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IN THIS WEEK'S ISSUE

President Obama's Plan Normalized Relations with Cuba. Can It Also Transform the Nation?

In the October 3, 2016, issue of *The New Yorker*, in “The Cuba Play” (p. 42), **Jon Lee Anderson** sits down with President Obama in the Oval Office to discuss the lead-up to the restoration of relations between the U.S. and Cuba, and the subsequent diplomatic engagement of the two countries. Obama tells Anderson that the ambitious bid to open up Cuba’s closed system was based on three premises: “No. 1 was, Cuba is a tiny, poor country that poses no genuine threat to the United States. No. 2, in this era of the Internet and global capital movements, is that openness is a more powerful change agent than isolation. . . . No. 3 was the belief that, if you are interested in promoting freedom, independence, civic space inside of Cuba, then the power of things like remittances to give individual Cubans some cash, even if the government was taking a cut, that then allowed them to start a barber-shop, or a cab service, was going to be the engine whereby individual Cubans—not directed by the United States, not directed by the C.I.A., not through some grand conspiracy, but Cuban people—who now have their own little shop and have a little bit of savings can start expecting more.”

Between Election Day, 2012 and his second inauguration, Obama asked his national-security team to draw up priorities for his second term. Ben Rhodes, the President’s chief foreign-policy aide, tells Anderson, “We had a series of meetings in which you basically go through the whole world, and Cuba was sitting there as an area where we had to make a decision.” With Cuba in mind, Obama brought Ricardo Zúñiga, a State Department official, to the N.S.C., where he could work closely with Rhodes. The two of them decided to keep their negotiations secret. “If the news of negotiations leaked to opponents of reconciliation in Congress, they could easily be scuttled,” Anderson writes. The Americans and the Cubans would need a secure place to meet, and, in June, 2013, the Canadian government provided a site, in Ottawa. At the initial meetings, there were three Americans—Zúñiga, Rhodes, and an “American counterterrorism expert”—and four Cubans. “Several reliable sources have confirmed that the leader of the Cuban team was Alejandro Castro Espín, Raúl’s only son,” Anderson writes. Rhodes reflects on the Ottawa meetings, which continued through the summer and autumn, and became “considerably warmer” after Obama shook hands with Raúl Castro in December, at Nelson Mandela’s funeral. Rhodes recalls, “It was the first discussion we had about history that wasn’t contentious. . . . They had read ‘Dreams from My Father,’ and had studied [Obama’s] role in the disinvestment movement. They had done their homework.” The American and Cuban teams began meeting every month, and as they started to hone the details of an agreement the Pope offered to help, which proved crucial. In an atmosphere of uncertainty, the Vatican reassured both sides by acting as a guarantor. Still, when the negotiating parties met in Rome, in October, the emissaries from the Vatican were shocked by the scope of the deal; what had begun as a prisoner exchange had turned into something much bigger. As Rhodes recalls, “Some of the people on the Vatican side were emotional to the point of tears.” On December 17, 2014, Raúl Castro and Obama appeared simultaneously on live television to announce the normalization of relations, the release of political prisoners, and the swapping of spies.

The following April, the Summit of the Americas was held in Panama, and Obama and Raúl Castro were the stars of the event. Obama described Castro to Anderson as a canny, good-humored pragmatist: “The first time we had the conversation about normalization, he warned me, ‘Look, we Castros, we speak a long time, but you’re lucky you’re talking to me and not Fidel.’ So that combination of humor and insight into his own issues has led me to be able to have productive conversations with him. Now, that does not mean that he is not guarded, cautious, that he’s not steeped in his own dogmas. What it does mean is that we don’t spend a lot of time on lengthy rants about Communism and imperialism.” Anderson asked Obama why, considering Fidel’s long-standing distrust of the Americans, Raúl had finally stepped forward. “There is a recognition . . . that sustaining their economic model over the next ten years becomes increasingly untenable. So they’re very much in the mode of: how do we make our economy run without giving up power?” He continued, “My impression also is that Raúl recognizes that any substantial change to their economic system—and, by extension, at least their civil society, if not their full political system—requires him to do the downfield blocking.” Obama recalled a partic-



ularly frank conversation, after a tour of Havana's old city, "I said this directly to Raúl, 'It is not my objective to see Cuba turned into some tourist playground for the United States.' There are genuine gains they made in health care and education that are worth preserving." He went on, "By opening up your economy, you can transform Havana in a way that really works for the economy and works for you."

Obama tells Anderson he believes that Americans need to make a greater effort to acknowledge perceptions that exist outside the United States. "We are a superpower, and we do not fully appreciate the degree to which, when we move, the world shakes." He continued, "The intention here is not, as the Republicans like to call it, engaging in apology tours. It is dignifying these countries' memories and their culture, and saying to them, 'We understand your experience and your culture, and that is valid.' And, once you do that, if people think, he sees me, even if they disagree with you, there is an openness to having a conversation."

The Supreme Court Has Leaned Right for Decades. Is That About to Change?

In "In the Balance" (p. 28), **Jeffrey Toobin** explores the fate of the Supreme Court after Justice Antonin Scalia, and how the outcome of this year's Presidential race will invariably transform the court. Following Scalia's death, the Court's liberals were ascendant for the first time in two generations. Carrie Severino, chief counsel of the right-leaning Judicial Crisis Network, tells Toobin, "Losing Justice Scalia on the Court created a one-way ratchet, making it so much easier to move in a liberal direction." Today, when the Court splits four to four, the lower-court decision is affirmed. And, thanks to seven years of President Obama's judicial appointments to the federal courts of appeal, the cases coming before the Supreme Court are often those in which liberals have prevailed. Noah Feldman, a professor at Harvard Law School, explains, "There has been a sense of empowerment among liberals on a whole bunch of appellate courts, in which Obama has appointed a majority of the judges. They know that if their cases go to the Supreme Court they will be protected." In March, Obama nominated Merrick Garland to replace Scalia, but Mitch McConnell, the Senate Majority Leader, had already announced that the Senate would not allow a vote on any Supreme Court nominee. Senator Patrick Leahy—who formerly chaired the Judiciary Committee—tells Toobin, "What we've seen from McConnell and the Republicans is the most irresponsible thing I've seen since I've been in the Senate. If the President had picked Garland for the seats that went to Sotomayor and Kagan, he would have been confirmed by ninety to ten."

The results of November's Presidential election could determine not only Scalia's replacement but also the retirement dates—and succession plans—of sitting Justices. Stephen Breyer is seventy-eight years old, Anthony Kennedy is eighty, and Ruth Bader Ginsburg is eighty-three. If all three step down from the Court in the coming four years, the next President will leave a legacy comparable to that of Richard Nixon, who filled four Supreme Court vacancies in a little more than two years. In May, Donald Trump provided a list of eleven judges whom he would consider nominating to the Court, and he added ten more last week. The confirmation of any of the judges on his list would essentially return the Court to where it was before Scalia's death. If Trump were then in a position to replace Ginsburg or Breyer, the transformation of the Court would be dramatic. "The calculus would be somewhat more complex for Hillary Clinton," Toobin writes. A senior Clinton campaign aide tells Toobin that Clinton "thinks the Senate should do its job and confirm Garland in 2016. . . . When it comes to judicial appointments, if she wins, we'll be looking at where the vacancies are, where the Obama nominees are in the pipeline, and looking to sit down with the Democrats and the Republicans in the Senate to make a plan to get it done as soon as possible." Senator Richard Blumenthal, Democrat of Connecticut, tells Toobin, "If you have a time manager for the President of the United States and you have several significant and politically sensitive issues that you want to get done, you should not expend the time and take the heat of fighting day after day for another nominee when Garland will be on the right side of all the major issues, like choice, right from the start."

The Country's Resurgent Far Right Has a Surprising Face

In "Germany's New Nationalists" (p. 54), **Thomas Meaney** reports from Germany on Frauke Petry, the leader of Alternative für Deutschland, a burgeoning new right-wing party that is the most successful far-right phenomenon in the country since the Nazis. For decades, the German far right has been a limited force, with easily recognizable supporters—ex-Nazis in the sixties and seventies, skinheads in the eighties and nineties. "Petry is something different," Meaney writes. "A disarmingly wholesome figure—a former businesswoman with a Ph.D. in chemistry and four children from her marriage to a Lutheran pastor." Yet her manner belies the extremism of the AfD's views. In the face of the recent influx of refugees (especially from the war in Syria) Petry has said that the police might have to shoot people crossing the border illegally, and the Party has called for bans on head scarves and minarets. The sudden rise of the AfD has been partly fuelled by an announcement, last year, by Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel: she said that the country would take in anyone who was a refugee. This announcement—along with a more recent weeklong spate of violent attacks involving perpetrators of Muslim heritage—has electrified the German right. Petry believes that most of the refugees are a threat to contemporary German values, and her party has declared that "Islam does not belong in Germany." In an interview with Meaney, Petry said, "These people coming into Germany are used to being in completely different social circumstances." Recalling her visit to an asylum shelter, she said, "I saw food on the walls, excrement as well—I saw how they behaved. And I thought, This is not going to work." According to an estimate by the German Interior Ministry, violence against foreigners increased by more than forty per cent last year. The affiliation between attackers and AfD supporters is well established. Petry

denies this: “There were no AfD members connected with any of the attacks, or whatever you are calling them,” she told Meaney. “We have to distinguish between the causes and the symptoms. . . . In order to get rid of the symptom, you have to get rid of the problem.”

“By American standards, especially in the age of Donald Trump, contemporary German politics is decorous and understated,” Meaney writes. But although Petry’s crisp style is in many ways the opposite of Trump’s, her rise has similarities. Both came late to politics, both often work by insinuation, both have been accused of financial improprieties, and both castigate the media for liberal bias but also thrive on the media attention. “My impression is that Trump may become the American President, because the alternative to him, Hillary Clinton, is just so unconvincing. She is almost like a copy of someone like Merkel—someone who just keeps on with the same policies that led to the trouble in the first place,” Petry says. She admires the American willingness to take risks, and thinks that German politics is more weighed down by liberal pieties. “It’s so moral to promise to people around the world that they can come to Germany and find paradise,” she said sarcastically. “I myself am not morally good. I’m just a human being. I try to stick to the rules. And I think there is a majority of Germans who agree with me.”

Ali Wong’s Radical Standup

In “Lady Bits” (p. 36), **Ariel Levy** writes about Ali Wong, the thirty-four-year-old writer, comedian, and actor—known for her often filthy, irreverent, and lewd material—who, at seven and a half months pregnant, filmed the Netflix special “Baby Cobra.” Wong tells Levy, “You know what male comics can’t do? They can’t get pregnant. They can’t *perform* pregnant. So my attitude is, just use all those differences. Don’t think of it as you’re oppressed.” Levy writes, “Wong can get away with a considerable amount of vulgarity—and hollering—because she is funny, but it also helps that she uses her differences, as she put it, to destabilize her audience’s expectations.” Amy Schumer tells Levy that she considers Wong “a revolutionary in comedy.” Wong is Vietnamese-Chinese-American; the comedian Margaret Cho says, “The archetype that gets projected onto us as Asian women of being silent—she really does go against that.” In addition to shooting the new ABC sitcom “American Housewife,” writing for ABC’s “Fresh Off the Boat,” and getting up at five-thirty to breast-feed, Wong goes out most nights—after putting her daughter to sleep—to perform at local clubs. Wong doesn’t announce these gigs to her fans, because, for her purposes, the fewer spectators there are at these shows the better. She tells Levy, “If the audience is really shitty, you feel free to just blurt things out. That’s the only way I write: onstage.”

Next, Wong wants to make a romantic comedy with Randall Park, the star of “Fresh Off the Boat,” and she is already planning a follow-up special to “Baby Cobra.” But at her home, in Culver City—when her daughter, Mari, was nine months old—Wong tells Levy, “If it wasn’t for Mari and doing that special when I was pregnant with her I could see how very easily I would have slowed down, and stopped.” Wong, who is her family’s primary breadwinner, says, “If I didn’t have to make money, I would be happy just staying home with her all day and doing these shows at night.” In her routine, Wong jokes that she “trapped” her husband for his earning potential, and declares, “Feminism is the worst thing to ever happen to women: our job used to be . . . *no job*.” She was kidding about feminism, telling Levy, “I think people who don’t get that are, like, not so smart.” But she was serious about wanting to work less. “I really just want more money for less effort. Don’t you want that, too?”

Plus: In Comment, **Steve Coll** considers how reactions to terrorism, including the recent attacks in Minnesota and the New York area, have influenced this Presidential election (p. 23); in Shouts & Murmurs, **Paul Rudnick** imagines a doctor’s answers to frequently asked questions about the impending divorce of Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt (p. 35); **Akash Kapur** considers what today’s movements for social and economic reform can learn from nineteenth-century utopias (p. 66); **Laura Miller** reads Tana French’s crime-fiction series, Dublin Murder Squad (p. 72); **Peter Schjeldahl** visits “Jerusalem 1000-1400: Every People Under Heaven,” at the Metropolitan Museum (p. 76); Hua Hsu listens to Bon Iver’s new album, “22, A Million” (p. 78); **Anthony Lane** watches Antoine Fuqua’s “The Magnificent Seven” and Andrew Neel’s “Goat” (p. 80); new fiction by **Etgar Keret** (p. 62); and poetry by **Philip Levine** (p. 48) and **Nyla Matuk** (p. 65).

Podcasts: **Dorothy Wickenden** speaks with **John Cassidy** and **Steve Coll** about how terrorism and national security factor into the conversation around the 2016 election; **Jill Lepore** talks about Presidential debates; and **Etgar Keret** reads his short story “To the Moon and Back.”

Digital Extras: Images of artifacts from Medieval Jerusalem, on display at the Metropolitan Museum; poetry readings by **Philip Levine** and **Nyla Matuk**; and **Richard Brody** discusses scenes from Herk Harvey’s “Carnival of Souls,” from 1962.

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