

# THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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## Can Shaun Harper Save DEI?

He built his career advocating for underrepresented students. Now his movement is under organized attack.



TURNING TIDES

*By J. Brian Charles*

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**S**haun Harper woke up in his room at the Hyatt Regency LAX hotel early on March 7, spoiling for a fight.

It was the first day of the 17th annual African American Male Student Success Summit, something of a homecoming for Harper, whose career as a researcher and advocate has focused on better educational outcomes for Black men.

Harper, 48, was getting ready to deliver remarks at a panel discussion, but on C-SPAN that morning, he could see trouble brewing 2,600 miles away. Just as the sun was peeking over the horizon in Los Angeles, Rep. Burgess Owens (R-Utah) was gavelling to order a hearing in Washington before the House Committee on Education and the Workforce. The title? “Divisive, Excessive, Ineffective: The Real Impact of DEI on College Campuses.”

Owens, a Black conservative, attacked with blunt force, hitting all the familiar notes in the campaign against diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts. DEI at colleges was “a cancer,” he said. The movement was “Marxist-centered.” Diversity training was “demeaning” and “racist” indoctrination. It was to blame for antisemitism on college campuses. It was nothing more than a gift.

“It is an industry that has created multi-millionaires from previously unknown and non-peer-respected authors,” he said.

Harper started to get angry. The key argument of his research — that deficits in college achievement among Black men were not personal failures but could be laid at the feet of administrators who gave them insufficient support — helped usher in the DEI movement. In the 20-plus years since he began his work, the movement has become a powerful force in higher education. Central to its mission of building inclusive campuses has been providing college employees and students training to confront implicit bias and, in Harper’s estimation, begin to unwind years of ingrained prejudice.



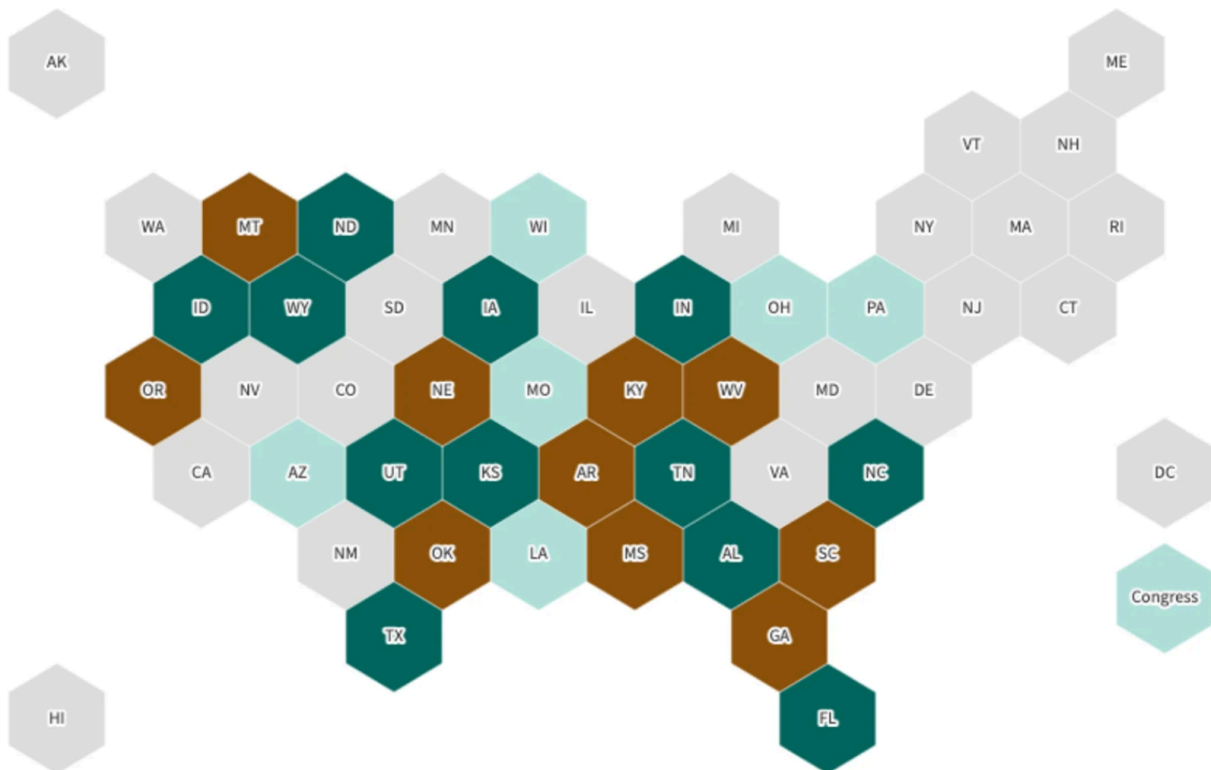
[Read the latest stories](#) about DEI state legislation and its effect on campuses across the country.

It’s a mission he clearly believes in. “When people go into our democracy and do racist, homophobic things, colleges and universities are partially responsible for that,” Harper says. “If we don’t teach about race and racism and inequality, we leave them

terribly underprepared to confront those issues and address them — and, in fact, they are complicit in perpetuating those issues.”

DEI has also made Harper a celebrity of sorts among academics. He is a sought-after speaker, frequent columnist, and served on an advisory committee for Barack Obama’s White House. Through the University of Southern California’s Race and Equity Center, which he has led since 2017, Harper has pulled in more than \$15 million in college and corporate contracts and nearly \$22 million in foundation grants to conduct campus-climate surveys, offer diversity training, and consult with both colleges and corporations, including Microsoft, Nike, and the NFL.

### Track DEI legislation and its affect on college campuses



- [Explore maps, read descriptions, and check the status of bills](#) in states where lawmakers are seeking to restrict colleges’ DEI efforts.

But as DEI's public profile has grown, so, too, have the attacks against it. And now, Harper faces the destruction of those practices he has long advocated and for which he is widely known.

As of late May, 28 states and the U.S. Congress have introduced 85 anti-DEI bills. Fourteen of those bills have become law, striking down diversity offices, mandated diversity training, the use of diversity statements in hiring, or all of the above. The attacks have cost DEI officers their jobs and made others fearful their work could draw unwelcome attention from lawmakers in states still considering bans. And while Harper's job at USC is safe, even he has found himself pausing projects he planned to begin.

That day in Los Angeles, he turned off the television, headed to the hotel's ballroom, and took a seat. He listened to the opening remarks of the House hearing, but his attention was split. He fired off texts to colleagues across the country and told them to watch and contribute to a counterattack.

Even in the months leading up to the congressional hearing, Harper had been busy waging a defense through op-eds and speaking opportunities. He had cast himself as one of DEI's biggest champions, someone uniquely positioned to make the case for its benefits.

"I don't see anyone fighting as hard as we are," Harper says, referring to the USC center. "I just don't see it."

Harper has the right temperament to wage a public defense. Since his earliest days as an academic, he has called out racism where he sees it and sought bigger and bigger

stages for his arguments.

Still, can a man so centrally identified with popular DEI practices — which even some academic proponents of diversity have found fault with — save those practices from the aggressive, fast-moving campaign to end them?

**H**arper's hometown of Thomasville, Georgia was shaped by an unwritten rule, he says: "We didn't talk about race unless we absolutely had to."

Thomasville, a 45-minute drive northeast from Tallahassee, Fla., is home to about 18,000 residents, more than half of whom are Black. Harper, the first of four children, was born when his parents were teenagers. He spent many of his early years in a single-story brick house that belonged to his mother's aunt, Willie Mae Williams, whom he always considered his grandmother.

The name of his street — South Martin Luther King Drive — suggests an appreciation in Thomasville for civil-rights history, and the town has some claims to Black achievement. Andrew Young, the activist and eventual mayor of Atlanta, was pastor at Bethany Congregational Church there, and Lloyd Austin, the first Black man to hold the title of U.S. Secretary of Defense, was born there. But though the public schools were integrated in 1970, Thomasville was and remains deeply divided along racial lines.

As recently as the early 1990s, when Harper was in high school, two homecoming queens were elected each year — one white and one Black. None of his peers blinked an eye at this vestige of the "separate but equal" South, he says.

Harper learned the unwritten rules early. He describes accompanying his mother, Cynthia Harper, to clean houses one day when he was about five years old, watching as a white owner rudely ordered her around. "I felt horrible that she was being treated this way," says Harper. He remained silent.

“Some things that Shaun took personal and still takes personal, I didn’t,” says Cynthia Harper. “I understood that this was just how it is.”

As indignities like this piled up, Shaun began to wonder how the world had become divided along racial lines.

“I knew very early on we were not poor because white folks were better than us or smarter than us,” he says. “I wanted to understand the racial stratifications. And I was on a mission to fix them.”

His aspirations were obvious to his mother, but she knew he’d need help. For one thing, Harper stuttered as a child, a condition one therapist told her was the result of his brain moving faster than his mouth. When Harper began middle school, his mother had him board a bus each day to travel across town and see Ira Flowers, a civil-rights leader who worked at what locals in Thomasville still call the Black YMCA. There, he organized youth basketball tournaments, helped kids fill out their college applications, and taught public speaking. In an office choked with cigarette smoke, Flowers offered the boy no quarter, rattling off a string of expletives each time Harper got tripped up on a word, his mother recalls.

**“I don’t see anyone fighting as hard as we are. I just don’t see it.”**

Shaun Harper

“Ira Flowers was one of the people in my childhood who took a deep interest in my success,” Harper says. “What he gave me was the confidence to speak up and voice my opinions on what I was seeing around me.”

Inside Flowers’s office, Harper began to piece together the words to express his anger about his mother’s client, his sense that racial stratifications were unjust. He dreamed of college, but his mother didn’t want him to go far away. Money, too, was a problem.

In 1994, the year Harper graduated from high school, his mother earned less than \$20,000, barely above the poverty line. Harper earned a Georgia HOPE Scholarship, which paid his entire tuition at Albany State University, an HBCU he attended an hour's drive north of Thomasville.

**A**lbany State was like a mirror. Harper pledged a fraternity, Kappa Alpha Psi, and began to meet students whose experiences were similar to his own.

“I saw in them examples of success and Black excellence all around me,” he says. “It was the exact opposite of what we see on television — movies where the Black kids all come from these harsh backgrounds and these rough schools.”

What — and more importantly, who — had made the difference in their academic success? He wanted to know.

His first answer was role models. A person's success wasn't just a matter of their talent, he realized, but depended on meeting people who were invested in them. It was also a matter of meeting people who had previously cut their own paths to success and could provide guidance. Harper found the latter in an aunt who by this time was working in Clayton County, Ga. as the school district's executive director of a federal program. “She is what made me want to become a college administrator,” he says.

Harper left Georgia and headed to Bloomington for graduate school at Indiana University, where a professor, George Kuh, asked new students the same question every fall: What did they want to do with their graduate degrees? Kuh says Harper's answer — be a college president — was the most ambitious he'd encountered in decades.

“My first thought was, ‘Do you have any idea what that means?’” Kuh remembers.



Harper imagined that a career as college president would give him the power to support progress for Black students, especially Black men, on a large scale. He went to work studying higher-education administrators, analyzing what was working and what wasn't. But as he moved through his doctoral studies, he began focusing less on what administrators were doing and more on the lives of students.

At the time, fewer than one-third of Black men entering college went on to earn a bachelor's degree, the lowest completion rate of any group by race or gender. Existing studies focused on Black men who had serious education deficits, which made the overall problem of Black-male achievement seem intractable. But that wasn't the world Harper had experienced at Albany State. "There were success stories and answers to Black-male achievement, and they were hiding in plain sight," he says.

Thinking of W.E.B. Du Bois's idea of the "talented tenth" — those exceptional members of the Black community who, in Du Bois's view, had a responsibility to be leaders — Harper decided to survey college students who were slightly less exceptional: Black men who were near, but not at, the top of the academic-performance curve. How could they reach more of their potential?

"I was never interested in individual notions of giftedness, hard work, and talent," Harper says. "I was interested in the institutional factors and institutional relationships that allowed these men to succeed. That is the part that I thought was adaptable and scalable."

Harper's dissertation studied 32 high-achieving Black men enrolled in colleges across the Midwest. The students all earned better than a 3.0 cumulative grade-point average and were involved in campus activities that extended beyond the classroom.

**"There are some people for whom serendipity is easier to take advantage of."**

George Kuh

The correlation of that engagement outside of class and their academic success wasn't revelatory. In fact, Kuh's own research had found that academic and career success depended largely on making the right social connections, joining the right clubs, and participating in college life beyond classes. However, Kuh had found those connections to be random, and he hadn't questioned how race might play a role.

"Too much of higher-ed success relies on luck," says Harper — on the parent's level of education, or the family's relative wealth, for example.

As Kuh now puts it, "There are some people for whom serendipity is easier to take advantage of."

Scaling success for Black men, Harper argued in his dissertation, meant building student services that not only attracted these students but embraced them once they entered college. It also meant mentorship — pairing undergraduates with older students and faculty and staff members who took an interest in their success.

And if predominantly white colleges wanted to have more success in matriculating Black men, they needed an environment that was more inclusive — which meant a faculty and staff that was more diverse. The idea, now mainstream, was fresh: It was named Dissertation of the Year by NASPA: Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, and later, in book form, it won the Association for the Study of Higher Education's Early Career Award.

The research was personal. "I often wondered what my undergraduate years would have been like had I been the same student (high-achieving) on a different type of campus (predominantly White)," Harper wrote in the dissertation.

Now he wanted to help others by pulling the same levers that had helped him. "My research was for Black boys and for Black men, to not be duped by these narratives

about ourselves,” Harper says. “We are not what the news says about us. And we are or not what the research reports or textbooks or whatever says about us.”

He asked Kuh if he could move his doctoral defense from the School of Education to a lecture hall inside the Kelley School of Business. The classrooms in the business school were much larger, and the seating was tiered.

“I was proud of my work, and I wanted as many people as possible to see what I had researched — but more importantly, what was possible.” Harper says.

Harper filled the room. People who witnessed his dissertation defense describe it as equal parts academic exercise and public performance.

**A**nd so he began to build what is now a 63-page C.V., moving from assistant professorships at USC and Pennsylvania State University to the University of Pennsylvania, where he won tenure and in 2011 founded the Center for the Study of Race and Equity in Education. There he began to offer diversity training to colleges around the country, often in the wake of a racial crisis on the campus — work he still does today. The cost of these trainings and consultations vary, according to Harper, who says he designs the program based on the college’s budget. (Ohio University, a recent client, paid \$235,000 for an audit of its campus-climate survey and diversity training programs.)

As he climbed the ranks, Harper’s research expanded, from Black to Latino male achievement and from there to how people from all marginalized groups, including LGBTQ people, experienced higher education and later the work force. (Harper kept his own sexuality private well into adulthood, but in 2008, while accepting an award, he acknowledged his boyfriend, now husband, in the audience. “People were taking out their phones to text the news,” he says with a slight chuckle.) In 2015, Harper was tapped to help with President Obama’s initiative on minority-male achievement. He has maintained a busy schedule of public and media appearances ever since, including presenting at South by Southwest and debating critical race theory on the *Dr. Phil* show.

He was flying high. But he thought he wasn’t doing enough.

In late April 2017, Harper was back in Thomasville during its annual Rose Festival. Dating back to 1922, the festival had crowned two Rose Queens — one Black and one white. Harper figured that by 2017, that tradition would have died. It hadn’t.

“I was shocked and looked at my mother. And she looked back at me and said ‘Of course. This is Thomasville, what do you expect?’” he says.

“Shaun, the world has changed,” Cynthia recalls telling her son. “Thomasville has not changed.”

He was also hearing President Donald Trump and his supporters pine for a yesteryear that had no place for people like Harper. He realized he had been preaching to the converted within the confines of higher education.

When USC invited him to move his center to its campus, and to bring his work on race and equity to corporate boardrooms and film companies, he seized the chance. DEI work wasn't just something to be studied and taught in universities, he believed. It needed to live outside the academy.

“At Penn, he would just be an academic. At USC, he is bigger than that,” says Lori Patton Davis, a professor of education studies at Ohio State University who has known Harper since graduate school.

A slick website, [shaunharper.com](http://shaunharper.com), highlights how much bigger. Against a backdrop of footage from his speaking gigs, it lists his numerous accomplishments, consulting work, press coverage, and his wide-ranging column in *Forbes* that touches on topics including politicians' gaffes, Black celebrities, and changing pricing models at Wendy's.

**I**n 2021, Harper and the USC Race and Equity Center joined with Achieving the Dream to start a Racial Equity Leadership Academy. Victoria Marron, then the associate vice president for retention and transition services and chief equity officer at Lee College, attended the sessions and brought the Harper-style lessons back to her campus in Baytown, Texas.

At Lee, the majority of students are Latino and the majority of faculty members are white. In a typical session, as Marron describes them, faculty members, staff members, and administrators would be asked to talk about race, gender, or sexuality

and open up about their own experiences. Afterwards, Marron would give them surveys so they could describe how the session made them feel and ask questions that the next session could answer.

“If we talked about a particular topic or watched a video that really resonated with them, we might need to spend the next class unpacking that some more,” Marron says. In one session, the class was presented with examples of implicit bias. They spent the following session in what amounted to a confessional, where professors acknowledged incidents where they might have made biased assumptions about students or other faculty members.

Over time, the sessions got quite emotional, says Marron. The Racial Equity Leadership Academy was designed as a two-year program. At Lee College, the training sessions were weekly, Marron says, and it only took a few months before she noticed something unusual: Faculty members and staff from different backgrounds began to have lunch and strike up connections that previously didn't exist.

The hope, as Harper explains it, is that even if progress is incremental, the college faculty and staff educating future professionals, leaders, and teachers can act as a force multiplier, ultimately reducing racism among the next generation of students.

But some — not just conservative politicians, but also fellow academics — don't think colleges should be in that business. Tyler Austin Harper (no relation), a Black literary scholar at Bates College who writes about culture and race for *The Atlantic* and other publications, says it is not the role of colleges to “legislate the morality of the campus and what the campus climate should be.”

Moreover, he questions the wisdom of spending in some cases more than \$200,000 and hundreds of hours in staff time on such sessions — the results of which can't be measured. Instead, he argues, colleges should be focused on what he sees as the real driver of inequality on college campuses: skyrocketing costs.

“The first thing universities can do to increase diversity, equity, and inclusion is to reduce the cost of college,” Tyler Harper says. “But they can’t do that, so they focus on other pseudo-problems.”

“It is really hard to put a metric to this,” Marron acknowledges. “What I can say is, being in a space with the individual colleagues — to see them get emotional around these topics and see their minds shifted and changed — is worthwhile work.”

Harper argues the conversations are themselves the point. Faculty and staff of color in higher education want to have these conversations, he says, if only to be heard and understood.

“People of color in higher education and outside higher education are always saying to me and to their leadership, ‘Can we please talk about structural racism? Can we please talk about inequality?’” he says.

In the wake of Derek Chauvin’s murder of George Floyd in May 2020, and the calls that followed for a national racial reckoning, demand for Harper’s work was strong. His client list grew to include T-Mobile, Nike, and Citigroup.

“I knew this was going to be a moment where massive change was possible,” he says, “but I also stopped and thought, ‘But for how long?’” He suspected that the protests and calls for justice would fade, and be followed by a swift backlash.

**H**e was right. In September 2020, President Trump signed an executive order prohibiting diversity, equity, and inclusion training for federal employees. The movement was thrown into disarray. Some people confused Trump’s prohibition as applying to any institution that receives federal money. The executive order didn’t immediately kill DEI, but the efforts began to ossify.

“It had this chilling effect in education,” Harper says. The contracts haven’t slowed, he says, but he has had to pivot, spending more time fighting for the right to conduct DEI training and programming than on the practice itself.

He has written three dozen op-eds in 15 months in *Forbes*. He assembled a 64-page document, which included answers to the text messages he’d fired off in Los Angeles, titled “Truths About DEI on College Campuses” and submitted part of it into the Congressional Record. He has parried with the morning-radio host Charlamagne the God for what Harper sees as the DJ’s misrepresentation of DEI. He has appeared on cable-news networks to defend his approach to equity.

But the movement to eliminate DEI efforts is vigorous and organized. Almost every law drafted in the past 17 months to eliminate or curtail DEI practices includes language from [specific recommendations](#) and [model legislation](#) from the Manhattan Institute. People like the Institute’s [Christopher Rufo](#) “are spreading disinformation,” Harper says. He accused Rufo of creating a playbook for anti-DEI laws. (Rufo declined to comment for this story.)

In 2022, as Marron was a year into the diversity training program at Lee College, she began to face resistance. Board members asked whether her DEI work favored minority students. When Texas passed Senate Bill 17 in 2023, banning colleges from spending state funds on DEI efforts, Marron was forced to strike all references to diversity, equity, and inclusion from the curriculum she had learned from Harper. (Officials with Lee College say the changes were being considered before Texas lawmakers enacted a ban on DEI.)

Marron also changed her job description, removing “equity” from the title to become the associate vice president for student success and chief belonging officer. In December, shortly after talking with *The Chronicle*, she resigned, saying the workplace had become hostile. She experienced “racial battle fatigue” from “being so closely involved in the fight,” she says.



“All I was trying to do is advocate for marginalized people,” Marron says. “And I started to feel like I was being punished for it.”

Marron relocated to California and began working as vice president for student services at Cuyamaca College. Her replacement at Lee College, a white woman, eventually changed her title from chief belonging officer to associate vice president for student engagement and basic needs. This most recent title change, like the changes made while Marron was at Lee, was based on “student needs,” according to college officials, who said they couldn’t comment on Marron’s individual experience.

Even in states where lawmakers have not formally banned DEI work, the tide may have turned against it. Harper’s efforts are met with apprehension, even when they come after the kind of crisis that has long prompted colleges to seek his services.

**“All I was trying to do is advocate for marginalized people. And I started to feel like I was being punished for it. ”**

Victoria Marron

At Ohio University in December 2021, a Black baby doll was found taped to a dorm-room door. Three months later, in the same dorm room, a black plastic trash bag was found with a note attached. In black marker, the N-word was written, along with another racial epithet and a misogynistic slur. The Black woman who found it, a 19-year-old freshman at the college, took a picture. The image quickly circulated on social media. Just a few hours later, a Black resident assistant at a nearby dorm was awoken to the sound of a white Ohio University baseball player urinating on his door. The back-to-back incidents, which investigators say are not connected, roiled the campus and ignited demonstrations by Black students.

They delivered a set of demands to the administration: They wanted renovations to the campus’s multicultural center and diversity training for faculty, staff, and

students. They demanded the college contract with a diversity expert to survey Ohio University's racial climate and look closely at how the practices and policies of the college affected students of color.

The administration sent out a request for proposal, and 11 firms bid on the contract. The USC Race and Equity Center won, signing a contract in November 2022.

"They were making good on promises made to students about the work," says LaNita Gregory Campbell, who works with Harper at the center as director of DEI organizational strategy. "They seemed like they had buy-in."

But from the beginning, the work was beset by challenges.

Harper requires his clients to engage with his center repeatedly; he says that's necessary for the changes they seek to stick. He insists on monthly or quarterly meetings.

And he prefers long engagement over the course of years. A project like the one Ohio University requested would typically have a three-year timetable. Harper's team would spend the first year auditing their DEI practices and performing a campus-climate survey. From there, the Center would create a training program for the DEI staff, administrators, and, if necessary, faculty.

Ohio University short-circuited those plans.

"Everything for the Ohio project was created for three years. After a couple of presentations and conversations we were informed it would be a one-year project," Campbell says. "Given time constraints, we didn't conduct any training." Ohio University conducted its own training, which Harper's firm reviewed.

At the time, Ohio University's president, Hugh Sherman, was in his final year of an interim appointment, and the university was in the middle of a search for a permanent leader. It wanted the work by USC completed by the end of Sherman's tenure, according to Dan Pittman, a Ohio University spokesman.

The USC Race and Equity Center concluded its audit and turned the final draft of its report over to Ohio University in December 2023. The university promised to release the report that month, but had not done so as of this publication.

Ohio is one of the states where lawmakers in 2023 considered bans against DEI offices, diversity statements, race-based preferences, and diversity training. In February, Ohio lawmakers also introduced a bill to prohibit the use of diversity statements at public colleges.

Harper has put a new suite of training programs — aimed at equipping DEI officers in smaller colleges and universities — on hold. The attacks on DEI are “all happening so fast,” he says. “I have to drop other things and put other things to the side to deal with this.”

But he argues that this moment actually presents an opportunity, similar to the one that arose when the country erupted in protest in 2020.

“I think it's going to make it easier to enlist more people to do the work,” he says. “People now understand what's at stake, that we are living in a land of these radical extremists. It's just now they are making laws.”

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