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Ras Baraka's Reasonable Radicalism

Kelefa Sanneh

46–58 minutes

On an August day in 2011, a man stood outside City Hall in Newark, New Jersey, exhorting a crowd through a wireless microphone. “Stop giving love to these *psychopaths*,” he roared. The “psychopaths” were criminals; a few days earlier, a twenty-nine-year-old teacher named Dawn Reddick had been shot and killed—a seemingly random crime, except that killings in Newark had come to seem dispiritingly unrandom. The city was on its way toward ninety-three murders that year, with a population of two hundred and seventy-seven thousand people—a rate five times that of New York City, which sits less than ten miles east but often feels much farther.

The killing of Dawn Reddick was unsolved then—indeed, it remains unsolved. So the speaker railed against the unknown perpetrators, as well as the systems and circumstances that enabled so much perpetration. “How you get a Chinese-made rifle in the middle of Newark?” he asked. “You can’t even get a decent loaf of bread!” He pictured what might happen if sufficiently assertive citizens found the responsible party: “The police should be trying to drag *us* off of *him*. We should be stomping his ass all the way into the precinct.” He didn’t sound like a typical protest leader, and he knew it. “Yeah, I’m talking vigilante talk today,” he said. “I’m talking mob justice.”

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The speaker was Ras Baraka, and he was already known around town as the principal of Central High School, a city councillor, and the son of Amiri Baraka, the poet and playwright, who was one of Newark's most prominent voices in 1967, when the city was engulfed by protests and riots sparked by anger over police brutality. Ras Baraka was born three years later, in 1970, and he inherited his father's twinned commitments to civil rights and civic pride. The rally on that August day was part of a long campaign against violence in Newark, a campaign that also functioned as a sustained critique of the person who had been trying to quell the violence: Cory Booker, the city's mediagenic mayor. Booker, a light-skinned Black man, had grown up in suburban New Jersey, an hour away. His voluntary attachment to Newark impressed many outsiders, but it aroused suspicion among a voluble set of locals, including the Barakas, who portrayed him as an interloper—someone who would never truly understand his adopted home town. “Despite what Cory Booker says, Black people are dying in this city every damn week,” Ras Baraka once said.

No one familiar with Newark would have been surprised by Baraka's emergence as an eloquent voice of political protest. But some might have been surprised to see how far his voice would take him. In 2014, after Booker was elected to the U.S. Senate, Baraka was elected mayor, promising—like not a few mayors before him—to usher in a new era for Newark. “We need a mayor that's radical,” he said, in his inauguration speech. As mayor, Baraka still talks like a rabble-rouser, at least some of the time. Earlier this year, at a Martin Luther King, Jr., Day event, he cast

doubt on the idea that James Earl Ray was solely responsible for King's assassination, saying, "It's pretty strange that a petty crook could murder Martin Luther King and find his way all the way to England." (Ray was apprehended at Heathrow Airport, two months after the killing.) But his mayoralty has been flexible and data-driven, and by most metrics very successful. He has lured businesses and developers to the city while funding a wide range of local programs and generally keeping activists happy. Perhaps most impressive, Newark was one of the few cities in the country not to see a spike in homicides in 2020, amid protests over the death of George Floyd. Last year, there were just forty-seven murders—still many more per capita than New York, but the fewest in Newark in more than half a century.

Baraka has recently expanded his horizons beyond his home town: earlier this year, he announced his candidacy in the 2025 New Jersey gubernatorial election, and the campaign will surely bring attention to his stewardship of Newark. Senator Booker, Baraka's old foil, is now one of his most enthusiastic cheerleaders. "To all the people that thought he was going to be some kind of, like, left-wing radical," he told me, "he has shown that there is a way for a city like ours to flourish." Another of his fans, former President Barack Obama, described him in an e-mail as "both idealistic and practical." And, at an event in 2022, Vice-President Kamala Harris praised Baraka, saying that Newark was a "role model of what cities around our country are capable of doing." When people talk about Black politics in America, they are often talking about struggle and protest, and although Baraka belongs to that tradition, he also belongs to the tradition of Black elected officials, who are measured by their accomplishments and their compromises. Baraka once said that he views himself as more "reasonable" than "radical." But he has never denied that, for a nimble enough politician, both descriptions might apply.

In March, Baraka delivered the State of the City address at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center, a theatre complex that was opened three decades ago as part of a previous effort at revitalizing Newark. He sat appreciatively through a choral performance; a hip-hop performance; invocations by an imam and a rabbi; renditions of two national anthems, official and Black (“Lift Every Voice and Sing”); and video tributes to the city’s five wards. Then he took the stage, cheered by a boisterous contingent of his brothers from Alpha Phi Alpha, the country’s oldest Black fraternity. When their cheers subsided, Baraka bragged about the businesses that had opened in town, told residents that a new walking bridge would resemble New York’s High Line, paid tribute to the police force, and excoriated “journalists that insist on our misery,” singing a few lines of a gospel song for good measure. When it was over, he made his way across the street to one of those new businesses, an upscale African restaurant called Swahili Village, where he and his wife, Linda Baraka, received so many well-wishers that they decided it would be more efficient for Baraka to preemptively greet everybody in the room.

The next morning, in his office at City Hall, Baraka was semi-formal, in a suit and dress sneakers, still thinking about the address. His father once described him, in verse, as having eyes “bulging out into the world, alive with life, whirling around like wild computers.” Baraka describes himself as an introvert, and in the absence of a crowd he is generally quiet and observant; he tends to talk out of the right side of his mouth, as if he were telling you something that other people don’t know. He said that having to give a big speech still makes him anxious beforehand and exhausted afterward. “I don’t know what I expected, but people were excited,” he told me.

At a Black History Month event earlier this year, Baraka announced that he is running for governor of New Jersey. He told the crowd, “We don’t

want your token representation.”

Unlike his father, who could be reflexively countercultural and anti-institutional, Ras Baraka has been running for office for most of his life. He launched his first campaign for mayor at the age of twenty-four. “It was almost like a dare, with my friends and people around me,” he says. He was a young activist, impatient for change and not particularly interested in the workings of municipal government. He laughs when he recalls his platform: it criticized the Thirteenth Amendment, which outlawed slavery “except as a punishment for crime,” and called for universal health care for Newarkers. “We just had a whole list of things, and some of it wasn’t even the purview of the city,” he told me, shaking his head. In those days, he was also building a reputation as a performance poet, in which capacity he appeared on an episode of “Def Poetry Jam,” the HBO series, delivering critiques of American oppression; the rapper Mos Def (now Yasiin Bey) introduced him as “Ras Baraka, people’s champion.” People all over the world have heard his voice without realizing it, because he plays a teacher, asking students about the meaning of love, on the skits that appear throughout the seminal hip-hop album “The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill.”

After a decade as mayor, Baraka is a kind of celebrity in Newark. Yet his job is unflaggingly unglamorous, and the same might be said about the city he loves. In the nineteen-sixties and seventies, Amiri Baraka and his comrades often referred to it as New Ark, to suggest that it might serve as a fresh start for Black people. “We will rebuild and turn the city into a Black heart beat,” Amiri wrote, in 1967. He imagined Newark as an “example, upon which one aspect of the entire Black nation can be built.”

Newark today is no one’s idea of a utopia; it is, instead, a scruffy and energetic place that captures the imagination partly because it still seems to have so much potential. Broad Street, the main downtown

thoroughfare, has plenty of options for anyone who wants to buy a T-shirt or sell some jewelry, and new businesses tend to be celebrated in ways that underscore the city's desire for more of them. Cory Booker spent a chunk of his mayoralty trying to lure Whole Foods to town, but the supermarket chain didn't arrive until 2017, which meant that it was Baraka who got to deliver a speech at its grand opening, thanking the company for "getting us in the game." One of the city's most important amenities is the *PATH* train, which whisks riders from downtown Newark to Manhattan for two dollars and seventy-five cents.

The city's political leaders are virtually all nonwhite; in addition to Baraka, eight of the nine members of Newark's City Council are Black or Hispanic. (The ninth, Michael J. Silva, is the son of Portuguese immigrants.) In this context, Baraka's frequent appeals to "Black and brown" identity are not a way to single out white people—there aren't all that many around—but a way to urge his constituents to be unified, to make their ancestors proud, to behave themselves.

"Don't forget to add 'LOL' to the end of your already casual text to make it sound even more casual."

Cartoon by Sarah Akinterinwa

Baraka has been eager to promote Newark as a cosmopolitan city. (Too eager, in one case: last year, he signed a "sister city" agreement with Kailasa, a Hindu country that turned out to exist only in the imagination of an international fugitive.) He has also commissioned a number of murals and sculptures, including a monument to Harriet Tubman, which replaced a statue of Christopher Columbus that Baraka called a symbol of "barbarism, enslavement, and oppression," and that he had removed four years ago—late at night, when no one was around to protest or counter-protest. Newark's City Hall is a grand Beaux-Arts building with a

golden dome, built in 1902, when Newark was the sixteenth-largest city in America; now it is something like the sixty-sixth, occupying a place between Lincoln, Nebraska, and Corpus Christi, Texas. As mayor, Baraka has a cluster of offices in a corner of the second floor, and one day I asked him which parts of Newark might give a good sense of what his administration has achieved. He paused briefly, and then said, “I mean, you would have to see the place before, right?”

Newark was once a prosperous manufacturing town, but when Amiri Baraka was born there, in 1934, city officials were already worrying about an exodus of wealthy residents. Young and ambitious, Amiri moved to New York City, where he made his name as a writer of sharp, caustic poems and plays, and as the author of “Blues People,” a 1963 book that was a landmark of American music criticism. He was known then as LeRoi Jones, and he seemed to enjoy showing the city’s radical-chic hipsters that they weren’t quite as chic, or as radical, as they thought. In his best-known play, “Dutchman,” a white woman approaches a Black man in a subway car, and their playful exchange soon becomes extravagantly unplayful. “Dutchman” premièred in 1964, as Amiri’s marriage to a white woman, the poet Hettie Jones, was ending. He found his way back to Newark, where he established himself as a political and cultural ringleader, and, in 1967, as a symbol of a city boiling over with frustration.

In the previous decades, Newark’s white population had fallen by about half, while the Black population had roughly quadrupled—Newark had become a majority-Black city, even as the police force remained mostly white. (Today, the population is about forty-seven per cent Black and thirty-seven per cent Hispanic.) In July, 1967, when a Black cabdriver named John William Smith was arrested by two white police officers and beaten, what started as a protest evolved into almost a week of arson,

looting, and urban guerrilla warfare. Amiri Baraka was arrested the night after Smith, for illegally possessing weapons, and he was brutalized, too. The journalist Ron Porambo later wrote, “I just knew they were going to kill him from the way they were beating him.”

Baraka's arrest drew worldwide attention; at the urging of his friend Allen Ginsberg, the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre apparently called the Newark Police Department, seeking Baraka's release. He was tried and convicted, and at his sentencing the judge read one of his poems, lightly bowdlerized but still decipherable as an ode to looting: “Run up and down Broad Street niggers, take the [blank] you want / Take their lives if need be, but get what you want what you need.” (The conviction was overturned shortly after.)

Twenty-six people died during five days of unrest, which did incalculable damage to both the city and its reputation; plenty of Americans who had never been to Newark would forever associate it with a *Life* magazine cover that showed a twelve-year-old Black boy lying in the street, shot by police. A righteous revolt is typically something to celebrate, but when I asked Ras Baraka about the upside of the Newark Rebellion he demurred. “Well, I can't see the upside—except that it forced everybody to depend on themselves,” he told me. “That's why Newark is so insular. That's why the residents are so Newark, Newark, Newark.”

For Amiri Baraka, the city's insularity was part of its appeal: Newark was a place where Black people were allowed—which is to say, forced—to shape their own future. By the time of the rebellion, he had married a local actress named Sylvia Robinson, and in the years that followed they renamed themselves Amiri and Amina Baraka, as they transformed their lives to reflect an ideal of Pan-African unity. People were always dropping by; Ras Baraka remembers a peculiar woman playing their living-room piano, who turned out to be Nina Simone. Amiri and Amina

wore clothes inspired by Julius Nyerere, the erudite President of Tanzania, and they launched the African Free School, where local children, including Ras, were taught a new alphabet: “A is for Africa, B is for Black, C is for Culture.” They settled on a leafy side street, and Amiri painted their house red and green with black trim. He wrote that “when the seasons allow the trees to come full out, the tableau is like a not quite subtle black nationalist flag.”

Amina Baraka's house is no longer so conspicuous. On a recent morning, the only sign of its significance was a security guard parked out front, keeping watch over the mother of the Mayor. Amina is eighty-one now, and her house is an elegant museum, archiving six decades of art and activism: the walls are covered with paintings and photographs, and a poster of Vladimir Lenin hangs in a hallway near the kitchen. Amiri died in 2014, but his old study has been preserved more or less intact.

Downstairs, there is a room where Amina has been making clay pots. These days, she is a proud supporter of not just her son but also his former rival, Cory Booker. “Yeah, that's what happens,” she told me, with a smile. “You learn as you go.”

For Amiri, this learning process advanced by a series of grand statements and renunciations. In his autobiography, he recalls how Amina objected to what she saw as “male chauvinism disguised as African traditionalism” and eventually resigned from the Congress of Afrikan People, an activist organization he led. “We made some terrible mistakes,” she told me, recalling the years she spent as a devoted Black nationalist, and over time her husband came to agree. In 1974, the *Times* printed the headline “Baraka Drops ‘Racism’ for Socialism of Marx.” In the article, Amiri emphasized global solidarity with the multiracial working class, saying, “It is a narrow nationalism that says the white man is the enemy.” After this conversion, the African Free School

shut down, and Ras Baraka was enrolled for the first time in a majority-Black public school, where his “funny” name sometimes made fellow-students think he had come from someplace else.

Unlike many sixties radicals, Amiri never found a comfortable place in the cultural mainstream. His early work referred derisively to gay people and Jewish people. In 2002, a couple of months after he was named New Jersey's poet laureate, he recited a poem called “Somebody Blew Up America,” which asked, “Who told 4000 Israeli workers at the Twin Towers / To to stay home that day / Why did Sharon stay away?” (Ariel Sharon was then the Prime Minister of Israel.) Governor Jim McGreevey asked Baraka to resign; when he refused, McGreevey pushed to eliminate the position of poet laureate.

Cartoon by Roz Chast

Politics would not seem like a natural occupation for a provocateur like Amiri Baraka, and yet he played an important role in the political evolution of his home town. During the Newark Rebellion, he and many of his allies focussed their dissatisfaction on the mayor, Hugh J. Addonizio, a Newark native of Italian descent. They charged that he had failed to punish abusive white officers and to hire and promote a sufficient number of Black ones. In 1968, eight days before Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated, King met with Baraka and declared in a speech afterward, “The hour has come for Newark, New Jersey, to have a Black mayor.” Acting strategically, Baraka and his allies supported Kenneth Gibson, who wasn't particularly radical; he worked for the city as a structural engineer and ran as a relatively cautious reformer against Addonizio, who was then on trial for conspiracy and extortion. Gibson was elected in 1970, becoming Newark's first Black mayor—although it is equally accurate to describe Addonizio, who was convicted and sent to prison, as its last white one.

On a recent Saturday morning, Ras Baraka invited constituents to join him in a hotel ballroom downtown. This was one of the Mayor's annual men's breakfasts, which combine networking opportunities with business advice and, inevitably, tough love, aimed at a demographic that is generally perceived to be in need of it. The city's young Black men are nearly fifty per cent more likely to be what sociologists call "disconnected"—neither in school nor employed—than its young Black women. As attendees filled up on eggs and grits, they heard from one of Baraka's executive directors, Jessiah Muhammad, a punctilious young man who favors suits and bow ties, which denote his membership in the local chapter of the Nation of Islam.

Baraka took the stage, in a pink shirt and white sneakers, and delivered an address that kept the room murmuring and chuckling for more than an hour. He praised Black women, which led to an endorsement of Kamala Harris and a defense of her racial authenticity. ("If the lady says she's Black, she's Black to me.") He lamented that so few Black-owned businesses got assistance from the state, suggested that banking was a bit of a scam, and encouraged the entrepreneurs in the room to fight for their slice of the municipal pie. "All the business that's going on in the city should be yours," he said, and he promised to help the men, as long they helped themselves first. "Stop waiting for stuff to happen for you—*make* it happen! When you come introduce yourself to me, come like a man! Don't grovel with your head down—'Oh, Mayor, it's nice to meet you.' " He shook his head. "Oh, no, brother! I'm just a regular dude from Clinton Avenue and Tenth Street."

Growing up, Baraka wasn't very interested in his parents' political work, or in their ongoing debates. It wasn't until he was in college, at Howard University, that he sat down to read "Blues People" and found that its argument about Black music as a historical force made intuitive sense to

him. He was a hip-hop guy, and for a time he had allied himself with a mystical offshoot of the Nation of Islam known as the Five Percent Nation, which combines Black pride with esoteric beliefs and wordplay. (The group teaches, for instance, that the human body spells out the name of God: arm, leg, leg, arm, head.)

Howard was also the site of Baraka's formative political experience. In 1989, the university gave a seat on its board of trustees to Lee Atwater, the national chair of the Republican Party, who had managed George H. W. Bush's Presidential campaign the year before. During that campaign, Bush and Atwater had tried to link their opponent, Michael Dukakis, to William Horton, a Black man who had attacked and raped a woman after receiving a weekend furlough from prison; Bush contended that Dukakis, as governor of Massachusetts, had been too slow to end the furlough program. Baraka, like many of his fellow-students, thought that this tactic should have disqualified Atwater from holding a position at Howard—so he helped lead an act of civil disobedience, occupying a building on campus. (Amina Baraka told me she was shocked to get a call telling her that her formerly “quiet” son had become a protest leader.) Unlike many protests, this one was an unambiguous success. Jesse Jackson and Marion Barry, the mayor of Washington, D.C., came in to mediate. After five days, Atwater stepped down, and then so did the university's president.

At Howard, Baraka was, by his own account, an inconsistent student, but student organizing helped him focus. He co-founded an activist group called Black Nia *FORCE*, which sometimes led paramilitary drills on campus. (“Nia” came from the Swahili word for “purpose,” and “*FORCE*” stood for “Freedom Organization for Racial and Cultural Enlightenment.”) In the wake of the protest, he got himself elected vice-president of Howard's student government. Though Baraka considered

himself a revolutionary, he didn't spend time parsing the differences between leftist ideologies. "We didn't really pay attention to what we needed to build," he told me. "It was more about defending ourselves against what we thought was an onslaught of things coming at us." In 1990, he wrote an op-ed for the student newspaper about academic misconduct in the library. "A building established for the purpose of educational achievement and character building has been transformed into a place of frenzy where cheating has become king," he wrote, arguing that the real problem was "Western forms of education," which relied too heavily upon memorization. He was calling for both higher standards and structural change, and he had faith that these two things could be mutually reinforcing.

To address crime, Baraka has collaborated with a network of grassroots groups—a strategy that has earned him more than a little loyalty. At one meeting, an activist told a critic of Baraka's, "If you've got a disagreement with the Mayor, you've got a disagreement with us."

Baraka returned to Newark after college; he had become the father of a baby girl named Amandla and needed to figure out a way to support her. It was the early nineties, and the current mayor was Sharpe James, who had campaigned on a promise of economic development, and who was a useful all-purpose foil for a young activist. Baraka was working during the day as a teacher, and when he ran against James for mayor, in 1994, he organized poetry readings as micro-fund-raisers, which he said eventually gathered about ten thousand dollars. "We thought we were rich," he remembered. He also thought he was popular in the city, until the votes were counted. "You think that because you're smart you're right, and that people are going to agree with you," he said.

But, as Baraka rose from teacher to principal, he started amassing a base of supporters. James, a shrewd observer of the city's political

scene, was impressed enough to make him a deputy mayor. Baraka insisted on a token salary of one dollar and kept his teaching job—he says that he didn't want his livelihood to be dependent on James's good will.

That was in 2002, the year James was first challenged by Cory Booker, who, in an odd way, helped Baraka find his voice. Booker lost the race, but he won four years later; soon afterward, James was imprisoned on fraud and conspiracy charges related to the sale of public land to a girlfriend. And so the Barakas, father and son, became two of Booker's most prominent critics. Amiri once called Booker a “white racist Negro.” Ras, who was promoted to principal of Central High School in 2007 and elected to the city council three years later, took a more sober approach, describing various city contracts as corporate giveaways, while also trying to channel community anger about crime. He faulted Booker for not demanding more tax revenue from the Prudential Center arena, for not hiring enough locals, and for not keeping Newarkers safe.

The stakes of the Baraka-Booker dispute were high, although the political conflicts could be arcane. When Baraka gave his speech in front of City Hall in the summer of 2011, he was criticizing Booker for vetoing a law that would have required restaurants with fewer than fifteen seats to hire armed security guards if they were open past 9 *P.M.*; it was known locally as the “chicken-shack ordinance,” because it had been inspired by the death of an off-duty police officer who was shot at a place called Texas Fried Chicken & Pizza. Booker argued that the law would hobble small businesses without really improving safety, but Baraka noted that Dawn Reddick, the victim he was mourning, had been killed outside a Chinese restaurant. “If the Mayor didn't veto that ordinance, there would have been a cop inside,” he said. On this topic, as on many others, each side claimed, plausibly, to be fighting for Black people.

By the time Booker ascended to the Senate, in 2013, Baraka had emerged as a viable successor: popular, with plenty of Newark credibility and a much more granular knowledge of city government than he had possessed two decades before. He eventually managed to win over many of Booker's allies, including Don Katz, the founder of Audible, the audiobook company, which made headlines by moving its headquarters to Newark in 2007. Katz is a strong supporter of the North Star Academy Charter School, and Baraka ran as a skeptic of charter schools, arguing that they ought to pay rent for the public buildings they use. When he was elected, Katz helped advise him on administrative appointments, and he was impressed by Baraka's determination to create a balanced administration, mixing well-connected insiders with outside experts. "I think he's proved himself to be a very sophisticated manager of public processes," he said. It was the kind of compliment that a younger Ras Baraka probably would not have appreciated.

The central event in Baraka's schedule is his weekly K.P.I. meeting, at which directors of various departments present their key performance indicators. When he first took office, in 2014, Newark couldn't afford a business administrator, so he arranged to borrow one from Prudential, the insurance company, which has its headquarters in the city.

Nowadays, Baraka has his own experts, and he pushes his top appointees to translate their accomplishments into data: the number of homeless people receiving services, the number of children getting vaccinations at city clinics, the number of crimes and arrests and requests for counselling. At a recent K.P.I. meeting, he offered sharp feedback on both the content and the form of the presentations. "Some of the information is just *ancillary*," he said. "I get it—maybe you want to report out that you're doing some work," he added. "Just because you're saying a lot of things doesn't mean the things that you're saying are

quality.”

Baraka seems to genuinely enjoy the logistical puzzle of city governance—he often mentions, unprompted, Newark’s program to replace its lead water pipes, which was completed so swiftly that Vice-President Harris visited to congratulate him. (The story got more complicated earlier this year, with the discovery that contractors hired by the city might have left some lead pipes in place.) Like any successful mayor, he has learned that he can’t afford to ignore the seemingly minor issues that infuriate city residents. When someone from the Department of Public Works reported that five trees had been cut down in the previous week, Baraka scowled. “Didn’t we tell ’em not to do that?” he asked, and the director promised to follow up. After the meeting, Baraka told me that this was part of a broader political issue. “We’re actually trying to plant more trees, because we need a tree canopy,” he said. The city had an obligation to dispose of dead trees, but he worried that some living trees were being disposed of, too. “We got an arborist to go out with them. And I told them, ‘Stop all tree cutting until we get this thing analyzed.’ ”

In his efforts to bring prosperity to Newark, Baraka has had to learn to love real-estate developers, or at least not to hate them. “You live under capitalism, you want development in your city, you’re going to have to mitigate the negative effects of development on a poor community,” he said, a few years ago. Like many cities, Newark has regulations that oblige developers to set aside units for lower-income renters. But Baraka also has more ambitious ideas about how to insure that locals benefit from rising real-estate prices. In 2015, a few months after he was elected, he organized a land sale on Valentine’s Day, offering a hundred city-owned lots, for a thousand dollars apiece, to couples willing to build and live there. “Some people built on it, but most people didn’t,” he acknowledged; the recipients generally couldn’t navigate the permitting

process and didn't have the assets to get bank loans. "We thought we were doing a good deed, and it turns out to be a bust."

Now the city is trying again, in the hope of creating a new cohort of Newark-native developers. One afternoon not long ago, Baraka called some prospective entrepreneurs into City Hall for a meeting. A few dozen people, mostly Black or Hispanic, sat on folding chairs, clutching sheaves of documents. Baraka wanted to both warn them about how complicated the process could be and reassure them that they could master it. "All of the doubters and haters and ignorant folk are going to say we shouldn't do it this way," he said. "'You're gonna hold the property for ten years, you don't have the capacity, you can't get the loans, you don't know what you're doing, you don't have the proper lawyers, you've never done this before, it's going to fall apart.'" (His speeches, like his poems, tend to be passionately enumerative.) "When you run into obstacles, that's because *they* don't believe you," he told them, deploying one of his greatest political assets: an ability to frame a program like this one as a grassroots community effort, rather than as a priority of a third-term mayor.

One way to chart the distance Baraka has travelled, from his radical family history to his practical-minded mayoralty, is to watch him talk to the police. At a public-safety meeting this year, he acknowledged to the assembled officers that he sometimes got credit that they properly deserved. "I ain't arrest a f—" he began, then reconsidered, as the audience members chuckled. "*I'm* not arresting nobody," he said. "*You guys* are making this stuff happen."

Since before Baraka was born, politics in Newark has tended to revolve around the police department. If the riots of 1967 were a rebellion, they were partly a rebellion against the police. (As mayor, Kenneth Gibson disappointed many supporters by not appointing a Black police chief until

1974.) And, in 1979, New York City police officers said that they witnessed Amiri striking Amina during a family trip to Manhattan. After a scuffle, Amiri was arrested and eventually convicted at trial—despite the testimony of nine-year-old Ras Baraka, who later said that he felt as if he had failed his father by not exonerating him. (Amina denies that Amiri struck her.)

“Well, what was I supposed to do while you were amusing yourself on the Internet?”

Cartoon by Peter Steiner

Baraka's Howard University protest, too, put him in conflict with the police, who arrived in riot gear to expel the students. And many of his early criticisms of Booker focussed on the chief of police, Garry McCarthy, a white man whom Booker had hired away from the New York City Police Department. There were signs that McCarthy was making progress, but the number of homicides remained stubbornly high. (This might have been partly owing to Newark's struggle to sufficiently fund its police department; in 2010, after failed union negotiations, the city laid off a hundred and sixty-seven officers.) “We want the police director, Garry McCarthy, to get out of town, go home, go back to where you came from,” Baraka said, during a rally. McCarthy left in 2011, to take on a more prominent job, as the head of the Chicago Police Department; he was fired amid outrage after police killed a seventeen-year-old named Laquan McDonald.

In Newark, and across Black America, concerns about the police exist side by side with concerns about persistently high levels of violent crime. This is especially true for the Baraka family. When Ras was thirteen, his aunt Kimako was stabbed to death by a man she knew. In 2003, his sister Shani was fatally shot, along with her girlfriend, by the estranged

husband of another one of Ras's sisters. Ras read an anguished poem at her funeral, praising her bravery. "That's why we couldn't protect her—she was too busy protecting *us*," he said. "Why we couldn't save her, in all of our blackness and prayers and revolution talk, all of our meetings and conferences—why we couldn't keep her alive."

As an activist, Baraka argued that Newark needed to treat violence as a public-health problem; as mayor, he has had to figure out precisely what that might mean. His approach has been to fund a welter of grassroots groups staffed by people from some of the city's most heavily affected neighborhoods, while also working to reduce complaints about the police force, which has been under federal oversight throughout his time in office. In 2019, when Attorney General William Barr gave Newark an award for its success in reducing violent crime, Baraka travelled to D.C. to celebrate, alongside Craig Carpenito, the U.S. Attorney for the District of New Jersey, who had been appointed by the Trump Administration. In 2020, as police departments nationwide were under scrutiny, Newark reached an impressive milestone: that year, none of its officers fired a shot.

In much of the rest of the country, of course, 2020 marked a different kind of milestone. The killing of George Floyd inspired an outpouring of anguish and anger, and led to calls from Democrats to cut police budgets or even to abolish police departments altogether. Two weeks after Floyd's death, Kamala Harris, who was then a senator, added her voice to the growing chorus of liberals and leftists suggesting that police caused more problems than they prevented. "It is outdated, and it is actually wrong and backward to think that more police officers will create more safety," she said, on MSNBC. Baraka took a different view. When I asked him about the popularity of calls to "abolish" or "defund" the police, he told me, "Those things were slogans. I don't know if they were meant

to be anything but slogans.”

Baraka on a community visit. Like any successful mayor, he has learned that he can't afford to ignore the seemingly minor issues that infuriate city residents.

Four years after the upheavals of 2020, the national crime wave has largely subsided, and so have the anti-police slogans. (At this year's Democratic National Convention, Harris emphasized her efforts, as a former prosecutor, to help “survivors of crime.”) But Democratic politicians who seek to follow Baraka's approach to policing may discover that it entails pursuing many approaches at once, some punitive and some therapeutic, and emphasizing different ones to different audiences. Not long ago, at a community meeting in Newark's North Ward, Baraka stood proudly as Fritz Fragé, the city's stern director of public safety, spoke of the recent arrests of a few dozen youngsters who had been systematically robbing people. “About twelve to fourteen were juveniles,” Fragé said. “They got charged, and most of them got remanded.” But when a woman who worked with senior citizens asked if something could be done about people on the block who were frightening her clients, Baraka pushed back. “Loitering is not a crime,” he told her. “Just because you see people out there does not necessarily mean police are coming.” For many kinds of trouble, he suggested, other interventions can be more effective.

This spring, Baraka announced that Newark would be resuming an annual tradition—a summertime youth curfew, from eleven at night to five-thirty in the morning. After a local chapter of the A.C.L.U. complained, the Mayor's office clarified that the curfew was actually a suggested curfew: the city would send social workers to speak to children who were out late, but it would not be arresting any of them. One of the people in charge of this program was LaKeesha Eure, a longtime

activist and social worker whom Baraka had recently appointed deputy mayor of public safety. Eure helps coordinate a complicated patchwork of nonprofit groups that have flourished in Newark. She framed the curfew as an opportunity for city employees to talk to young people. “If they say, ‘Fuck off,’ then they say, ‘Fuck off.’ It’s O.K.,” she told me. “It’s just engagement, so that they can see that somebody noticed them.”

Eure appeared one morning at a summit between local outreach workers and community leaders from Los Angeles, who wanted to learn more about the Newark method. A native Newarker whose life changed after her brother was shot, Eure is earnest but often unsentimental when she talks about street violence. When the group asked her to say a few words, she delivered a twenty-minute history of the movement that she helped build. “I don’t come from law enforcement,” she said at the outset. During the Booker years, she honed an approach that was anti-violence but not exactly anti-gang. “We wanted the Bloods and Crips to put their guns down,” Eure told the crowd, and she recalled the compromise she offered to diminish the collateral damage from “street justice”: “Do it the way you need to do it—but you can’t shoot innocent bystanders.” She says that nowadays her approach is more ambitious: she thinks that, with the proper training, people who once committed violence can learn to transform themselves and their neighborhoods.

In office, Baraka has managed a delicate symbiosis between community groups and the police department. Even as he talks about the importance of policing, he boasts about having “moved money from the police department” to pay for other initiatives—which sounds a bit like defunding the police. He has been careful not to decrease the number of officers, but he did limit police overtime, using the savings to help pay for a new city department, now known as the Office of Violence Prevention and Trauma Recovery, or O.V.P.T.R. Other groups managed by Eure are

funded through President Biden's American Rescue Plan Act. During her talk, she explained how Baraka had pushed to integrate anti-violence workers into city government, arranging trainings with police officers. To demonstrate commitment to the initiative, Baraka moved the anti-violence office into the same police precinct where the 1967 rebellion began. "They gave us a *police precinct*," Eure told the visitors from L.A. "Put the police out the building!"

"I don't get it. We had all those meetings."

Cartoon by Kaamran Hafeez and Helene Parsons

As a former principal, Baraka is unusually well connected to the people in his city, and by steering money to grassroots groups he has earned more than a little loyalty. Last year, when activists tried to disrupt a city meeting, an anti-violence leader named Khalil Tutt pushed back. Tutt had previously served time for his involvement in the killing of a police officer, but now he helps lead a group called New Direction, urging young Newarkers away from violence and gang involvement. "If you've got a disagreement with the Mayor, you've got a disagreement with us," he told the activists, explaining that Baraka had chosen to work with people other politicians might avoid. "He dealing with convicted gang members, criminals—he dealing with *us*," Tutt said.

Often, the work of these grassroots groups is intentionally informal. "I'm a Grape Street Crip," an anti-violence leader known as Hot-Rod told me. "I no longer sell drugs. I'm no longer on the block all day. But I still go to the hood, still roll up a blunt, still have a shot of liquor." The hope is that his relationships, and his reputation, allow him to deliver calming advice that might be ignored if it came from anyone else. In order to get paid, members of anti-violence groups must show up reliably and file reports to their leaders about what they do and what they see. But they insist that

they are not police informers; the information in their reports isn't shared with police, and in any case they often redact identifying details.

Some officers have learned to tolerate Eure's people, and even to view them as allies. But not all. Earlier this year, police detained an anti-violence worker after an altercation at a summer youth program. Jeffrey Weber, a detective who leads Newark's Fraternal Order of Police, noted that Eure was there, and claimed that she refused to leave the scene when asked. Weber said that the F.O.P. had "endless amounts of body-cam footage showing O.V.P. members and city officials interfering with crime scenes." In response, Baraka accused the F.O.P. of sowing a "spirit of division" and organized meetings to resolve the conflict. But that division is built into the idea of anti-violence workers, who are credible in the community precisely because they are independent from the police.

The more time Baraka spends in office, the more he is obliged to talk not about how far the Newark Police Department has to go but about how far it has come. The most reliable metric may be the murder rate, which is easy to measure and hard to manipulate. (A fight might be recorded as an assault, or an attempted homicide, or a mere scuffle that doesn't require paperwork, but a dead body can't readily be fudged.) Many criminologists agree that more police generally means less crime, but the effects of anti-violence initiatives are harder to gauge: in Newark, Eure's people do everything from monitoring the areas around schools to defusing neighborhood disputes before they turn violent. Baraka's office is working with the Rutgers-Newark School of Criminal Justice to get better evidence that these programs work. In the meantime, Baraka has plenty of room to experiment, because whatever he is doing seems to be succeeding. This is accountability, of a sort, although of course this general truth—that citizens want to feel safe, and might not ask too many questions about any institution that can credibly claim to provide safety—

is part of what enabled the bad old days to get so bad in the first place.

Earlier this year, Baraka announced that he wanted to leave his beloved Newark behind. During an appearance at a Black History Month event at the Trenton War Memorial, he declared that he was running for governor. His speech lasted forty minutes and was unusually ebullient, even by Baraka's standards. "I know our history is every day, but I *love* Black History Month," he said. "I get to be very Black today—unapologetic, and arrogantly so." He talked about Jim Crow and Emmett Till, "runaway slaves" and Black freedom fighters, and the "shuffling Negroes" whom he blamed for enabling white supremacy. "We don't want your token representation, or some sympathetic white Democrat in office—we're tired of supporting mediocre people over our damn selves," he said. "Damn it, we want power." He let his audience revel in the militancy of this demand, before adding a moderating afterthought: "We don't want this just for ourselves—we actually want it for *all* Americans." It was, in other words, a civil-rights speech, with a preacherly rhythm that made listeners feel carried by a historical tide from a sorrowful past toward a more hopeful future. Black leaders have been delivering speeches much like this one since long before Baraka was born—which suggests, rather less upliftingly, that subsequent generations will be delivering them long after he is gone, too.

In Newark, where the idea of reclaiming electoral power from white people is not a threat or a fantasy but a fact of life, Baraka has been notable less for demanding "power"—what politician doesn't want that?—than for his evolving curiosity about how to wield it. As a gubernatorial candidate, he looks different. He is an extraordinarily effective speaker, capable of switching between poetic exhortation and policy minutiae so fluidly that it can be hard to tell one from the other. But a statewide campaign might also draw attention to facets of his record that don't

seem unusual in Newark, like the fact that he supports some form of reparations, or that one of his top appointees is a member of the Nation of Islam, or that his approach to crime prevention involves working with a number of self-acknowledged gang members.

Cartoon by Carolita Johnson

Baraka's announcement rearranged the Democratic field, which already included Steven Fulop, the mayor of Jersey City (which sits next to Manhattan and has a per-capita income more than twice as high as Newark's), and may well include Representative Mikie Sherrill, whose district contains many of Newark's wealthy suburbs. The timing of Baraka's announcement also surprised many of his staffers, including his brother, Amiri, Jr., known as Middy, who serves as his chief of staff. "I'm not even sure he told his wife," he told me. Where Ras was once a spoken-word artist, Amiri, Jr., was once a musician—part of a hip-hop group, One Step Beyond, that was affiliated with Bad Boy Records. (Earlier this year, Baraka's campaign disclosed that a company owned by Amiri, Jr., had been paid about seventy-seven thousand dollars for campaign consulting, even though he worked for the city.) Amiri, Jr., told me that he expected that his brother would be portrayed as the "progressive" candidate in the race, although of course he viewed his message as more broadly appealing. "This is about making New Jersey a place where everybody can live, everybody could prosper," he told me. "But this state is so racist, man, and so divided. As we go from county to county, we can see it."

For more than half a century, Newark has been a city that defines itself, proudly and even defiantly, in opposition to its surrounding suburbs—Baraka has suggested, for instance, that wealthy neighboring towns such as Montclair and South Orange aren't doing enough to provide affordable housing in the region. And yet New Jersey is, by some

measures, the most suburban state in the country. By running for governor, Baraka is hoping to convince those residents that his approach can be as successful in the suburbs as it has been in Newark.

Before he can win a general election, of course, he will have to win the Democratic primary, which may be crowded. Although the state is unusually suburban, it is only about fifty-five per cent white, which means that Baraka's best strategy in a primary might be to emphasize his Newark credibility, in the hope of doing well enough among urban and nonwhite voters to attract a plurality. Modia Butler, a political consultant who has been a longtime adviser to Cory Booker, described Baraka to me as "ultra-Newark." He meant it as a compliment, even if not every New Jersey voter is likely to view it that way.

Several months ago, Baraka participated in a public forum with a couple of Republican candidates for governor: Jack Ciattarelli, who was the losing Republican candidate in 2021, and Jon Bramnick, a state senator. It was a friendly event; both of the Republicans seemed happy for the chance to contrast themselves with Baraka, who made an unusually forthright analogy in defense of the state's high tax rates. "People know—you go to restaurants, you pay more money because you get quality service and quality food," Baraka said.

At one point, Ciattarelli tried to make common cause by talking about how his own Italian American family had roots in Baraka's city. "A hundred years ago, where did our grandparents live? They lived in Newark," Ciattarelli said. He reached over to put a genial hand on Baraka's arm. "Did they not?"

Baraka smiled, but he didn't concede. "They did—then they were subsidized, so they could move into the suburbs and get a house there," he said. "My family couldn't do that." ♦

