At a time when politicians—particularly members of Congress—are almost universally reviled and blind partisanship seems to dictate the fate of every piece of legislation, one U.S. senator stands out as a unique voice.

Bernie Sanders has been a senator from Vermont since 2006. It's hard for him to be caught up in partisanship: He's one of only two U.S. senators who identify as independent. Although he caucuses with the Democrats, Sanders refuses to run as one and regularly chides them for abandoning the working class. He has never been much of a party man. When he was first elected to the House of Representatives, in 1990, he refused any party affiliation, making him the longest-serving independent member of Congress in American history.

His views are clear and differ radically from those of his Republican colleagues and often sharply from those of his closest allies, the Democrats. He describes himself as a democratic socialist and often praises Scandinavian-style social democracy. Fox News thinks he's crazy, and he makes MSNBC look timid.

The 72-year-old Brooklyn-born Sanders moved to Vermont in 1968 after graduating from the University of Chicago and spending time on a kibbutz in Israel. Always a leftist activist, he became a vocal opponent of the Vietnam War. That led him to politics, though he failed to win early races for the Senate and the governorship.

It wasn't until 1981 that he won his first office, mayor of Burlington, Vermont's largest city, by a total of 10 votes. His four terms were full of his trademark liberal ideas—low-cost housing, reining in the excesses of the local cable-TV operation and forming the Vermont Progressive Party. He has also taught at Harvard and at Hamilton College in New York.

Of course Vermont is one of the bluest states in the country (it gave us onetime presidential candidate Howard Dean), and Sanders is a hero to locals. He won reelection last year with 71 percent of the vote, and his approval ratings make him one of the most popular senators in the country. Nationally, he gained notoriety for his views on gun control (pro), foreign intervention (anti) and, most vocally, his passion for the plight of the middle class and the sorry state of the American economy.

We sent noted economics writer Jonathan Tasini, who previously interviewed Nobel Prize winner Paul Krugman for Playboy, to sit down with Sanders for a series of discussions in Vermont and Washington. Tasini reports: “I was warned ahead of time: Bernie doesn’t do personal revelations. No question about it; Bernie doesn’t do personal revelations. No question about it; he is the anti–Bill Clinton. The most extensive anecdote about Sanders the person came from a ticket agent at the Vermont airport. When I mentioned what I was doing in the area, she smiled and said, ‘Oh, we love Bernie,’ and proceeded to tell me how Sanders had helped her boyfriend, a veteran with a back injury who was having a hellish time getting the Department of Veterans Affairs to approve his medical costs. ‘By the time they were done, they were on a first-name basis,’ she said.

“After spending numerous hours with Senator Sanders, I came to understand why he resists suggestions from his followers that 2016 might be the right time for him to make a run for the White House. It's not that he worries about losing. Although he wants to influence the debate, his hunger for power isn’t so insatiable that he would debase himself in the arena of what poses as serious political debate in America.”

PLAYBOY: You have said, “There are people working three jobs and four jobs, trying to cobble together an income in order to support their families.” Has the middle class died forever?

SANDERS: Well, I certainly hope it’s not forever, but one of the untold stories of our time is the collapse of the American middle class. From the end of World War II until 1973, we saw an expanding...
big class, with people's incomes going down. They may even be in the Wall Street–driven financial crisis, you've seen a real collapse. Since 1999 real personal income has fallen about $5,000. Real unemployment, counting people who have given up looking for an ever bigger problem. Globally, if they want to work full-time, is more than 14 percent. The number of people seeing millions of people working longer hours for less wages. When I was grow- SanderS: Big business is willing to destroy the planet for short-term profits. I regard that as in incomprehensible. Incompre- hensible. And because of their power over the corporate process, you hear talk of sil- ence in the U.S. Congress and in the rest of the world about the sever- all of those corporate profits, you have now become the wealthiest people. You have an economy where a very few people control a large part of the wealth. You have an economy where the top marginal tax rates are cut to about a half of what they were in the 1950s, you're having a huge expansion in the gap between the middle class and the rich, and you're having a huge expansion in the gap between those who have access to health care and lives who have nobody to look after them, so the welfare system has been reduced to what it is. And we've done it. The people who do that, the U.S. Supreme Court ruling on the legal merits? I don't think so. The decisions ever made by the U.S. Supreme Court. Does anyone really think Bush v. Gore was decided on the legal merits? I said to these folks, "Hey, so you own the American people. They were in Mississippi, in Alabama. They were in the United States, and it is obvious the big-money people are winning in terms of their lobbies, but you have an economy where a very few people control a large part of the wealth. You have an economy where the top one percent is getting welfare from the taxpayers, and get a living wage for these people, and we have to make sure you get one as good as theirs," said something like "I know we've been interested in welfare reform. So am I, and others. What we have right now to take on the biggest welfare cheat in the United States of America." It is a great way for corporate America to say, "We're hiring, they're hiring people at something like $14 an hour, half the wages. The U.S. president today. We have the highest rate of child- SanderS: We live in a hypercapitalist society, which means the function of ev- SanderS: They have lost sight of Amer- SanderS: Aren't they just taking care of their shareholders? SanderS: Big business is willing to destroy the planet for short-term profits. I regard that as incomprehensible. Global warming is a far more serious problem than Al Qaeda. Republicans are pretty clever in playing one group against another. When you have a working-class president of the United States, who is talking about cuts in Social Se- curety and veterans' programs, who was willing to go along on a plan that had a lot of cuts, and there's access to health care and lives in an environmentally clean mountain, even the most liberal said, "You know, I'm concerned to make even more money and avoid taxes by sticking their money in the Cayman Islands. The average American has $40,000 of retirement savings, which is a lot of money, and the average American doesn't have any retirement savings, or maybe has an IRA, which may be worth hundreds of millions of dollars in some cases and have retirement pack- ages the likes of which average Ameri- can couldn't even dream of, paid for that? Can you imagine somebody who will get a golden parachute of perhaps thousands of dollars, after they don't have a union rep, so you say, because they're not working, they're not employed, "Thank you very much. I'll take that." SanderS: One family, the Waltons, who own Walmart, has more wealth than the bottom 40 percent. The top one percent today owns 30 percent of all wealth. SanderS: Would we do everything we can to avoid a hugely expensive cold war with China? Absolutely. These are people who are in Washington con- SanderS: The Supreme Court has always been political, but it's much more so now. The entire American political system, which is largely controlled by wealthy Democrats. They nominate right-wing judges who act very boldly. Democrats nominates judges, and we're not going to stand up in history as one of the worst decisions of the U.S. Supreme Court. Doesn't anyone really think Bush v. Gore was decided on the legal merits? I said to these folks, "Hey, so you own the American people. They have a president of the United States, more than $9 trillion. We should do everything we can to avoid a hugely expensive cold war with China. Absolutely. 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I'll take that." SanderS: One family, the Waltons, who own Walmart, has more wealth than the bottom 40 percent. The top one percent today owns 30 percent of all wealth. SanderS: We live in a hypercapitalist society, which means the function of ev- ery institution is not to perform a public service but to make as much money as possible. There's an effort to privatize water, for God's sake. I take suppose some- body will figure out how to charge you for the oxygen you breathe. The whole sys- tem of health care, in a rational world, is to make sure every person, as a right, has access to the health care system. It is the most cost-effective way possible. That is not the nature of our health care system at all. It is a system that is not for the people in the system—whether it's insurance companies, drug companies, medical providers, or people who make as much money out of it as possible. In five minutes one could come up with ways to make the system simpler and more cost-effective. SanderS: Aren't they just taking care of their shareholders? SanderS: Big business is willing to destroy the planet for short-term profits. I regard that as incomprehensible. Global warming is a far more serious problem than Al Qaeda. The wealthiest 400 individuals in this country have a savings of at least 30 or 40 years, right? And the United States Supreme Court. Does anyone really think Bush v. Gore was decided on the legal merits? I said to these folks, "Hey, so you own the American people. They have a president of the United States, more than $9 trillion. We should do everything we can to avoid a hugely expensive cold war with China. Absolutely. 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don’t like to talk about private sessions behind closed doors with the president, but let’s just say the response to that discussion from the president and his team was not inspiring, and the proof is in the pudding. The president has hired people from Wall Street, obviously. We had Federal Reserve Board chairman Ben Bernanke come before the Senate Budget Committee, and I said, “Mr. Bernanke, can you tell me the role the Fed played—how much money the Fed provided to financial institutions, and which ones, during the financial crisis?” He said, “No, I can’t tell you that. I’m not going to tell you that.”

PLAYBOY: Do you think the term class warfare is a hard thing to explain to or use with most Americans?

SANDERS: People understand it. Sometimes people come up to me and say I’m courageous for saying all these things. I say, “I’m not courageous. Go look at these guys who want to give more tax breaks to billionaires and cut programs for working families. That is incredibly courageous, because the vast majority of the American people think that’s crazy.” The polling says: Don’t cut Social Security, don’t cut Medicare, don’t cut Medicaid. Ask the wealthy and large corporations to pay more taxes. The political question is, why have the Republicans not been reduced to a 15 percent marginal third party?

PLAYBOY: And the answer is?

SANDERS: Most people do not perceive a heck of a lot of difference between either party. The Democrats are too diffuse, and their message is so unclear the American people don’t see the real difference.

PLAYBOY: Some people claim Obamacare was really a payoff to the drug companies and the insurance companies to get them onboard, saying there would be a plus?

SANDERS: People who give great speeches about the need to go to war and years later talk about gutting benefits for vets or ignoring their needs? As somebody who has always been antiwar—I’m not a pacifist but I’ve always understood war is the last recourse—I also understand the cost of war. Some people think more Vietnam vets committed suicide than were killed in Vietnam. Lives were just totally destroyed. Right now, as a result of this war in Iraq, which I voted against, there are an estimated 50,000 veterans suffering from minor to moderate traumatic brain injuries. These are folks you would not recognize walking down the street. This is not somebody who has had half his head blown off. These are folks who are functioning but have been exposed to multiple explosions; maybe they have had many, many concussions. We don’t know what that will mean over the years. We don’t know its impact on depression, on other emotional attributes, on behavior.

PLAYBOY: How would you assess the country’s nation-building efforts around the world, particularly in Iraq and Afghanistan?

SANDERS: If you want to talk about nation building, I know a great nation that needs to be rebuilt. It’s called the United States of America. I would rather invest in this country than in Iraq or Afghanistan. Our roads and bridges and railroads and water systems and schools need rebuilding. We have been at war now for more than a decade. Our troops have done a tremendous job, but it is time for the people of Afghanistan to take full responsibility for their country and for waging the war against the Taliban. And in Iraq, I think it’s clear that nation building didn’t work very well.

PLAYBOY: There has been a debate about the president’s use of drones, particularly whether any president can order the killing of an American citizen without due process. What’s your view?

SANDERS: The way the drone program has been handled is a major reason I voted against the nomination of John Brennan to head the CIA. Of course we must defend ourselves against terrorism, but I am not convinced Brennan is adequately sensitive to the important balancing act required to make protecting our civil liberties an integral part of ensuring our national security. Drone attacks that kill innocent people are immoral and create an enormous amount of anti-Americanism.

PLAYBOY: Do you think international terrorist attacks at home are a serious threat requiring more surveillance, less privacy or other actions? Do we need a London-style network of cameras on every street? How active should the NSA be?

SANDERS: I think we can fight terrorism without undermining the Constitution. That is why I voted against the so-called Patriot Act. In my view, that surveillance law gives the government far too much power to spy on innocent U.S. citizens and provides for very little oversight or disclosure.

PLAYBOY: What role does religious fundamentalism play in conflicts today in the world and at home, whether it’s fundamentalist Islam, Christianity or Judaism?

SANDERS: I have real problems with people who believe they have a direct line from God and can commit any act, no matter how horrendous, because it is “God’s will.” There is no simple answer to combating religious fundamentalism. It’s a question of education, of bringing people together to discover their common humanity and working toward more tolerant and democratic societies.

PLAYBOY: If you had the power, how would you negotiate an end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, where fundamentalism is so strong?

SANDERS: The hatred, violence and loss of life that define this conflict make living an ordinary life a constant struggle for both peoples. We must work with those Israeli and Palestinian leaders who are committed to peace, security and statehood rather than to empty rhetoric and violence. A two-state solution must include compromises from both sides to achieve a fair and lasting peace in the region. The Palestinians must fulfill their responsibilities to end terrorism against Israel and recognize Israel’s right to exist. In return, the Israelis must end their policy of targeted killings, prevent further Israeli settlements on Palestinian land and prevent the destruction of Palestinian homes, businesses and infrastructure.

PLAYBOY: And what role, if any, do you see for the U.S. in Syria?

SANDERS: With regard to Syria, it is my strong opinion that Bashar al-Assad has to go. He is a terrible dictator at war with his own people. The difficulty for the United States is to make certain the opposition groups we support in Syria are not extremists working with Al Qaeda.

PLAYBOY: Is the deficit a challenge to be addressed slowly over time, as Paul Krugman and others argue, or an immediate crisis that puts the country at grave risk and requires immediate deep cuts, as others say? Do you see a price for inaction?

SANDERS: Congressional action has already resulted in a major reduction of the deficit, and (continued on page 130)
BERNIE SANDERS (continued from page 62)

I expect that in years to come those reductions will continue. Our focus has to be on the economic crisis facing the working families of this country. We need to address the reality that real unemployment today is around 14 percent and higher for young people and minorities. We need to invest significantly in rebuilding our crumbling infrastructure and transforming our energy system away from fossil fuels. When we do that we make more productive what the greenhouse gas emissions and create millions of jobs. We cannot continue to balance the budget on the backs of the elderly, the children, the sick and the poor.

PLAYBOY: Yet people go out every two or four years and vote for those two parties. Incumbents keep doing those things, and they keep getting reelected.

SANDERS: I think a lot of that has to do with people voting for what they perceive to be the lesser of two evils. A couple of years ago, not long after President Obama was elected, I had the opportunity to be in the Oval Office with him. What I said to him—I won’t tell you what he said to me—was “Now is the time not for another Bill Clinton but for an FDR. People want to know why their standard of living is going down, why they’re getting battered. They want to know who is responsible, and they want to know what we are going to do about that.” That’s what the American people want to hear. Why is the standard of living for the average American going down? Why is the gap between the rich and the poor getting wider? Why is Wall Street able to get away with murder? People want to know why.

PLAYBOY: How would you describe the differences between FDR and Bill Clinton?

SANDERS: Well, Clinton was and is a very smart guy, but he is the guy who signed NAFTA. I like Bill Clinton. I like Hillary Clinton, but they live in a world surrounded by a lot of money. It’s not an accident that Clinton is doing a fantastic job with his foundation. Where do you think that money is coming from? The point being that Clinton was a moderate Democrat who was heavily influenced by Wall Street and big-money interests, and Obama is governing in that same way.

PLAYBOY: And compared with FDR?

SANDERS: The difference is FDR had the courage and the good political sense to understand that in the middle of terrible economic times the American people wanted to know what caused their suffering, who was the cause of it, and they wanted somebody to take these guys on, so he was very aggressive in his rhetoric in taking on the money interests. He said, “Of course they’re going to hate me, and I welcome their hatred. I’m with the working people of America. We’re going to take on the money interests, and we are going to create jobs through a variety of government programs.” If you’re prepared to deal with class issues, as Roosevelt did, if you’re prepared to take on the big-money interests, you can rally the American people, and I think you can marginalize the Republicans.

PLAYBOY: Do you have a favorite Republican, dead or alive?

SANDERS: Abraham Lincoln, of course. George Aiken, a former governor and senator of Vermont, was a smart and progressive politician. Teddy Roosevelt fought to break up big corporations. Eisenhower warned us about the military-industrial complex and built the interstate highway system. One of the great tragedies of today’s politics is that the Republican Party is now a right-wing extremist party in which none of these leaders would be welcome.

PLAYBOY: What is the importance of manufacturing jobs? What’s the matter with service-sector jobs?

SANDERS: That’s a good question. First, we know that historically, in terms of wages, service-industry jobs—McDonald’s, Walmart—pay significantly less than manufacturing. Often in the past those were unionized jobs.

PLAYBOY: And McDonald’s is not unionized. That’s the fundamental difference, isn’t it?

SANDERS: So you’re arguing if McDonald’s workers were organized tomorrow and were paid $20 an hour, what’s the difference? The answer is, I’d like to see that. There is something psychologically important about being able to say, “I created this product,” whether it’s an automobile or a table. Do I want to see McDonald’s workers make a living wage? Absolutely. Is that important? It’s enormously important. Should we organize them, unionize them? Absolutely. But I think it says something about a society if it consumes rather than just imports. That’s the fundamental difference, isn’t it?

PLAYBOY: Where do you stand on immigration?

SANDERS: Look, my dad came to this country as an immigrant.

PLAYBOY: He was only 17 when he came, correct?

SANDERS: From Poland, without a nickel in his pocket. It was difficult. I mean, he came here, as many immigrants do, without any money and didn’t know how to speak the language. He had maybe one or two words. He came from the bottom. He never made much money, but he was a proud American who appreciated the opportunities this country gave him and never forgot that. The ultra-conservative or libertarian types say we shouldn’t have any rules. If capital needs labor, bring them in. Let them get the cheapest possible labor. I think we need a sane immigration policy, and the life-blood of this country is immigration. But that doesn’t mean open the doors and say to a black kid who can’t find a job, “Hey, we’re going to bring in people to work for lower wages than you would.”

PLAYBOY: When you talk about America, you don’t often talk about American exceptionalism, saying we have the greatest workers in the world. That’s different from most politicians.

SANDERS: We are largely a nation of immigrants, with people from all over the world coming to this country. We have from our earliest days held democratic values. We rejected early on the class nature of Europe, believed in social mobility regardless of where you were born. Those are all extraordinary virtues of this country that we should be very proud of. I think we have a lot to be proud of. Do I think we’ve done some bad things—Europe or Canada, that God somehow stopped at the border? No, I don’t think that.

PLAYBOY: The country has moved rapidly to a different view on gay marriage. In 10 years will the country look back and wonder what all the fuss was about?

SANDERS: Absolutely. There has been a huge societal transformation on this issue. Today, state legislatures all over the country are passing gay marriage bills—and hardly anybody cares. For younger people it is totally a nonissue.

PLAYBOY: Vermont has quite a few gun owners. How do you position yourself on the debates regarding gun ownership and restrictions?

SANDERS: Vermont does have many gun owners who enjoy hunting, target shooting and other gun-related activities. But most people in Vermont understand that as a nation we must do everything we can to end the horror of mass killings we have seen in Newtown, Connecticut; Aurora, Colorado; Blacksburg, Virginia; Tucson, Arizona and other American communities. Clearly, there is no single or simple solution to this crisis. While the legislation [to expand background checks] recently brought forth in the Senate would by no means have solved all our gun-violence problems, it would have been a step forward, and that’s why I voted for that legislation.

PLAYBOY: Does the public care all that much about the issues you’re passionate about?

SANDERS: If you go out and talk to people and say, “Hey, the Celtics beat the Knicks last night. Let’s talk about that, or let’s talk about the football game,” that’s part of the vernacular. If you say to somebody, “What are you doing to try to improve life for the middle class?” they’ll look at you and say, “I’m crazy. What are you talking about?” What am I supposed to do? I’ve got a job, I’m working 50 hours a week.” Or “I don’t have a job. I’m unemployed. I’m knocking my brains out trying to find work, taking care of my kids.” The idea that collective action can improve our quality of life and make gains for working families—I don’t think that’s part of people’s worldview.

Let me tell you a story outside of school. I go to the Democratic caucuses every week, and every week there is a report about fund-raising—Republicans have raised thus and thus; this is what we have done. In the six years I’ve been going to
those meetings, I have never heard five minutes of discussion about organizing. It’s about raising money. Not five minutes to say, “Look, West Virginia, we have rallies, we’re doing this, we’re doing that, we’re knocking on doors.” In six years, I have heard no discussion about that at all.

PLAYBOY: Why is the hatred of Obama so extreme from some quarters? Is that a function of race or ideology or both?

SANDERS: The hatred of Obama is extreme, and it is frightening. There is no question race is one of the factors behind that hatred, but it is not race alone. Today millions of Americans get all their political information from right-wing media outlets that have totally distorted the reality of who Obama is and what he stands for. That is one of the reasons so many right-wing Republicans were shocked at the election results, in their world it was impossible to believe anyone would support Obama.

PLAYBOY: People just seem to think the system doesn’t work for them, whether they’re in the Tea Party or on the left.

SANDERS: The system doesn’t work for them. I think they’re exhausted.

PLAYBOY: Are we stuck with the two-party system?

SANDERS: There’s no question there is a massive amount of cynicism and displeasure toward our current political system and Republicans and Democrats. Clearly most people vote for one or another party not because they strongly believe in the goals of that party but because they see it as the lesser of two evils. Having said that, no one should underestimate the enormous difficulty of creating a broad-based third party that speaks to the needs of working families. That party in all likelihood would have to be organized through the trade union movement and its millions of members.

PLAYBOY: Many of your hardcore support-

ers are urging you to run for president in 2016. Are you considering it?

SANDERS: Well, the answer is that to run a serious campaign, you need to raise hundreds and hundreds of millions of dollars. That’s number one, and I don’t think—

PLAYBOY: Barack Obama proved candidates can raise money.

SANDERS: Obama went to his friends on Wall Street the first time around.

PLAYBOY: That’s true, but he still raised a fair amount of money in small donations.

SANDERS: Yeah, but I’m not Barack Obama. That’s the point. I do not take corporate money. I think people are hungering for a voice out there. It would be tempting to try to raise issues and demand discussion on issues that are not being talked about: inequality in wealth and trade policy, protecting the social safety net, moving aggressively on global warming. Those issues are not being talked about, and it would be tempting, but….

PLAYBOY: Hillary Clinton will probably be the Democratic nominee. Does that offer an alternative to the country?

SANDERS: No, it does not.

PLAYBOY: Are you absolutely ruling out running for president, 100 percent?

SANDERS: Absolutely? 100 percent? Cross my heart? Is there a stack of Bibles somewhere? Look, maybe it’s only 99 percent. I care a lot about working families. I care a lot about the collapse of the American middle class. I care a lot about the enormous wealth and income disparity in our country. I care a lot that poverty in America is near an all-time high but hardly anyone talks about it. I realize running for president would be a way to shine a spotlight on these issues that are too often in the shadows today. [pauses] But I am at least 99 percent sure I won’t.

PLAYBOY: At 14 you started hanging around with your uncle, who deejayed at sound system parties. What did you like about DJ culture?

ELBA: My uncle played a lot of Nigerian songs, which were often 16 minutes long. Nigerian vinyls were thick like doormats. I think he played them so he could dance longer with the ladies. My cousins and I were gagging to just touch the turntables. I got into the world of pirate radio, which was illegal, and sound systems, which was sort of a heated atmosphere, with one sound system clashing with the other, so I didn’t spread the news to my parents about that. They were very strict, and I didn’t want to get in trouble. I was my mum’s only child, so she was very protective of me.

PLAYBOY: As a father, are you more like your mom or your dad?

ELBA: More like my mum, believe it or not. Man, what’s that about? I’m very protective of my daughter and who she hangs out with. Same stuff my mum used to do, when I’d tell her, “Mum, relax.” [laughs] You can drive yourself nuts as a parent, thinking about what boys do and what I got up to as a kid. If my kid got up to that same stuff, I’d be horrified.

PLAYBOY: When you were spending time in London clubs, did you take ecstasy?

ELBA: Drug culture is a big part of the house music scene that I deejay now. Loads of DJs get smashed. But then you end up playing shitty music. At first I bypassed drugs. I didn’t start smoking weed until later in life. Am I allowed to say that? I mean, I’m not gonna lie—I’ve tried everything, just between you, me and the people who read this magazine. I’ve tried it all. I played one of the biggest drug dealers in the world on TV, so you think I’d know what I was talking about.

PLAYBOY: You’re also a rapper. This lyric from “Sex in Your Dreams” is particularly interesting: “Bone-hard diamond cutter, dick thick like homemade butter.”

ELBA: You have been listening. [laughs]

PLAYBOY: “Show you parts of your pussy that you ain’t discovered.” Has your mom heard the song?

ELBA: When it’s read back to me like that, I’m mortified that such trifle could come out of my mind. [laughs] Let me tell you, some fans hate it, some love it, some can’t stand the idea that I’ve got the audacity