republican Party. Stopping Moore is equivalent to stopping that cancer from spreading to the rest of government.

As a matter of electoral strategy, Democrats are still reluctant to compete in unfamiliar territory. Making a strong run in Alabama in December could give hope to Democrats across red states in 2018. With Tennessee Senator Bob Corker announcing that his seat will be open next year, Democrats will have opportunities to offset their fundamental disadvantages (they are defending far more seats than Republicans). A true 50-state strategy, which national Democrats have said they want to implement, requires showing that you're willing to make risky bets. It also requires painting your opponents in big, understandable terms, and Democrats will not get a better brush than Roy Moore.



Alex Shephard is the news editor at *The New Republic*. [@alex\\_shephard](#)