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Epilogue

THOSE WITH EYES TO SEE

WOULD I HAVE BEEN THERE? That was the question I asked myself as I watched the insurrection on television that day. It's the inquiry that set in motion the writing of this book, the refrain that sometimes still haunts me when I watch the videos and images from January 6. I hear people praying in the familiar cadence and vocabulary we used in my evangelical circles. The way that some of the rioters raised their hands to the heavens as they sang and worshipped brings back visceral memories of doing the same motions in church and at summer camp. Several friends from my former church were, in fact, at the Jericho March on December 12. Others were present on January 6. Those with whom I used to pray and break bread and worship and serve *were* there.

Even if I hadn't actually been there, I think, would I have been at home, quietly or not so quietly cheering them on? Would I have felt something akin to relief, or joy, in watching the patriots fight to retake the country for God and his righteous servants? For every person in the Capitol that day, my guess is that there were a hundred or a thousand cheering them on. Had history unfolded differently,

perhaps I wouldn't have been in DC but at home, praying alone, or in an impromptu group asking God to somehow reinstate Trump to office and protect the people fighting in his name.

Nearly twenty years after leaving the church, I realize that I cannot know what I would have done. The thought exercise that animated the writing of this book proves useful insofar as it offers lines of inquiry to pursue, but games of imagination can only take us so far. Ultimately, a more pressing and urgent question remains for all of us to consider: that is, *Why didn't we see this coming?*

I am not so much talking about the Trump presidency itself as the White Christian coalition that helped create the pathway for his ascendancy and then supported him every authoritarian and traitorous step of the way. I'm talking about the megachurch congregations, Jericho Marchers, Proud Boys, QAnons, Oath Keepers, Redoubt Migrants, and other MAGA-ites who used God's name to justify the worst domestic attack on the Capitol in the history of the United States.

As the history we have traced throughout this book testifies, the clues were there all along. In 1964, Goldwater won the hearts and minds of radical conservatives by proclaiming that extremism is a virtue. In the wake of his defeat, Paul Weyrich and Richard Viguerie launched the counterrevolution that reshaped American politics. "We are radicals, working to overturn the present power structure," they proclaimed. In order to propel their recapturing of America, they teamed up with conservative White evangelicals and Catholics who claimed victimhood every time they didn't get their way. The family became a versatile weapon deployed to counter advances in gender equality and civil rights for BIPOC Americans. James Dobson called children the "foot soldiers in the second American civil war."

The New Religious Right always envisioned the cross and the flag together. There was no separating national identity from the divine calling of the United States. This meant sacrificing the republic in order to save the America they wanted—a nation where White,

straight Christians maintain power. If authoritarianism and conspiracy were necessary to retake America, then democracy be damned. What mattered was a pure nation constructed according to White Christian supremacy rather than multiracial democracy. In the case of Jimmy Carter versus Ronald Reagan, White Christians chose power over piety. Over the decades from the 1960s to the 2010s, power became the *marker* of piety—the sign of doing God’s will the ability to conquer and eliminate political and cultural opponents.

Historian Kristin Kobes du Mez summarizes this brilliantly in *Jesus and John Wayne*. Though she names White evangelicals, I would expand it to include White Christian nationalists as a whole. “By the time Trump arrived proclaiming himself their savior, conservative White evangelicals had already traded a faith that privileges humility and elevates ‘the least of these’ for one that derides gentleness as the province of wusses,” she writes. “Rather than turning the other cheek, they’d resolved to defend their faith and their nation, secure in the knowledge that the ends justifies the means.”

If one accepts, as the data says we should, that Christian nationalism is the standard worldview for not only a large number of the January 6 rioters but White Americans as a whole, it becomes clear that what happened on January 6 was the inevitable outcome of an American cold civil war half a century in the making. When one puts together the history of political and culture wars, fought over the fault lines of race, gender, sexuality, family, immigration, and foreign policy, it becomes clear that the January 6 insurrection was simply the logical next step.

But the homegrown terrorist threat that culminated in the J6 insurrection went unheeded for decades. Why so many investigators, historians, and journalists missed it is a complex question. But it’s clear that one reason so few observers saw January 6 coming is because, for centuries, the assumption has been that White American Christians—like my former classmates and church friends who have moved to the Redoubt region—are the default demographic of the

nation. This is what the ex-evangelical author and scholar Chrissy Stroop calls Christian privilege: “Christian supremacy and privilege are every bit as real as white and male privilege, for example, and are part of the unjust social hierarchies that need to be dismantled in order for equity to be achieved in our society.” Under the guise of (White) Christian privilege, people like Leandra Blades are often envisioned as the heart of Americana—the pesky but harmless moralists of a nation founded on religious principles. They’re seen as more Ned Flanders—the irritatingly pious neighbor from *The Simpsons*—than Mr. Burns, the power-hungry corporate authoritarian who cares little for democracy, fairness, or inclusion, much less loving his neighbor.

Seeing this story in its full light doesn’t leave me bereft of hope. There are many reasons to think that the United States might continue to reach its promise of equality, freedom, and the pursuit of happiness for all its people in the coming decades. After all, the night before J6, Stacey Abrams and a host of other organizers helped to pull off one of the most stunning electoral victories in modern American electoral politics, when Jon Ossoff and Raphael Warnock were elected to the Senate from Georgia. In 2020, Delaware’s Sarah McBride became the first transgender candidate elected to a state legislature in the country’s history. In 2021, Michelle Wu became the first Asian American and first woman to become Boston’s mayor by running on a thoroughly progressive platform. During the same election cycle, Elaine O’Neal became the first Black woman to win the mayor’s office in Durham, North Carolina, a city with a history of voter suppression aimed at preventing African Americans from voting. These aren’t isolated stories. All over the country Americans are fighting for labor protections, voting rights, immigration reform, new gun laws, and climate policies for a sustainable future. There are bright lights illuminating the arc that bends toward justice, from Georgia to Delaware to Oregon and everywhere in between.

But after January 6, 2021, we need to acknowledge this isn’t the only path possible for our future. A new picture should come into

focus for anyone paying attention. Many Christian nationalists are a clear and present danger to the United States of America. They are homegrown radicals who prioritize White Christian supremacy over multiracial democracy. They are not interested in pluralism. Their goal is not a model of governance based on dialogue and debate. The goal is to take back America by any means possible.

In a very real sense, January 6 was not the end of a movement—some last-gasp attempt of a weakened and aggrieved group supporting a politician who didn't want to admit he'd lost an election. No. If we are paying close attention to the extremist backstory of the people who stormed the Capitol that day, we will see that the insurrection was the logical next step for a certain diminishing White Christian population trying desperately to retake what they considered theirs. Acclimating or adjusting themselves to the inevitable waves of religious, racial, and other forms of diversity, for White Christian nationalists, is no option at all. This was not the last stand of a dying faction. It was the first violent battle in what they foresee as the coming civil war.

