Covering Poverty

Greg Kaufmann re-joins *The Nation* as a contributing writer focused on poverty. From 2011 to '13, Kaufmann wrote the regular *Nation* series “This Week in Poverty,” part of our continuing coverage of an issue that editor and publisher Katrina vanden Heuvel calls “the shame of our nation.” Kaufmann will revive this beat with two columns a month focused on those waging today’s War on Poverty, paying particular attention to the emerging Poor People’s Campaign, now at work in more than 40 states.

Kaufmann will also provide updates on legislative efforts at the national, state, and local levels; highlight the work of community activists; bust myths in the media’s coverage of poverty policy; and identify ways of changing the narrative. He will demand accountability from the Republicans and Democrats who stand in the way of effective policy, and spotlight under-the-radar opportunities for action—lifting ideas from scholars, policy professionals, and others that could make a real difference in the lives of people in poverty.

Finally, Kaufmann will call attention to everyday poverty in our nation’s capital, where he is based, and where the reporting and public awareness are woefully inadequate.

To read Kaufmann’s first installment, “How a Guaranteed Income Could Relieve the ‘Pressure Cooker’ of Poverty,” go to *TheNation.com*.

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The Lying Game

Democratic senators should have called out Kavanaugh’s blatant perjury.

The Senate Judiciary Committee’s Kavanaugh–Blasey Ford hearing perfectly illustrated the conundrum that we find ourselves in today. We teach our children to live by the core values of honesty, civility, respect, and fair play, and we do our best to live up to them ourselves. Yet it is our own adherence to these values that leaves us vulnerable to the campaign by Donald Trump and the Republican Party to destroy what remains of our democracy.

It is no secret that—amid his whining, brag-gadocio, and staggyering displays of self-pity—would-be Supreme Court justice Brett Kavanaugh repeatedly perjured himself. Fact-checking articles in the days after the hearing identified well more than a dozen lies: lies about his high-school years, his college years, his drinking habits, his calendar, his yearbook, his judicial beliefs, the laws of Maryland, the testi-monies of his friends, and the meaning of words. It’s a wonder he gave his real name.

And yet none of the Democrats on the committee had the nerve to call Kavanaugh a liar to his face; none were even willing to call his lies “lies.” They raised questions; they implied that they did not find him credible; they tried to catch him in contradic-tions; they rolled their eyes at his protestations of innocence, in both sexual and criminal matters; and they asked him, over and over, to pretty-please ask the president for an FBI investigation. But Kava-nough simply boasted and yelled, as if auditioning for a frat-boy spin-off of *Fox & Friends.*

In the upper reaches of American politics, to call a powerful person a “liar” has long been beyond the pale of acceptable behavior. The exploitation of this now-obsolete nicety is what lies behind not only Trump’s success, but that of Mitch McConnell, Paul Ryan, Ted Cruz, Lindsey Graham, and just about every other successful contemporary “conservative” pundit and politician in America.

But Democrats and most members of the mainstream media are still playing by the old rules. Senators on the Judiciary Committee had to know they were being lied to, since the lies were continuously highlighted on Twitter. Just cataloging them all would take up more than double the space of this column. *The New York Times* fact-check of Kavanaugh’s testimony ran over 2,700 words; *The Washington Post*’s, more than 2,300. But even here, where his deliberate dishonesty was the actual topic of the articles, we got headlines that described Kavanaugh as having given testimony that “Misleads or Veers Off Point” (the *Times*) or was “misleading or wrong” (the *Post*).

The fact-checking articles were largely second-day pieces, but just like the brainless chyrons that appeared on the bottom of the cable-news shows, the initial straight-news reporting presented the hearing as a “he said/she said” affair, despite being written and edited by people who had to have known that “she” told a credible story, while “he” had done the opposite.

The front-page coverage in the *Times* was literally headlined “She Said. Then He Said. Now What Will Senators Say?” Peter Baker’s account failed to mention that Kava-nough’s testimony had been discredited (though the other article that ran across the front page—“High-Stakes Duel of Tears and Fury Unfolds in Senate”—quoted a senator inquiring about a lie but took no position on the obvious falsehood). The stories that ran inside the paper similarly ignored Kavanaugh’s fibs, such as “Graham Erups at ‘the Most Unethical Sham,’ Capping a Turn Toward Trump,” by Michael Shear, or “A Day When Emotions Ran High, Both Inside and Outside of the Capitol,” by Matt Flegenheimer.

The *Post*’s coverage mirrored this tendency. Its front-page story was a “he said/she said” compendium by three reporters—Michael Kranish, Emma Brown, and Tom Hamburger—titled “A different Kavanaugh comes out swinging, hard.” Such stories were the rule across the mainstream media. Here’s CNN.com: “Ford ‘100%’ certain of assault claim; Kavanaugh says ‘I am innocent.’” *The Atlantic*’s report by Russell Berman was headlined “The Senate Judiciary Committee Believes Brett Kavanaugh” and took no notice of the judge’s lies. Even the *Columbia Journalism Review*
chose to go in this direction with Pete Vernon’s article, “Ford, Kavanaugh, and America divided,” which began with the words “It was a he-said-she-said exchange....” In The Wall Street Journal, Kristina Peterson, Natalie Andrews, and Andrew Duehren’s piece, “Hearing Rivets the Nation and Its Legislators,” not only failed to point out Kavanaugh’s flimflammetry, but also mostly limited its quotes to pro-Kavanaugh partisans, going so far as to give unnamed “officials” anonymity to sell the Republican version of events.

All of these publications—excluding Rupert Murdoch’s Wall Street Journal—were filled on the same day with probing commentary demonstrating how dishonest Kavanaugh had been. (Special kudos to the Boston Globe editorial that stated flatly: “Brett Kavanaugh’s a liar.”) It is this kind of commentary that gets the media accused of “liberal bias.” But it is also clear that reporters on the news side aren’t going to do the Democrats’ job for them, and so Democrats had better do it themselves.

It is clear that reporters on the news side aren’t going to do the Democrats’ job for them, and so Democrats had better do it themselves. If just one senator had listed Kavanaugh’s lies and then challenged him to prove that he was telling the truth, our benighted politics would be in a different place today. If that had happened, journalists covering the hearing would have had an opening to adjudicate the argument by examining the evidence without falling prey to the reflexive charge of “liberal bias.”

When spectacle is all, then the spectacle wins and substance disappears. Trump and the Republicans know that, which is why they control all three branches of government in a country where most people find their policies and politics anathema. Democrats refuse to acknowledge this, which is why they keep losing. And the members of the mainstream media certainly know this as well, but continue to pretend they don’t—which is why the charade lives on.

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know. For people prone to anxiety like ourselves, this uncertainty is hard to tolerate. But within that uncertainty lies a measured but radiant hope.

“Some things are going much better than we thought they would,” McKibben says. To give just one example, the price of solar panels has fallen by 90 percent. “Every-thing points to: If we want to solve this problem, we can.”

This kind of optimism is not denial. “We’re not going to be able to stop global warming,” McKibben acknowledges. “But we may be able to save the civilization that our forebears have built.”

To do that, we need to reject despair and start fighting together—for future humans and for ourselves.

COMIX NATION

PETER KUPER

Dear Liza,

I have a cousin that I haven’t seen in many years and saw only from time to time as a youth. My only knowledge of his life and politics is via social media; he’s well-educated but deeply reactionary and motivated by far-right ideology. He’s getting married and wants to send me an invitation to the wedding. Am I obliged to give him my address? I will not attend (too far away), but am I also obliged to send a wedding gift? Can I ignore the request?

—Commie Cousin

Dear Commie,

Don’t send a gift. We all sometimes forget to send wedding presents—even to people who aren’t Nazis. It’s petty for newlyweds to notice such things; they should be enjoying their honeymoon in Bali (or in this case, Budapest). You could send a polite card with your regrets, wishing Mr. and Mrs. Storm Trooper many happy returns. But it’s worthwhile to raise the social cost of membership in the far right.

After many participants in the Charlottesville rallies had their personal information revealed online, white-pride leader Richard Spencer saw a dip in attendance at his events. People were afraid of losing their jobs or alienating their friends and family. That’s good. If you don’t mind severing the relationship, decline to receive the invitation and tell him why. But if you don’t wish to confront him, that’s understandable. Perhaps you avoid antagonizing men with hateful ideologies (fair), or want to protect the relationship out of a shared history or a fondness for his unlucky parents (both also fair). If that’s the case, but you’d still like to withhold your approval, I recommend ignoring his request for your address. Just pretend you forgot to answer his messages.
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