

Texas State Police Rammed Family Vehicle, Pointed Guns in Mistaken 'Operation Lone Star' Border Stop, El Paso Latinos Say

The US citizens were returning to El Paso from a trip to Mexico when their car was rammed by unmarked cars carrying gun-wielding plainclothes cops, who then advised them the state might not be responsible for damages. Local police said it's none of their business.

By ANGELA KOCHERGA,
El Paso Matters

An El Paso family returning from a visit to Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, says they were forced off the road by Texas state agents who then rushed out of their unmarked vehicles and pointed semi-automatic rifles at them.

"This was excessive, way too much force. It would have been just as easy to turn on your lights, pull us over and do an investigation" said Gerardo Ayala, 37, who was in his Chevy Cruze on Oct. 12 with his wife, 13-year-old daughter and mother-in-law.

Ayala said they were released after a Texas Department of Public Safety supervisor told them their car was similar to one being tracked in an investigation. DPS spokesperson Elizabeth Carter said only, "We're looking into the allegation."

The Ayalas are US citizens, and the October incident underscores concerns by civil rights groups and immigrant advocates that Texas' border enforcement efforts include ethnic profiling and civil rights abuses.

Gov. Greg Abbott and Texas Republican lawmakers have approved \$11 billion in recent years for Operation Lone Star, which floods border areas with DPS troopers and agents and Texas National Guard soldiers in an effort to impede entry by unauthorized migrants. The increased DPS border presence has led to more high-speed chases of suspected migrant smugglers, which sometimes end in crashes with injuries and deaths.

Abbott in December signed Senate Bill 4, which was passed by the Legislature and will allow Texas police officers – including DPS troopers – to arrest people suspected of entering the country illegally, and possibly deport them to Mexico. El Paso County filed a lawsuit the next day challenging the law.

Ayala and his family were on their way to their West El Paso home at about

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Illustration by DOLORES CULLEN

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FIGHT FASCISM

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WORKING CLASS VICTORIES
From the picket lines to statehouses to the White House, the fight against inequality landed huge wins.

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Is it possible to build a political party that truly speaks to the needs of the working people in an era of runaway inequality?

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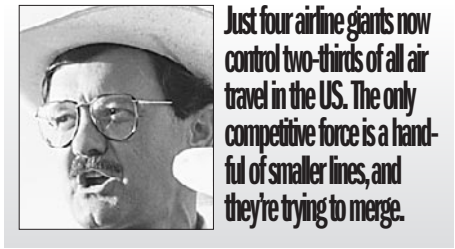
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JIM HIGHTOWER



Why Air Travel Is So Expensive and Unpleasant

In a song about outlaws, Woody Guthrie noted that, “Some’ll rob with a six-gun / Some with a fountain pen.” Indeed, the big-money thievery in our society today is being perpetrated by the Fountain Pen Gang of corporate monopolists, Wall Street financiers and Washington lobbyists. They’re trying to pull off another multibillion-dollar heist right now in the airline industry. It’s a merger caper that would gouge consumers, shortchange airline workers and cut service to communities by further shrinking competition in an already-monopolistic market. Just four giants — American, United, Delta and Southwest — now control *two-thirds* of all air travel in the entire US. The only competitive force left is a handful of smaller lines, such as JetBlue, Spirit, Alaska and Hawaiian. Currently, though, Alaska and JetBlue are trying to take over the other two, perversely arguing that *cutting* the number of competitors will miraculously *increase* competition and magically *reduce* prices for consumers.

This is what I call “Santa Claus Economics”: You have to be 6 years old to believe it. Here, boys and girls, is the reason that less competition is not more: All of these airlines are owned and controlled by the same tiny group of uberrich, Wall Street financial profiteers. For example, Vanguard Group (a \$7 trillion global investment powerhouse) is the largest institutional shareholder in American, United, Delta, Southwest and Alaska, plus the second-largest in JetBlue. So, far from fighting the Big Four, the two monopolistic wannabes would join them to rig prices even higher and make airline “service” more of an oxymoron than it is now.

The word “free” in free enterprise is not an adjective, it’s a verb. We have to free-up the enterprising competitors that corporate monopolists are locking out, decentralizing market power, not increasing consolidation.

Why Is My Doctor Unionizing?

You wait a month to get a doctor appointment, then you sit in the waiting room an hour because Dr. Incorporated is perpetually overbooked, then you’re finally rushed in for your 10 minutes with the doc ... tick, tick, tick ... and then you’re scooted out, uncertain whether you’re supposed to take pills or make funeral arrangements.

Welcome to corporatized, consolidated and bureaucratized “health care” — a rigid system in which nurses, pharmacists and doctors too are no longer independent health professionals driven by a moral mandate to provide their best care to patients. Instead, all are treated as cogs in a monopolistic structure driven by an imperative to provide maximum profit to Wall Street investors who own the corporate-care chains. This financial hierarchy demands factory-like cost-cutting — including cutting the numbers of nurses, pharmacists and physicians who actually provide the care.

The cutbacks leave remaining caregivers stressed to the breaking point, and “care” is regimented to such time-motion metrics as limiting doctors to only 10 minutes per patient. Next!

Even when professionals complain that corporate cutbacks are endangering patients, the hierarchy responds with irrel-

evant financial statistics. For example, when Walgreens’ pharmacists recently revolted against constant staff cuts, the chain’s corporate bosses coldly retorted that they were investing \$400 million in new pharmacists. Sounds like a big number, but really? Walgreens is pocketing \$27 billion this year in profit! So, investing under 2% of one year’s profit will not make a blip in service to patients. Instead, the bulk of the billions that consumers pay goes to enrich top executives and Wall Street investors.

This enrichment of the rich few at our expense is why health care providers are unionizing — not for themselves, but for us patients. For information and action, go to doctorscouncil.org.

Want Environmental Progress? Follow The Kids.

“OK, boomer.” That’s a snarky phrase currently some use to mock 60- and 70-year-olds they consider to be cluelessly out of touch.

Recently, however, teenagers and 20-somethings have turned that snide sentiment into a positive challenge directed at doomsayers of all ages who claim nothing can be done to stop runaway global warming: “OK, doomer,” these young climate activists respond. It’s their shorthand way of saying to do-nothing fatalists: Give up if you want, but please step aside while we organize and mobilize for climate sanity.

Our globe’s fast-warming, catastrophe-creating climate is more than just another issue: It has become a generational cause for young people. Indeed, 62% of young voters support totally phasing out fossil fuels, and they’re channeling their anger about official inaction toward both political parties. Such feisty grassroots groups as Gen-Z for Change, Zero Hour, Black Girl Environmentalist and Our Children’s Trust are on the front lines — in the face of power, and on the move.

As in all progressive struggles — from civil rights to labor to environmental justice — progress comes from sticking with principle, building incrementally on local victories and persevering against moneyed reactionaries. Already, one breakthrough by these young climate activists was made this year in deep-red, rural Montana. In a case filed by Our Children’s Trust, 16 children, ages 2-18, charged that a state law took away their right to challenge energy projects that increase global warming. Noting that Montana’s constitution establishes a right to “a clean and healthful environment,” state Judge Kathy Seeley ruled for the children... and for a clean, healthy climate future.

Progress is not made by spectators and cynics, but by activists. And those who say that activism can’t produce change should not interrupt those who’re doing it.

The Rattiest Right-Wing Congress Critter

Vangunu, one of the Solomon Islands, is home to a giant species of rodent called the vika. Astonishingly, this rare and very large rat has jaws so powerful it can bite through a coconut shell!

That made me think of Rep. Jim Jordan, the GOP’s rattiest far-right-wing Congress critter. There is no documented proof that this extremist partisan was raised on Vangunu, but he sure keeps gnawing on Joe and Hunter Biden, desperately trying to crack open a scandal that simply doesn’t exist. Vikas are powerful, but they’ve not been accused of being smart.

Jordan, the former coach of a men’s wrestling team at Ohio State, now has his team of House Republicans in a choke hold, draining national media attention to his goofy obsession with impeaching Joe. Impeach him for what? Well, says Jordan, we’re looking for a reason.

He has it bass-ackwards — real impeachment proceedings start with specific charges of an official’s “high crimes and misdemeanors.” But Coach Jordan is perverting that constitutional requirement by first accusing Biden of high crimes, *then* holding hearings in hopes of finding one. But poor Jim — it turns out to be easier for him to bite through a coconut than to fab-

ricate a Biden crime. But Jordan keeps gnawing, wasting Congress’ time, staff and credibility (plus millions of taxpayer’s dollars) scuttling down trails that go nowhere. Meanwhile, as he and the GOP House prioritize their clownish political agenda, they can’t perform the basics of government, which is simply to keep essential public services funded and functioning. Unable to govern, Republican leaders abruptly stopped working in the House in early December, saying they’ll get serious next year. But, uh-oh, the vika congressman has just announced he’ll hold more impeachment hearings next year so he can keep gnawing at the Biden coconut.

A New Road to Farm, Food and Climate Progress

“Arkansas Traveler” is an old-time song of folk humor that tells of a well-heeled dandy who gets lost while traveling across the Ozark Mountains. He comes upon a backwoods farmer and shouts out: “Hey farmer, where does this road go?” Not missing a beat, the farmer says: “I’ve lived here all my life, stranger, and it ain’t gone nowhere, yet.”

A corny joke, yet the current US Congress has traveled that same nowhere road all year long in a fruitless attempt to reach agreement on a rewrite of America’s basic Farm Bill. This failure is a very big deal and wholly irresponsible. The bill is a five-year, \$700 billion package that not only doles out federal crop subsidies (which have largely gone to huge agribusiness operations), but it also provides food stamps for millions of poor families, money for vital ag conservation programs, and economic development work in thousands of rural counties.

So why the dead end? It’s caused by the same plutocratic/theocratic nuttiness of Republican lawmakers who put their extremist right-wing ideology and corporate servitude above all the other needs of regular people and our country. Because of their internal chaos and political grandstanding, the old status quo Farm Bill had to be extended for another year. Yet, that’s not all bad news, for a whole new constituency has begun rallying to write a truly innovative, forward-looking farm-food-labor climate bill that fosters the common good above the exploitative greed of today’s monopolistic, narrow-minded agribusiness complex.

Let’s turn the dead-end year into a positive opportunity to build public support in

2024 for fundamental *democratic* change in America’s food direction. The way to get there is not through more backroom Washington deals, but by going straight to the people, mobilizing family farmers, food workers, consumers, climate activists and others behind a revitalized system that works for us.

My New Year’s Resolutions for Some Powerful People

I made a few New Year’s resolutions this week — not for me, but as self-improvement ideas for some of the people running our country. No need for them to thank me — happy to help.

I drafted one for the GOP’s whole ultra-rightist gaggle of lawmakers who keep blocking passage of health coverage for poor people. “Resolved: We will forgo the gold-plated socialized health care we now take from taxpayers, because it’s only right that we be in the same leaky boat as our constituents.”

Then there are America’s 735 narcissistic billionaires who obviously need to find a moral compass. They’re so self-absorbed they keep wasting their money and “genius” on phantasmagoric plutocratic schemes to separate their fortunes from the well-being of the rest of us. Then they wonder why they are not beloved. So, rich ones, let me help. Resolve in 2024 to demonstrate a little less hubris and a little more humanity, less strut and more sharing. Practice in front of a mirror; try seeing beyond you to the common good. It’s a beautiful and deeply rewarding place if you can find it.

And I didn’t overlook you Washington operatives and Big Money donors of the Democratic Party. Please resolve to camp out in grassroots America this year — where everyday little-d democrats want and need your attention and support. Not just in safe blue districts, but especially in rural, purple and even in red areas. You’ve abandoned them in recent years, but they still yearn to build a progressive governing majority for America’s future.

Of course, the problem with New Year’s resolutions is keeping them, and my honorees can’t be counted on. So, we have to keep pushing them to do what’s right.

Jim Hightower is a former *Texas Observer* editor, former Texas agriculture commissioner, radio commentator and populist sparkplug, a best-selling author and winner of the Puffin/Nation Prize for Creative Citizenship. Write him at info@jimhightower.com or see www.jimhightower.com.



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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Checking the Record on Israel and Palestine

Concerning Stephen Appell's letter ("Distorted Israel/Palestine History," 1/1-15/24 *TPP*) on my column "Reaping What's Been Sown" (12/1/23 *TPP*), a few points need to be made.

First of all, the claim that Truman friend Edward Jacobson's reputed influence on the president's Israel policy is "a myth" is incorrect. In his Pulitzer Prize-winning 1992 Truman biography, the late David McCullough called Jacobson's role one of "unusual importance." Harry Truman himself went further; according to McCullough, he maintained after the fact that Jacobson's contribution to his decision making on Israel was of "decisive importance."

Truman was no Zionist. In fact, he resented the political pressure extreme American Zionists were putting on him. His and Jacobson's shared motivation for pursuing a Jewish homeland in Palestine was primarily based on humanitarian, not ideological, grounds — the establishment of a refuge for survivors of the Holocaust, a destination for displaced persons who either couldn't or wouldn't return to their countries of origin.

To that end, beginning in 1946, Jacobson acted as facilitator for Jewish groups anxious to make their homeland case to Truman, shepherding them to White House meetings with the president. Jacobson's key accomplishment as mediator was arranging a secret visit by Chaim Weizmann, future Israeli president, when Truman's final determination on recognizing Israel was still in doubt (the other option, favored by the British, was a temporary UN trusteeship); their confab sealed the deal for statehood.

On Great Britain's inconsistent application of the Balfour Declaration under the mandate, the British did honor their homeland commitment for nearly two decades leading up to the 1939 White Paper limiting Jewish immigration to Palestine. Prior to the White Paper (issued to reduce rising Arab-Jewish tensions), 300,000 Jewish settlers were granted access to Palestine in the 1920s and 1930s, considerably altering the country's ethnic population balance.

As for the whole question of the "rightful historical occupants of the land," one perceptive observation was provided in 1956 by General Moshe Dayan, war hero and chief of staff of the Israeli military. Dayan said the following as part of a remarkable eulogy for a fallen Israeli security officer that was reprinted recently in the *New York Times*: "What can we say against their [the Palestinians'] terrible hatred for us? For eight years now, they have sat in the refugee camps of Gaza and watched how, before their very eyes, we have turned their land and villages, where they and their forefathers previously dwelled, into our home."

Dayan, a conciliator, was briefly part of the Begin government in the 1970s; he resigned over its excessively hard-line West Bank policies. His early death in 1981 deprived the peace process of a potential force for reconciliation.

Finally, my column clearly condemned the Hamas killings of Oct. 7 at the very beginning. For whatever reason, Mr. Appell chose not to recognize that fact.

WAYNE M. O'LEARY, *Orono, Maine*

Church Corruption

Full disclosure, I was reared a Roman Catholic and was observant until my thirties. By that time, I had studied church history to the point that I could no longer stomach the ridiculous hypocrisy. First of all, I was expected to suspend my disbelief and accept the fact that I was never to push back on the idea that certain men were able to assert, without any empirical evidence, that they spoke for God. In my teens, I was plucked out of a perfectly fun arts and crafts

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More Than a Staging Area

By DON ROLLINS

It was July 8, 1741, when the otherwise measured Rev. Jonathan Edwards preached a Puritan-style sermon so fiery it helped occasion an entire rethinking of Protestantism in the colonies. Delivered to a congregation in Enfield, Connecticut, his hearers were so haunted by the images invoked by "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," some were known to have spasms, even faint. Tradition has it, Edwards was so concerned at the extreme responses, he prematurely ended the sermon.

Once in print form, "Sinners" found a ready audience as the First Religious Awakening — a 1730-1770s evangelical, Calvinis-

tic movement — was sweeping through all 13 colonies. So popular was Edwards' violent, apocalyptic God, not even the more secular strains of colonial life were spared: While some believers were content to wait for Judgment Day, more fervent colonists took their doomsday theology with them into their businesses, schools and governments. Doomsday had now entered the colonial cum national lexicon.

According to a 2020 poll conducted by Pew Research Center, Edwards' ugly eschatology has indeed survived, thrived and spread as hoped: Nearly four in 10 Americans believe the world will end in their lifetimes, and in keeping with the account given in the Book of Revelation from the Christian scriptures. (Noteworthy if not surprising, 45% of Republican and 63% of evangelical respondents expect an imminent end of days. They outpaced Democratic and non-evangelical participants by double digits.)

class and tasked to teach communion-preparation classes. As a budding literary analyst, I began taking the Bible more seriously after that and took on a summer school project of reading the Bible from cover to cover. (The Old Testament seemed to me to be ancient Jewish creation mythology, folk lore, a bit of history, some wisdom, and the Ten Commandments, which were okay for its time but were a little better than the old Hammurabi Code. The New Testament contained an upgrade to the Beatitudes — Christ's mandate. I am now philosophically a Beatitudes Christian.)

In the 12/15/23 *TPP*, a religious deacon wrote an op-ed criticizing the pejorative that the columnist Frank Lingo used while criticizing Pope Benedict IV for his protection of pedophile priests and supported his good opinion of Benedict with a blurb from the Vatican listing all of Benedict's fine accomplishments. If he had studied the history of the Catholic Church like I have, he would know that the Curia of the church has always been an absolutely corrupt political group. As a matter of fact, all conservative "Christians" are corrupt because they have never represented what Christ actually taught; Christ was murdered because he stood up to the vicious conservative Jewish leadership (like Netanyahu) of his time.

If the word "prick" was too crass for the deacon, perhaps he should avoid learning the language that the parents whose children's lives were forever scarred, or the expletives of the women and families whose lives are being destroyed by the arrogant presumptuousness of forcing their corrupt conservative nonsense on women. The whole purpose of this disgusting rapaciousness is to maintain power, especially power over women.

The part of the report from the Vatican hiding behind the thin line of Holy Smoke that the deacon missed was that these pedophiles were not removed from society and jailed as any other pervert would be, not because they were not as guilty, but because, like Trump, they were special and were entitled to special treatment. We see you there. Don't expect us to be nice.

P. ANN WHITE, *Meridian, Texas*

A Disqualifying Deadly Legacy

A recent United Nations report documents 10,000 Ukrainian civilian deaths due to Russia's aggressive war. That number is dwarfed by an estimated 15,000 Palestinian civilians killed in Israel's military response to Hamas' 1,200 murders Oct. 7. How then should we characterize the deaths of nearly 319,000 American civilians by what Brown University medical researchers call "COVID-19 vaccine-preventable deaths?" This devastating number is higher than a previous estimate by the US Centers for Disease Control, and Harvard School of Public Health, that 232,000 American deaths could have been prevented had the deceased been vaccinated.

"All of this comes down to trust — whether the political leadership creates a climate of trust in public health agencies' efforts, in the science," says Dr. Thomas Tsai, co-author of Harvard's analysis.

This deadly legacy is the crime for which Donald Trump's anti-vaccine, anti-mask, anti-science harangues must disqualify him from holding public office ever again.

BRUCE JOFFE, *Piedmont, Calif.*

Don't Blame Alternate Parties

Cecelia Delambre's letter to the editor ("Jill Stein Comes Off the Bench") in the 12/15/23 *TPP* would make sense if only Democrats and Republicans were permitted to run for office. Fortunately, in a country like ours, anyone can give it a try, but the myth endures that third party and independent candidates only muck it up for the "serious" candidates.

Perhaps Ms. Delambre's Democrats should be offering us better policies that we progressives can vote for, like Medicare For All, a living minimum wage, or an end to the wasteful wars instead of worrying so much about Donald Trump.

GARY CRONIN, *West Babylon, N.Y.*

An Oath of Candidacy

Oaths of office have the power, ethically if not legally, to bind public servants to their obligations to the voters, as well as to our system of democratic governance. We all know now that an oath won't stop the most determined sociopaths from wreaking havoc, and it only takes a few, or one, to do so.

But what if we also required an oath at the beginning of a candidacy? There should be rules and norms of running for office that any candidate with a conscience would feel at pains to obey. Again, the sociopaths wouldn't care about the restrictions of an oath, but in their wanton disregard for any oath, they would self-identify as unfit for office before voting begins.

An oath of candidacy would set down rules of conduct, such as:

- No name-calling or accusations without factual basis.
- No lying about one's record, background, or qualifications
- Revealing the true sources of all campaign donations before voting begins.
- Vowing to abide by and accept the results of the election.
- Contesting close election results only through legal means, and accepting the verdict of the courts.
- Vigorously discouraging and condemning violence and threats against opponents.

To stanch the flow of grifter "populists" into our political system, it would be better to restrict the flow of the dark money that lures them in. But that's a very tough hill to climb, due to the long train of pro-corporate Supreme Court decisions, starting with *Buckley v. Valeo*.

But an oath of candidacy would provide somewhat of a buffer for democracy and an advance warning to voters.

JEFFREY HOBBS, *Springfield, Ill.*

Make Elder Care a Human Right

The article titled "Facing Financial Ruin as Costs Soar for Elder Care" by Reed Abelson and Jordan Rau (12/15/23 *TPP*) documents the shameful lack of long-term health care for the nation's elderly. One factor for this deplorable situation facing elderly people is that in the US economic and social rights are not generally deemed to be human rights. The public discourse on human rights in the US is limited to political and civil rights.

The UN's International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1976) incorporates the right to health care, a decent standard of living, education and other rights. Unfortunately, although President Ford approved this Covenant, it was never ratified by the US Senate. The US did sign the UN Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, which does include economic and social rights, but the US Supreme Court has held international law is not binding on US courts.

A number of US states do incorporate the right of public school students to a quality education, under their state constitutions. Numerous countries have placed economic and social rights in their constitutions. What is needed is recognition in the US that economic and social rights are human rights made mandatory in state and federal law.

JIM PHILLIPS, *Wichita, Kansas*

Tom Conway, R.I.P.

Sorry to read of the passing of Tom Conway, the International President of the United Steelworkers.

I would read one of his articles and get a good feeling, being a longtime union construction worker myself.

Then I see who wrote it. "Oh yeah, that guy." Always a great article.

S.D. ROSENBAUM, *New York, N.Y.*

Editor Notes: We're glad Tom Conway's successor as USW International President, David McCall, has chosen to continue the column.

you're seeing Bible prophecy fulfilled in your lifetime!"

The list of mostly MAGA politicians sharing in the giddiness is long and growing - none more publicly and consistently than Florida's Republican Senator Marc Rubio: "The day of the LORD is coming! Yes, it approaches, a day of darkness & gloom, a day of thick clouds! Like dawn spreading over the mountains, a vast & mighty army!"

Although believers in a literal Judgement Day have never been exclusively Christian, hard core Christian millenarianists here and abroad should be called to task for celebrating anything to do with the unspeakable death and suffering in Gaza and Israel. The broken, bleeding region cannot be reduced to a staging area for their unholy theology.

Don Rollins is a retired Unitarian Universalist minister in Jackson, Ohio. Email donaldrollins@gmail.com.

Will Truth Survive in 2024?

Ahoy, 2024! Ahoy, first issue of *Progressive Populist* 2024! And I hear a sizable part of America saying, “Good riddance, 2023.”

The first column of the year is always interesting. Will we write something that looks back at losers of the last 12 months and compliments the few (very few) winners of the year? Or will we look forward and announce our prognostications for the coming year? Tough decision.

This year, I’m tempted to simply re-submit my column published on Nov. 15: “Truth in War Remains Hard to Ascertain.” That column quoted a few of the many observers, starting with Aeschylus, who probably picked it up at a toga party, who said the first casualty of any war is the truth.

What did we know about the Hamas-Israel War when I wrote that column? Darn little. Hamas had attacked civilian sites in Israel and killed 1,200 people, then Israel retaliated and killed more. Fingers were being pointed and media was heaping on the blame, but the first casualty, yes, was the truth.

Now we know slightly more: The mas-



Hamas attacked civilian sites in Israel and killed 1,200, then Israel retaliated and killed more. Fingers were pointed. Truth was among the casualties.

sive Israeli killing machine has been unleashed and Palestinians are being bombed, kidnaped and starved. Hospitals have been destroyed. Families are sent on marches to places where they are not safe and are attacked again. Rape, mayhem, destruction. On both sides. The children who witness this will be full of hate and all to ready to defend themselves next time.

Our president has revealed himself, then revealed himself again, but the truth is still elusive. And journalists who might be able to shed light are among the many victims. Americans, perhaps more than anyone else, have blood on our hands.

To run that column again, I’d have to tweak it massively. For starters, I’d change what polls say about American feelings about the conflicts. In October, Americans were about 50/50 supporting Israel. The next month, a Reuters/Ipsos poll showed a decline, as 32% thought it was OK for the US to support Israel and 39% said the US could be a neutral mediator. The *New York Times*/Siena College poll in December showed that only 33% approve of Joe

Biden’s handling of the conflict while 57% of voters disapprove. We’ll see what the polls say in January.

If we want to get all “Holy Land” about it, we can remind ourselves that Jesus was born in that conflicted place. And we can pile our voices on with Ralph Nader’s, calling on the Catholic Biden to listen to the Pope. In a Dec. 29 letter, distributed widely (including this issue, on page 19), Nader reminded Biden that “Abuse of power is a cardinal sin.” My Dec. 1 column said Biden should withdraw from the 2024 election for the sake of allowing younger competition. He didn’t listen. Maybe I should just tweak that column and submit it again.

Never mind. For this first-in-2024 column, I’ll just move to prognostication. As Mark Twain said, “A man who goes around with a prophecy-gun ought never to get discouraged: if he will keep up his heart and fire at everything he sees, he is bound to hit something by and by.” I think that idea goes for women also, so here goes:

In 2024, the wave of immigrants will continue moving from the southern hemisphere north. Climate change, which has already hit the southern hemisphere more drastically than the north, will force people from their homes and the US will still have no answers to housing and care for them.

There will be no movement at all—not a millimeter—on the possibility for gun control. Gun manufacturers and the NRA will continue to put money into elections. BUT more victims will sue. We’ll see suits against the thoughtless parents that allow (or help) their kids buy war weapons and suits against venues that allow guns. Lawsuits

will begin to turn the tide on mass slayings in our country. This wave will begin on the east coast and move west.

In 2024, the movement to manufacture meat without animals will flutter and die. Consumers are getting smarter about what we put into our bodies and as the word gets out that lab created meats take too many inputs, use too much energy, don’t have the same health benefits as meat raised outdoors on real pasture, the laboratory-meat industry will die. People, starting on the west coast, will adopt increasingly vegetarian diets.

And, finally, beginning in the north, the threat to democracy will be revealed as courts and legislatures continue their partisan paths. Citizens will insist on fixing gerrymandered district lines and AI-assisted demographers will begin to make correct districting decisions.

All these waves will dribble from the edges of the nation into the midwest and arrive here as little ripples, but our intrepid state Attorneys General will resist. We’ll learn freedom allows us to have gerrymandering, guns, unhoused immigration and weird meats.

And the wars? What will we say about them a year from now? With truth as the first victim, nobody can predict.

Margot Ford McMillen farms near Fulton, Mo., and co-hosts “Farm and Fiddle” on sustainable ag issues on KOPN 89.5 FM in Columbia, Mo. Her latest book is “The Golden Lane: How Missouri Women Gained the Vote and Changed History.” Email: margotmcmillen@gmail.com.

DISPATCHES

OUR 30TH YEAR (WITH AN ASTERISK). With this issue we mark the 30th year* of publication of *The Progressive Populist*. We started in November 1995 as a monthly attempt to restore the good name of progressive populism, and provide an alternative to the corporate “mainstream” media.

Among the writers appearing in the inaugural issue who are still writing for us are Jim Hightower, Hal Crowther, Jesse Jackson and Ralph Nader (as well as Jim and Art Cullen). Other inaugural columnists of note included Molly Ivins, A.V. Krebs, Charles Levendosky and Eugene McCarthy.

(The 30th year gets an asterisk because, for bookkeeping and librarian purposes, the inaugural issue counted as the first volume of publication. The January 1996 issue counted as the beginning of the second year.)

In March 1996, Roberto Rodriguez and Patrisia Gonzales joined us with the Latino Spectrum column, which Roberto took solo in September 2008. New columnists in April 1996 included Joan Retsinas, Joel D. Joseph and Ted Rall. Margot Ford McMillen took over the Rural Routes column in June 1998 and Wayne O’Leary joined in September 1998.

We made the move to twice-monthly publication in November 1999 and since then, many distinguished writers have filled out our crew.

We still believe people are more important than corporations, and government of the people needs to be strong enough to keep corporations in line. We remain the antidote to your daily news and “social” media. If you’d like to keep us going, you may send a donation or suggest a friend or friends who might be interested in *The Progressive Populist*. And we hope you’ll stick with us through the 30th anniversary of our publication, in November 2025, and beyond.

HOUSE CHAOS CAUCUS OUTRAGED GOVERNMENT MIGHT NOT SHUT DOWN AFTER ALL. Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer and House Speaker Mike Johnson struck a deal on funding the government for the rest of the fiscal year. After months of House Republican chest-beating over funding cuts, and the ouster of former Speaker Kevin McCarthy when he didn’t make them happen, the agreement, announced Jan. 7, puts Congress right back where it was in May. Johnson agreed to basically the same funding topline that McCarthy and Biden agreed to seven months ago in the deal that raised the debt ceiling, Joan McCarter noted for Daily Kos (1/8).

A deal between the two congressional leaders does not, however, fund government, and two big obstacles still stand in the way. The first one is time. There are two deadlines on funding the government—Jan. 19 and Feb. 2—and the House wasn’t going to start legislative work until Jan. 10. That’s a tight window to work through agreements on 12 appropriations bills.

The second obstacle is the Freedom Caucus’ vehement opposition to the deal.

“This is total failure,” the group tweeted after the deal was announced. They are furious that Johnson agreed to honor a “side deal” McCarthy and Biden made last year, which includes \$69 billion to nondefense programs. The usual suspects are livid.

“That’s a hard no,” Rep. Chip Roy of Texas tweeted at Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, who touted the deal. Rep. Bob Good of Virginia, the new chair of the Freedom

Caucus, said it’s “nothing but another loss for America.” Montana Rep. Matt Rosendale, one of the eight GOP members who voted to oust McCarthy, said it reflects the “D.C. Cartel’s addiction to wasteful, unnecessary spending.” And Georgia Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene—who voted for the deal back in May—tweeted, “I am a NO to the Johnson Schumer budget deal. . . . So much for the power of the purse!”

Johnson tried and failed to win over extremists with a promise that he would “fight for the important policy riders included in our House FY24 bills.” Those riders would be the poison pills to restrict abortion and gender-affirming health care, and to ban books in libraries in military base schools.

The Freedom Caucus crowd probably is smart enough to comprehend that’s an empty promise because the only way that this agreement can be turned into passed funding bills is without those riders—after all, the bills must pass with Democratic votes. Also, Democratic leaders in the Senate and House promised “full-year appropriations bills, free of poison pill policy changes.”

The announced agreement sets aside the ongoing fight over border security and Ukraine funding, which is just another point of contention for the Republican maniacs. A good chunk of them (including some of the eight who ousted McCarthy) want to shut the government down over the border. “No more money for his bureaucracy until you’ve brought this border under control,” Arizona Rep. Andy Biggs declared. That group includes Judiciary Chair Jim Jordan of Ohio, who has tied funding the government to shutting down the border.

The timeline, the border, and the extremely thin GOP majority in the House (made even smaller by the absence of Majority Leader Steve Scalise for cancer treatment) all combine to set Johnson up for potential failure. If he caters to his

extremists, the government shuts down and the blame will be squarely on him and his inability to lead.

Alternatively, he navigates all this successfully and the government stays open and an enraged Freedom Caucus has more incentive to remove him. They’re already complaining that they booted McCarthy and still “failed to get a more conservative speaker.” Don’t be surprised if there’s more speaker drama in the year ahead, which would be fine, just as long as the government gets funded. It would make for a deliciously entertaining election year.

HOUSE GOP DISMISSES DEMS’ FINDING THAT TRUMP GOT \$7.8M+ FROM FOREIGN GOVERNMENTS WHILE IN WHITE HOUSE. A report released Thursday by Democrats on the House Oversight Committee estimates that former President Donald Trump’s businesses received at least \$7.8 million from foreign governments during his four years in the White House, payments that appear to violate the Constitution’s Foreign Emoluments Clause—which Trump once dismissed as “phony.”

Titled “White House for Sale: How Princes, Prime Ministers, and Premiers Paid Off President Trump,” the 156-page report uses documents from Trump’s former accounting firm to show that businesses owned by the former president received payments from at least 20 foreign governments during his White House tenure, including over \$5.5 million from China, \$615,422 from Saudi Arabia, \$465,744 from Qatar, and \$303,372 from Kuwait, Jake Johnson noted at CommonDreams (1/4).

Given that the documents underlying the report only cover payments to four of the more than 500 businesses Trump owned while simultaneously serving as president, the estimated \$7.8 mil-

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FROMA HARROP



California has lost population in the last three years, while Texas and Florida are growing. But losing population is not always bad and growth creates problems.

Sorry, Haters. California is Doing Just Fine

There’s a neurotic need in the right-leaning media to declare that California is going down. The future belongs to Texas and Florida, where “woke” is a discouraging word — and climate change is somebody else’s problem, if it is a problem. California has lost population in each of the last three years, while Texas and Florida are growing fast. The “story” is that

high taxes are driving the rich out of California. And it’s true that some high-profile California magnates have left for Texas and Florida, neither of which tax income. But that’s only a piece of the truth. The number of millionaires in California is actually surging as global wealth continues to flood into the Golden State, according to Bloomberg News. From 2019 through 2021, California’s population of millionaire taxpayers has grown by 116,000. The number of residents pulling in more than \$50 million surged 158% to 3,182! Nonetheless, every time a company moves from California to Texas, Gov. Greg Abbott crows that his state’s lower taxes and laxer environmental laws are draining California’s economic might. Texas does regulate businesses with a light touch. Different story if you have a woman’s body. Same goes for Florida, which, like Texas, has virtually banned abortion. Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis has made a specialty of attacking local businesses for oddball reasons. He pushed through a law forbidding employers to require proof of vaccinations from their workers. And he reserves special punishments for Disney, his state’s largest private employer, for daring to disagree with him on gay rights.

A Prayer to Toribio

By ART CULLEN

Dear Toribio Romo, We think you’re out there somewhere, in a red pickup where water pours from an apparent mirage in the Sonoran desert. People have told us you directed them here. They wear your picture on medals and scapulars with those piercing blue eyes that met those of the soldiers who murdered you in the Cristeros War for being a priest, playwright and patriot. You exhorted the young men of the Los Altos region of Jalisco to stay home and fight for freedom in the wake of the Mexican Revolution, until the government came to muzzle you in Tequila at the close of the 1920s. They say you kept on. That you are keeping on. That you continue to guide people to safety. You and Our Lady of Guadalupe, who appeared to the least among us, Juan Diego, and she insisted that he make those high-minded bishops take him seriously. He had to make roses grow in snow. Just a couple weeks ago, the people who believe danced the story right into the church that bears her name. We were cooped up at home on Christmas with COVID while Clarence made a visit upon George Bailey. A lot of people believe in some spirit riding shotgun in their

lives. We have no other explanation why we lived to tell about it but for Uncle Joe Cullen watching over us. We are Irish, raised to respect such possibilities. Ours came over on cattle boats. Someone was riding on Biddy Mulroney’s shoulder in steerage from Kilkenny so she could watch Chicago burn. (They blamed the fire on the Irish immigrants, of course, not that Chicago was built of sticks.) So we have an inclination toward the mystical and a disposition for the immigrant because they built this country after we stole it from the likes of Juan Diego, who had just been minding his own business. Exhausted from holiday movies and bad football, we turned to the Panic News Channel. Immigrants are flooding the USA. Joe Biden doesn’t know what to do. Donald Trump would only make it worse. People are dying. Children are suffering. Politicians go with their armed guards to the border to talk tough while babies sleep in a tent city at Juarez. But for the grace of God it could have been that cute kid from El Salvador next door. Where was the grace of God for the one who didn’t make it? We thought a lot about how we need you right now. For mercy and guidance. Mercy for those who drew the short straw, guidance for those of us who are trying to do what’s right. The same forces that drove you to write your play, “Go North!,” which drew

Losing population is not always a bad thing. The raps against California include the high cost of housing and brutal traffic. Fewer people means less competition for real estate and fewer cars on the road. Meanwhile, the cost of housing in Austin and Miami has shot skyward. With 39 million people, California still has 10 million more residents than does Texas, the second most populous state — not that this should matter on the individual level. What does the population race have to do with the quality of life? That’s not to say all is nifty in California. The Californians going elsewhere tend to be middle-class or poor. Many end up in next-door Arizona or Nevada. The result has been a growing and concerning disparity in wealth. California still has nice weather and, for those who care about show business, Hollywood. But its great draw is brain power supported by top universities and the tech magnet of Silicon Valley. Right-wing politics can turn off rich people more than low taxes turn them on. Dave Nixon of the Patriotic Millionaires, a group of well-to-do business leaders who advocate for “fair” taxation, moved back to California in 2022 after selling his St. Pete Beach home

in Florida. San Francisco Mayor London Breed said she knows “several” people who recently returned from Austin for similar reasons. This is clearly anecdotal evidence, but one can believe that a sharp right turn in local politics could get some former Californians down. There’s no point, though, in playing one cultural preference against another. People may go to Florida or Texas — or stay in California — for different reasons. And even some progressive-minded people dislike some of the silly woke stuff or flashy esthetics coming out of Southern California. They would include liberals in Washington state. But suffice it to say, California’s economy is doing just fine. A new members-only club demanding initiation fees as high as \$100,000 is opening in San Francisco. Core’s backers are assuming that the city’s stressed downtown will be coming back. “If people were telling us, ‘I’m planning my exit,’” a club spokeswoman said. “We wouldn’t come here.”

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the government’s aim, remain at play: oppression by government and gangs, guns made north of the border, extreme poverty and racism toward the indigenous. (“They’re poisoning our blood,” Donald Trump repeats.) Mercy should be our instinct and freedom must be our guide. They are coming to escape authoritarian governments. They flee gang violence inspired by our demand for opiates seeded by US pharmaceutical companies. Help us recognize what the root causes are. The closer you get to the equator, the tougher it gets to survive. It’s going to get pretty tough south of Kanas City in a bit. Climate change is driving migration as drought starves peasants in nations built on plantation economies. Leaders of nations will pledge to work together, to build more walls among people and soldiers to guard them. It may bring order but not justice. Isn’t that what you were, or are, about? This is not a challenge but a cry for help in opening eyes and hearts in a season devoted to a poor family in transit amid a despotic system. We are not religious in a hierarchical sense. Neither was Our Lady. She did not appear to a prelate or politician but to a campesino like you. The point of it was peace. Millions of men with her image on their backs cannot be that wrong. Keep us on the right path, Padre. We need you about

now. There are deserts all over the place where people need to see a friend in a cowboy hat who can talk sense. We were all born with inalienable rights. That is what you were preaching during the revolution. So were Zapata and Mart on the battle fields, and Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta in the produce fields, and so were Jefferson and Franklin. We need to hear it now. We don’t know much about prayer, honestly. It’s more effective than cursing into a December rain. What we do know, for sure, is that when you set your mind to what is real and right — and who do we think we are to declare that you are not out there? — that we can make roses grow in snow. That’s our entreaty on this Fifth Day of Christmas. The Epiphany, curiously on the calendar for Jan. 6, is upon us. That’s when the Wise Men show up. Remind us all. The fight for freedom never ends. That’s it. Thanks for listening. Our regards to all the saints. Especially Uncle Joe. Amen.

Art Cullen is publisher and editor of the Storm Lake Times Pilot in northwest Iowa (stormlake.com). He won the Pulitzer Prize for editorial writing in 2017 and is author of the book “Storm Lake: A Chronicle of Change, Resilience, and Hope from America’s Heartland.” Email times@stormlake.com.

Doubling Down on Death, Taxes, and Crop Insurance

By ALAN GUEBERT

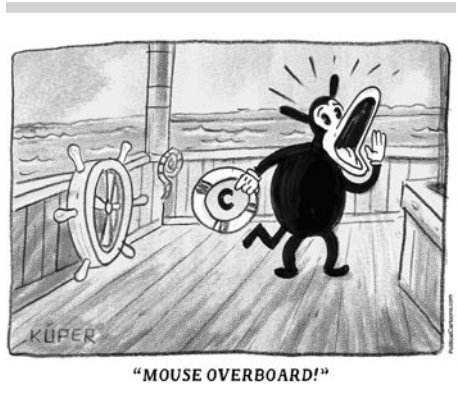
Founding father Benjamin Franklin was spot-on almost three centuries ago when he noted—in print, no less—that two unavoidable facts of life were death and taxes. Had Ben been in the “Almanack” business today, he might add two, more modern facts of American life to his list: farmers and ranchers’ growing dependency on crop insurance and the growing taxpayer concerns about the increasing cost of that dependency. Congress’s non-partisan watchdog, the Government Accountability Office (GAO), put hard numbers on the widespread use of today’s federal crop insurance program, its rising costs, and where most of the federal subsidies wind up. The findings were shocking to taxpayers who, like almost every American outside working farmers and ranchers, have no clue of the program’s growth, functions, and costs. For example, explained the Environmental Working Group (EWG), one of crop insurance’s long-time critics, “The top 1% of crop insurance policyholders, farmers with the highest incomes, got over \$2.5 billion in premium subsidies in 2022 — an average of

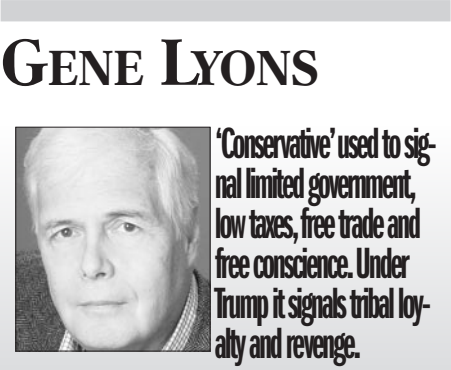
almost \$500,000 per farm.” By any standard, that’s an incredible sweetener to entice already well-heeled farmers to use a revenue-insuring program many would join anyway because of lender or market pressure. GAO acknowledges as much, noting that shaving 15% off government subsidies to this group would have “minimal effects on participation ... and the program’s financial soundness.” Without simple fixes such as a graduated subsidy rate based on farm size, says EWG, in 2022 the “19 largest policyholders each received more than \$3 million in subsidies, with the recipient who received the most taking in \$7.7 million ...” These subsidies aren’t chickenfeed: “In 2022, subsidies averaged about 62% of policyholders’ premiums and totaled \$12 billion,” explained the GAO, “comprising the largest portion of the program’s total cost of \$17.3 billion.” Policyholders aren’t the only players in this federal crop—really revenue—insurance program to receive hefty subsidies to participate. The insurance companies hired by the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) to deliver the program continue to reel in whopper dollars, too. In fact, one-third of the program’s annual cost, calculates EWG, “or about \$3 billion per year, goes to insurance companies instead of farmers. This money,” it continues, “goes to just 13 companies, nine of which are publicly traded corporations,

worth billions of dollars, whose CEOs make millions of dollars every year.” Reforming crop insurance, the centerpiece of today’s federal farm program and the still-overdue 2023 Farm Bill, seems impossible. Pressure from farm groups, Big Agbiz, and insurance companies keeps Congress on its back foot whenever talk of examining and updating the aging, bloated, and deeply arcane program begins on Capitol Hill. Worse, Republicans on the House Ag Committee now are using the Farm Bill delay to advocate for an expanded—but still unreformed—crop insurance program that would send even more subsidies, say critics, to even more wealthy farmers. For example, reports AgriPulse, a well-sourced ag news service, “Lawmakers are looking at boosting subsidies for supplemental, area-based crop insurance policies to induce growers to buy higher levels of coverage, which could potentially reduce the demand from farm groups for ad hoc disaster assistance.” Did you catch all the certain-to-cost-more words in that sentence: “boosting subsidies,” “supplemental policies,” and “induce” compared to the single cost-saving hope of “potentially reduce ad hoc disaster ...”? More to the point, AgriPulse continues, “Economists say the expanded ... coverage could particularly benefit farmers during periods of relatively high prices and input costs when farmers are unlikely to get payments

from two [of the biggest crop insurance] programs, Price Loss Coverage and Agriculture Risk Coverage.” In short, today’s call to expand crop insurance in the face of new efforts to reform it is just like death and taxes: No matter the circumstances, it’s inevitable.

Alan Guebert is an agricultural journalist who was raised on an Illinois dairy farm and worked as a writer and senior editor at Professional Farmers of America and Successful Farming magazine and is now a contributing editor to Farm Journal magazine. Guebert and his daughter Mary Grace Foxwell co-wrote “The Land of Milk and Uncle Honey: Memories from the Farm of My Youth” [University of Illinois Press, 2015]. See past columns, supporting documents, and contact information at farmandfoodfile.com





Fundamentalism and Donald Trump

Donald Trump’s MAGA movement is fundamentalist at its core — with fundamentalism being understood as a psychological rather than a religious concept. Pretty much every large-scale public movement, secular or sacred, has its share of extremists, and as the religious columnist Paul Prather has argued: “Remove the labels, close your eyes and quickly the fundamentalists in one group start sounding uncannily like the fundamentalists in all other groups, as if they were reading from the same script.”

It’s another word for fanatic. Most Trumpists call themselves “conservative,” which used to signify a belief in limited government, low taxes, free trade and freedom of conscience, but which under Trump signals tribal loyalty and revenge. This explains what some see as the central paradox of the MAGA movement:

that a congenital braggart who embodies what Christianity has traditionally called the seven deadly sins — greed, lust, envy, sloth, gluttony, pride and wrath — has come to seem the totem of faith for millions of Republican evangelicals.

Trump spent Christmas Day typing up and posting laments and threats in ALL CAPS on his Truth Social, targeting “JOE BIDEN’S MISFITS & THUGS, LIKE DERANGED JACK SMITH.” They’re “COMING AFTER ME,” he warned, “AT LEVELS OF PERSECUTION NEVER SEEN BEFORE IN OUR COUNTRY??? ... looking to destroy our once great USA. MAY THEY ROT IN HELL. AGAIN, MERRY CHRISTMAS!”

A bit lacking in the spirit of the holiday, some would say. Not to mention he’s the world’s biggest crybaby.

But they would be wrong, the MAGA faithful would insist. George Orwell captured the essence of the whiny strongman in reviewing the British edition of Adolf Hitler’s “Mein Kampf” way back in 1940, after the German dictator had driven Germany to war, but before it was clear that he had doomed his country to catastrophe.

Hitler, Orwell wrote, “knows that human beings don’t only want comfort, safety, [and] short working-hours ... they also, at least intermittently, want struggle and self-sacrifice, not to mention drums, flags and loyalty-parades.”

Orwell understood fascism’s appeal to an aggrieved population. While European and North American democracies, he wrote, told people in effect that “I offer you

a good time,’ Hitler has said to them, ‘I offer you struggle, danger and death,’ and as a result a whole nation flings itself at his feet.”

Orwell also understood the personal psychology of the crybaby conqueror: “The initial, personal cause of [Hitler’s] grievance against the universe can only be guessed at; but at any rate the grievance is here. He is the martyr, the victim, Prometheus chained to the rock, the self-sacrificing hero who fights single-handed against impossible odds. If he were killing a mouse he would know how to make it seem like a dragon.”

Sound like anybody we know? That said, I do believe Trump when he says he never read “Mein Kampf.” Too long, too many big words. Trump never learned anything from a book. He stole his whole act from 1950s professional wrestlers at Sunnyside Gardens in Queens — specifically from Dr. Jerry Graham, who swaggered around boasting that “I have the body men fear and women adore.”

The hairstyle, too — a bleach blond pompadour that taught a generation of wrestling fans how a “heel” behaved — that is, basically like a cartoon Nazi. Graham was a masterful showman who aroused thousands to frenzy with balsa wood chairs and fake blood capsules. He was as fat as Trump, too, although there was muscle under the lard.

Likewise, Trump needed no books to absorb the lesson that nonwhite immigrants are “vermin” poisoning the nation’s blood, or that (White) people in Minnesota, as he assured an audience there the other day, are genetically superior. He learned those things at his slumlord father’s knee. Fred

Trump was arrested at a Ku Klux Klan march through Queens some years before The Donald was born. This business about racehorse genes is straight KKK dogma. It’s always appealed to people who fear outsiders.

But back to the great man’s hypnotized fanbase. Prather credits David French with defining fundamentalism’s essential nature. French argues that whether religious or political, all fundamentalist cultures exhibit “three key traits: certainty, ferocity and solidarity.” He says certainty is the key to the other two traits.

“The fundamentalist mind isn’t clouded by doubt,” French has written. “In fact, when people are fully captured by the fundamentalist mind-set, they often can’t even conceive of good-faith disagreement. To fundamentalists, their opponents aren’t just wrong but evil. Critics are derided as weak or cowards or grifters. Only a grave moral defect can explain the failure to agree.”

Doubters should see this column’s e-mail feed, although I must say the Trumpist faction has been relatively restrained of late. Maybe they’ve given up on me, or maybe reality has begun to creep in at the edges.

One way or another, fundamentalist cults always implode; often violently, but sometimes not.

Gene Lyons of Little Rock, Ark., is co-author of “The Hunting of the President” [St. Martin’s Press, 2000] and received the National Magazine Award in 1980 for reporting in Texas Monthly. Email eugenelyons2@yahoo.com.

Celebrating the Resilience of Low-Income Women

I’ve spent the last few years working with poor people advocating for change. Seeing their resilience firsthand, I feel hopeful.

By KAREN DOLAN

It’s been a difficult few years for poor people in this country. Just a year after the pandemic era safety net expansion saw poverty fall to its lowest level on record, we saw a historic 60% increase as those programs expired.

Women and children have been among the hardest hit. In 2022, the last year we have data for, at least 32 million women and children were living in poverty.

Despite that hardship, I feel some hope. That’s because I’ve spent the last few years working with poor and low-income people — mostly single moms — impacted by systemic poverty. Through helping them

tell their stories, I’ve learned that they’re some of the strongest — and most resilient — members of our society.

Take Amy Adams from rural Kentucky. She has two associate degrees. Yet with a dearth of child care options, no public transit, and wages too low to afford even a second bedroom, her daily challenges are astounding. She walks to and from work late at night, depends on family for child care, and somehow fits her family of four into a small one-bedroom apartment.

Despite these challenges, Amy still gives her time as a member of a non-profit advocacy board to help other struggling mothers fight for policies that will improve their lives.

Or Joyce Kendrick. Joyce grew up in a middle-income family but suffered abuse as a child that led to lifelong physical and mental health challenges. The increase in food benefits and cash assistance during the pandemic briefly lifted her out of poverty. But when Congress failed to renew those critical supports, she fell right back in.

Yet even as she struggles to make ends meet, Joyce co-leads an Ohio chapter of the Poor People’s Campaign, a national coalition of poor and low-income people working together for more just policies.

Growing up poor and escaping an abusive partner later in life, Trish Brown has benefited from safety net support not only to take care of her family, but also her community. She volunteers as a coordinating committee member of the Poor People’s Campaign in Florida and gives back as the founder and director of Power Up People in Tallahassee.

Wisconsin mom Kali Daugherty’s family was transformed by the expanded Child Tax Credit included in the American Rescue Plan, which cut child poverty by half nationally. With that help, she was able to return to school, get her child new clothes, and take her to a water park for the first time. When Congress let that expansion expire and these advances for families were reversed, Kali advocated for their return as a RESULTS expert on poverty.

Kazmyn Ramos, another RESULTS expert on poverty in Indiana, learned through generational poverty how key housing is to well-being. Believing that “housing should be seen as a human right and a community builder, not a wealth builder,” she founded the affordable housing non-profit Seeking 1610.

My organization, the Institute for Policy Studies, partnered with the Poor Peo-

ple’s Campaign to study the increase in suffering since the expiration of the pandemic era supports that helped these women keep their families heads above water.

Alongside increases in poverty, we found increases in food and housing insecurity, the loss of critical health care, and declines in life expectancy — even as billionaire wealth nationally grew by \$2 billion a day between 2020 and 2022. It’s clearer than ever that poverty is a policy choice.

But that means we can choose differently. Amy, Joyce, Trish, Kali, and Kazmyn are just a few of the millions of poor and low-income women leading the way against these systemic policy failures that impact all of us. We need to join them and demand our nation make the investments to end structural poverty.

We know what works. Collectively, we have a voice powerful enough to make it happen.

Karen Dolan directs the Criminalization of Race and Poverty Project at the Institute for Policy Studies. This was distributed by OtherWords.org.

Only One Poll Mattered in 2023

By JOHN YOUNG

For one who labored decades in the land of ink stains and deadlines, the dying days of December are a good time not to be there.

Not because of the industry’s struggles or the issues of the day.

It’s because of the annual waste of space on the “Top Stories of (insert year).”

Yes, let’s identify the most overplayed stories of the past year and overplay them further.

Let’s identify the personalities who got too much attention (“Person of the Year”) and give them more.

That’s not to say that the rest of a year’s news cycle is driven by pithy, impactful pertinence.

No. a lot of it is putrid pabulum.

If anything deserves a magazine cover for 2023, it is the “Stupidest Question of the Year.”

That stupid question, asked over and over and over, was, “How will the latest

legal perils affect Donald Trump politically?”

Insert: “latest revelation about fake electors,” “latest evidence of bullying election officials,” “latest state to toss Trump from the ballot,” “latest defamation judgment,” “latest civil fraud determination,” “latest Hitler appropriation.”

We know the answer to each. Stop asking it.

Trump’s base is as thick and impenetrable as toenail fungus. Sadly, it also is part of the body politic.

Every time one sees a too-early presidential poll, think of toenail gunk and cast your sights north of the ankles.

Fortunately, most voters don’t have calcified minds.

That’s why polls a year away from an election are way beyond dubious. So much can happen. For the Republican front-runner, that can include conviction on any one of 91 felony charges.

That’s why only one poll mattered in 2023, and it was the one that found the majority of Americans, including a whole bunch of Republicans, think Donald Trump is in a heap of trouble.

They don’t believe Trump’s legal problems are the result of a partisan “witch hunt.”

They don’t believe this is all because the “deep state” has it out for him.

They believe Trump has put his political career and his freedom in jeopardy.

They believe him to be unfit for any political office, just like the 14th Amendment commands.

An October *New York Times*/Siena College poll finds that a Trump felony would trigger a 14-point shift to Biden in swing states in an otherwise tight race.

A December *Times*/Siena poll found a comparable effect including the fact that nearly a third of Republicans would reject him if convicted.

So much for the robot wannabes on the GOP primary stage who said they’d support Trump even if the hammer of justice came down.

But there’s more: As former prosecutor Joyce Vance observes, these polls point to a “more compelling conclusion,” that felony trials alone — conviction or no — are going to be poison for Trump, even among a number of Republicans.

“A jury’s verdict isn’t the only kind of proof that can convince people to reject Trump’s candidacy,” she writes.

Fully digesting the indictments and evidence presented, she writes, will persuade

decisive numbers of voters that they are dealing with a highly suspect man and a highly suspect tan.

Of course, “the base” will hear nothing of this, relying as it does on the Fox Propaganda Channel and other right-wing media.

The base will just get harder and crustier.

Meanwhile, Joe Biden will remind voters that it is he who cares about health care, about student debt, about drug prices, about climate change, about women’s reproductive freedom.

Biden will remind voters that he got a bipartisan coalition to authorize a massive infrastructure package in contrast to the “Infrastructure Week” running gag of the Trump presidency.

Biden will remind voters that the US unemployment rate is at a 54-year low, and that inflation — 9.1% two years ago — is 3.14% as an election year commences.

These are things to report, along with the fact that Donald Trump is doing his damndest to forestall his Judgment Day.

John Young is a longtime Texas newspaperman who now lives in Fort Collins, Colo. Email jyoungcolumn@gmail.com. See johnyoungcolumn.com.

Cover Story...
Continued from page one

6:30 p.m. Oct. 12 after visiting family in Juárez, across the Rio Grande. They returned via the Santa Teresa port of entry in New Mexico, just outside the El Paso city limits.

Shortly after they crossed the Texas state line on Artcraft Road, Ayala said their car was boxed in by two vehicles without law enforcement markings. He said they didn't turn on lights and sirens during the forced stop.

"The vehicle in front kept slowing down, slowing down, slowing down. All of a sudden, this vehicle rams us from behind, pushes us into the other vehicle. The other vehicle puts his car, his truck, into reverse and actually reverses into us," Ayala said.

At first, he and his wife say they thought there was a chain reaction pile up on busy Artcraft Road as they approached Interstate 10.

But then, several men with weapons rushed their car yelling, according to Ayala and his wife. He says at least four men wearing street clothes and tactical vests quickly surrounded the car and pointed semi-automatic rifles at them. His wife Alejandra Lopez, 36, said she feared for her family's safety.

"When they started coming out with their guns, the first thing I did was look back to my daughter and my mom," Lopez said. "I mean, they were the first thing I thought about. I saw her little face scared. I had never seen her face so scared."

Ayala said: "They came in charging. I mean, they looked like furious bulls com-

ing at us. As soon as I opened the door and I told them this is just me and my family, their faces just changed drastically."

He said a DPS supervisor on the scene told Ayala their car was similar to one they had been tracking as part of an investigation.

"DPS approached me, they actually told me this was a mistake. But nobody there actually came up and apologized, not one single person apologized," Ayala said.

Their car had minor damage in the front and rear.

The Ayala family wants their car repaired and medical expenses covered, including the cost of X-rays at a hospital the night they were hit. Ayala says his 67-year-old mother-in-law has lingering back pain and can't afford to keep seeing a doctor. So far, Ayala says, they've spent about \$3,000 on medical bills.

And they want an apology.

The family talked about their nightmare at their Westside home with lights twinkling on their Christmas tree and the family's small black and white dog Bonita, red ribbons in her hair, at their feet.

The Ayalas say there was no probable cause to pull them over, and certainly none to ram their car and threaten them with guns.

Their 13-year-old daughter says the experience has changed her view of law enforcement. "It was kind of traumatizing," Isabella Ayala said. "I don't feel safe anymore because they don't do their job correctly."

DPS said special agents in plainclothes and unmarked vehicles work in Northwest El Paso near the border, targeting smuggling rings as part of Operation Lone Star.

The area where the Ayalas were targeted has been the scene of numerous high speed chases involving Texas state troopers pursuing people suspected of transporting undocumented migrants.

Lopez says one of the law enforcement men on the scene asked her, "Haven't you seen the news of everything going on?" I took that as them excusing themselves, 'oh it was an accident; oops.'"

The DPS supervisor handed Ayala a small slip of paper notifying him that the vehicle that hit the family is owned by the Texas Department of Public Safety and "exempt from financial responsibility laws." It included an address to file a written claim.

Ayala says most of the law enforcement on the scene abruptly left without providing their names, including Border Patrol agents who he says told him they were not involved. Border Patrol officials referred media questions about the incident to DPS.

After getting medical attention, Ayala and his wife said they tried to document what happened, including damage to their vehicle, by filing a report with the El Paso Police Department at the Westside Regional Command Center around 11 p.m.

"They just completely refused. They said there were other (law enforcement) entities involved and they had nothing to do with it and they could not make a report. This happened on an El Paso street," Ayala said.

Lopez told an officer she had the license plate for the vehicle that reversed into her family car.

"Whoever it was, I think it is their duty to make the report. And I did have information and even then, they didn't want to

take the report," she said.

"We were the victims," Lopez said.

El Paso police spokesperson Adrian Cisneros said when law enforcement uses an intentional "tactic" to stop a vehicle, police cannot take an "accident report."

Additionally, he said El Paso police cannot "investigate other law enforcement agencies," and for that reason the officer at the police station that night instead referred the family back to DPS.

After his experience with DPS, Ayala said he's worried about how the new state law will affect others living in El Paso, where the vast majority of the population is Hispanic.

"I need them to be held responsible not just for our sake but for every individual in the city," he said.

It's not clear how often improper DPS stops happen along the border. DPS has a complaint process but does not specifically track whether they involved Operation Lone Star, according to the agency.

Fernando Garcia, executive director of the Border Network for Human Rights says the state's border crackdown is out of control. He and others have called on state lawmakers to provide oversight.

"They need to launch an investigation on the actual consequences of Operation Lone Star, on migrants dying, on US residents being abused, on wasting of money, on our taxpayer dollars," Garcia said.

Angela Kocherga is multimedia editor for El Paso Matters, where this appeared. She reports on both sides of the border for readers, viewers and public radio listeners. Email angelakocherga@gmail.com.

With Pandemic Funding Expired, Child Care Providers Seek Solutions to Shortages and Sticker Shock

One small community in Iowa could show the way forward, with a collaborative, community-driven model.

By ERIK RICHARDSON

Almost half the US population is struggling to find adequate access to child care, according to a report from the Center for American Progress, and the rate is closer to 60% in rural areas.

During the first two years of the pandemic almost 20,000 child care centers permanently closed — nearly one in 10. Many child care workers lost their jobs or left for better options, and while there has been some recovery, the industry still has approximately 40,000 fewer positions than it did in early 2020.

Congress set aside \$24 billion in stimulus funding specifically for child care, to shore up those workers' salaries, keep family costs low, and sustain industry training programs. However, that stimulus money expired at the end of September, and estimates of additional program closures are now as high as 70,000.

That would represent as many as one in three of remaining child care programs, providing care to some 3.2 million children, per a Century Foundation report. For a nation already struggling with child care shortages, the overall economic impact of that loss could amount to \$10.6 billion.

"We have to acknowledge that childcare has now become an essential part of workforce infrastructure," said Professor Chris Merrett, dean for Innovation and Economic Development at Western Illinois University and director of the Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs. "However, we are not treating it like infrastructure. That means that where it cannot be delivered at a profit, the private sector will not offer affordable, reliable childcare."

The Costs of Care

Experts, like Robin Phillips, CEO of Child Care Aware of Missouri, point to a number of possible solutions being explored by researchers. This includes government interventions, like more state and federal funding for early child care and education or child care subsidies for parents, as well as employer-led solutions, like on-site care, flexible work scheduling, or benefit accounts that can be used for dependent care.

Each of these strategies, as well as more creative ap-

proaches, bump up against the hard economics of the child care industry, where requirements are many and margins are razor thin. If programs had to sustain themselves only through direct revenue — in other words, charge families what it really costs to operate in line with licensing and safety standards, and to train and retain staff — the true cost would be even further out of reach for most parents.

Alternatively, providers can look for ways to cut costs, but there is little room to maneuver when essential labor makes up between 60% and 80% of the budget for typical providers, with standard staff-to-child ratios driving those costs. And that is in an industry where workers often earn less than \$16 per hour, lower than the average pay for fast-food cooks or janitors, with greater training requirements.

One can imagine the impact if parents had to pay the entire cost of their children's K-12 education, and that is for classrooms where it can work to have a 20-to-1 or even 30-to-1 student-to-teacher ratio. That becomes more severe when you look at the ratios required to provide a healthy, nurturing environment for toddlers (10-to-1) and infants (3-to-1).

This also highlights the limitations of one commonly proposed solution: increasing the availability of pre-K programs in public schools. As Phillips explained, that solution siphons off 3 and 4-year-olds, who have a larger staffing ratio, and leaves independent child care providers to stay afloat with only infants and toddlers, as the number of children per staff person shrinks significantly; meanwhile, the average staffing cost per child rises, and that doesn't even touch on the challenge of allocating overhead costs for a site with fewer children.

A Promising Model

In an environment where raising prices and cutting costs are both unworkable, the remaining alternative is to find other ways to shore up revenue. A surge in government funding offers one option there, but in the case of the pandemic era, a temporary one.

One promising solution might be found in Fairfield,

Iowa, a community of 9,416 people. In 2017, responding to a shortage of available day care, the Fairfield Economic Development Association, the Fairfield Community School District, Early Childhood Iowa, and Pathfinder RC&D (a non-profit focused on community development), formed a coalition with businesses from the area and began exploring possible pathways.

Together, they established a steering committee and launched a market study of the existing supply and demand for child care. The research showed the community had a shortage of just under 550 child care spots. This gap was fueling a number of issues, with about 70% of surveyed employers reporting productivity decreases due to absenteeism and 40% reporting trouble even hiring employees.

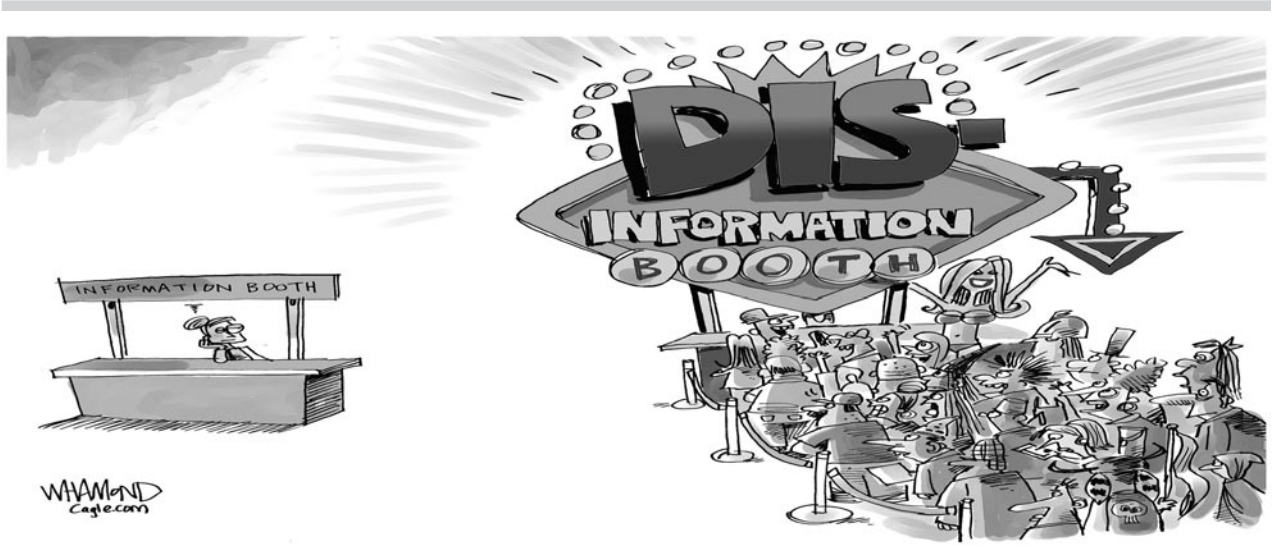
The coalition came up with a plan that combined grants, business contributions, and a \$4.8 million capital campaign. The hybrid funding model included incentives for home-based providers, help for existing child care centers to add new openings, and the design and build of a new child care center. In all, they were able to open almost 300 new spots.

Other small communities with similar child care shortages may not have all the expertise needed to run such a campaign or might lack support of such a broad coalition, but that makes what Fairfield learned and achieved all the more valuable.

"While this child care shortage is not unique to rural areas," says Merrett, the Western Illinois University professor, "because they have lower incomes in general, the market for private sector childcare is proportionately less likely to happen."

A collaborative paradigm, with businesses, schools, governments, and nonprofits working together to expand in-home and stand-alone child care, offers a scalable model for easing some shortages. These successes could also lay a foundation for expanding on such efforts going forward and renew dialogue about how to fund and support child care as critical infrastructure.

This article appeared in the Daily Yonder. See dailyyonder.com.



Happy New Year! Three Big Reasons Why We Can Plausibly Hope for a Sunny '24 Election.

By DICK POLMAN

Democrats have entered the hand-wringing phase of the election season, fretting about Joe Biden and poised to leap from their windows. But everyone needs to chill. I foresee many reasons why Uncle Joe is likely to defeat the worst excuse for a human being to ever fail upward.

Wow, *deja vu!* I wrote that opening paragraph way back on April 12, 2020.

The conventional wisdom at that time, the mainstream media's big meme, was that Biden was a shaky candidate with shaky prospects of beating Donald Trump. But I said that the old guy was being vastly underestimated – and I was proven right in November when he won all the swing states, plus Georgia and Arizona, and racked up more votes than any presidential candidate in history.

What I said in that April '20 opening paragraph is just as true now. I wouldn't change a word, for these three reasons:

Biden is the anti-fascism candidate. Trump's 2020 coup plot, his Jan. 6 incitements, and his current vows to end democracy as we know it, obviously play well with duh dolts in duh Republican base, but the

majority of the electorate refuses to swallow his criminal swill. President Biden says, "Our message (in 2024) is clear, and it is simple: We are running a campaign like the fate of our democracy depends on it. Because it does."

And Biden has the wind at his back. According to a newly-released national poll, most Americans, by a decisive margin of 56 to 33 percent, say that Trump is "definitely" or "probably" guilty of a crime in connection with the "illegal effort to overturn the 2020 election." Most Americans, by an even more decisive margin of 63 to 33 percent, say that Trump's Jan. 6 insurrection actions should either "disqualify" him from the presidency or, at minimum, "cast doubts on his fitness for the job." Indeed, according to a national poll last summer, even 45% of Republicans said they wouldn't vote for Trump if he's convicted of a crime prior to the election.

Biden is the abortion rights candidate. Trump committed political suicide by rigging the US Supreme Court with an anti-Roe majority, and Biden will relentlessly twist the knife. No other issue has inflamed the American mainstream more than the MAGA war on women's reproductive rights and privacy. Democrats reaped the rewards in the '22 midterm elections (despite conventional wisdom predictions of a "red wave," Republicans barely won the US House), and in a slew of '23 contests (including the Democrats' sweep of both Virginia state chambers, a solid Democratic gubernatorial win in Kentucky, and the decisive defeat of a six-week abortion ban on the ballot in red Ohio).

This year, Biden will rightly warn women voters that if Republicans win the presidency and both congressional cham-

bers, they'll push for a national abortion ban. Trump has cut and run on the national ban plan, but the forced-birth movement within the Republican base wants it bad. In a post-election memo, one vocal pressure group, Susan B. Anthony Pro-Life America, declared: "It is long past due for the GOP to define where it stands on the issue nationally ... The party must put real advertising dollars behind (a ban), going toe-to-toe with the Democrats." Keep it up, zealots. Biden will appreciate it.

Biden is the healthy economy candidate. Yeah, I know, millions of Americans don't think things are all that great, and Fox News in particular continues to feed the fiction that Biden is ruining us. But this year he'll have ample opportunities to share key facts with the majority of Americans who presumably still believe in facts. Like, the fact that gas prices at the pump continue to plunge. Like, the fact that the Dow is hitting record highs. Like, the fact that GDP growth hit 5.2% in the last quarter. Like, the fact that interest rates are projected to drop this year (thus helping more people to buy houses). Like, the fact that real wage growth is now higher than inflation. Like, the fact that the rate of Americans with health coverage is now (thanks to Obamacare) the highest ever recorded. Like, the fact that consumer confidence has been spiking lately. Like, the fact that Biden's numerous legislative achievements have created jobs, protected labor pensions, and generally improved millions of lives in real ways; starting this week, for instance, all the major insulin manufacturers are offering \$35-a-month caps on their products – an expansion of the caps that were previously reserved only for Medicare recipients, as mandated by Biden's Inflation Reduction Act.

This is called governing. It's not as exciting, as, say, threatening the lives of judges or smearing feces on Capitol walls, but governing for the common good still seems to me like a campaign asset.

Yeah, I know, the polls continue to claim that Biden and Trump are virtually tied. But as I recently detailed, it's a waste of time to take the public's pulse far in advance of election day. Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, and Barack Obama were all deemed to be in deep trouble on the eve of their re-election bids, and Democrats in particular are notorious for peeing their pants. What I see this year (barring some unforeseen event), is a president with a solid record of accomplishment facing off against a craven fascist with 91 felony changes and a track record as an adjudicated rapist, adjudicated fraudster, and adjudicated insurrectionist.

So get a grip, people. Skip the woe for Uncle Joe. (I also wrote that sentence in April '20.) Democratic strategist Simon Rosenberg, who virtually stood alone in 2022 when he presciently mocked the "red wave" meme, wisely wrote the other day that we ended 2023 "on an upbeat, optimistic note ... with momentum, in my view in a far better place than Republicans, who are, in just about every imaginable way, an historic sh*t show." And if, as I anticipate, the majority of voters in swing states cast their ballots for sanity, the forecast for America will be sunnier in '25.

Dick Polman, a veteran national political columnist based in Philadelphia and a Writer in Residence at the University of Pennsylvania, writes at DickPolman.net and is distributed by Cagle Cartoons newspaper syndicate. Email him at dickpolman7@gmail.com.

How the Trumps Indict Themselves

By JOE CONASON

The lesson to be learned from the latest revelations about former President Donald Trump's misuse of highly sensitive classified documents concerns the character of the former president and his cronies: They constantly accuse their political adversaries of the crimes and misdemeanors they have committed – or will perpetrate – themselves.

And the more information that is uncovered, the less culpable Trump's targets appear to be – while his own guilt, and the guilt of his associates, is established ever more firmly.

Nobody who has read the lengthy Florida indictment of Trump, which alleges more than 30 violations of the Espionage Act, can doubt his narcissistic attitude toward the protection of national security secrets. Nor is there any question that he repeatedly lied and conspired to conceal his violations of the law.

But where his behavior once seemed mysterious, we now can see at least one clear motive behind his bizarre and dan-

gerous conduct: the desire for revenge against everyone who had sought to uncover the truth about Russia's illegal support for his 2016 campaign. The "Crossfire Hurricane" folder that disappeared from the White House during the final days of his administration has never been located, which has raised grave alarm in the intelligence community over the potential exposure of sources and methods to our adversaries in the Kremlin.

It is no exaggeration to say that those concerns include the possibility that Trump himself might expose those sources to his friends in the Putin regime. His loyalty to the West is questionable and his debt to the Russian dictator is undeniable.

Yet as the underlying events of Crossfire Hurricane unfolded, Trump and his campaign were shrieking incessantly about Hillary Clinton's emails – urging federal authorities to "lock her up" for these supposed offenses against national security. The facts that have emerged since then have proved that the number of classified documents jeopardized by her actions amounted to exactly zero.

The same pattern of false accusation and true culpability applies to the Clinton and Trump foundations. In 2015, the far-right "strategist" and publisher Steve Bannon, who then became Trump's campaign

manager, launched a multimillion-dollar smear campaign against the Clinton Foundation that succeeded beyond his wildest dreams – including a ludicrously false accusation featured as an "investigation" on the front page of the *New York Times*. The real achievements of the Clinton Foundation in saving many millions of lives and stemming the AIDS epidemic were submerged beneath a sewage outflow of phony conspiracy claims.

Largely ignored amid Bannon's publicity jihad against the Clinton Foundation were the grotesque abuses of the Trump Foundation, which accomplished no good works and more closely resembled a racketeering conspiracy than a nonprofit charity. Trump's self-serving manipulation of nonprofit tax laws was both comical and shocking. And then a few years later, Bannon himself established an abusive nonprofit – "We Build the Wall" – from which he and his criminal confederates admittedly stole millions donated by naive conservatives. He's an unrepentant crook and may yet go to prison, despite the pardon bestowed on him by Trump.

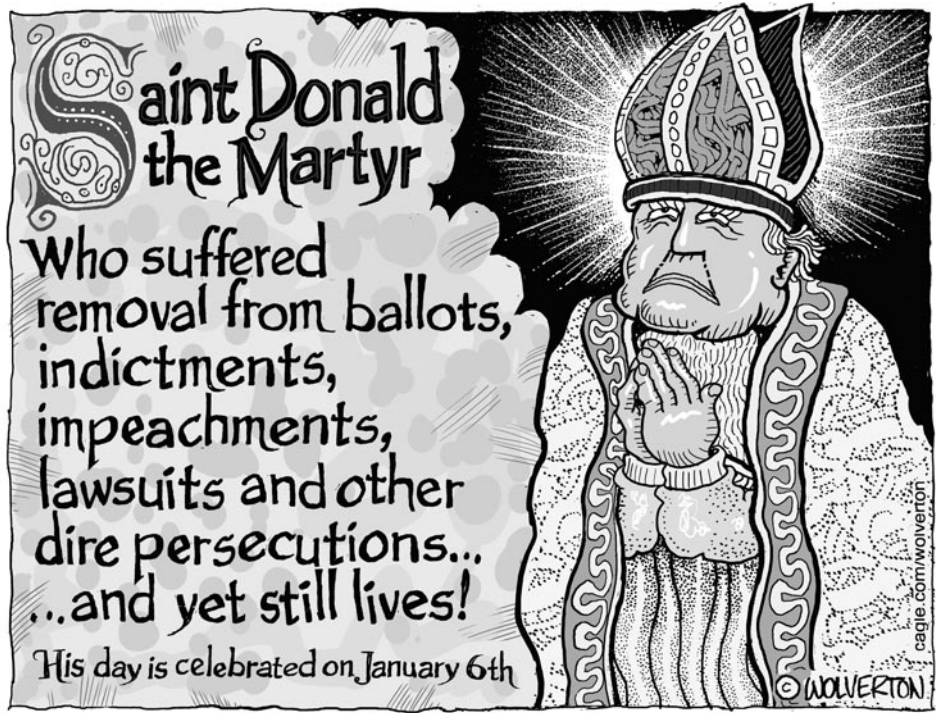
Making a hollow accusation to conceal suspicious behavior (or actual crimes) remains the modus operandi not only of Trump and Bannon, whose corruption is well established, but of the Republican

Party leadership they have suborned. That is why congressional Republicans have mounted a fake impeachment inquiry against President Joe Biden, despite the complete absence of any evidence that he profited from his son's foreign business dealings – or that those dealings had any effect on public policy while Biden served in the White House.

There is nothing to those charges, as the Republican investigators have inadvertently proved with their bumbling displays of malice. But several indiscreet politicians have disclosed the Biden impeachment's real purpose: to distract voters from the pending indictments against Trump – not to mention the massive profiteering by Trump, his daughter Ivanka and his son-in-law Jared Kushner during their years in the White House.

Every accusation they utter is an indictment of their own misconduct.

Joe Conason is the editor in chief of NationalMemo.com and author of several books, including (with Gene Lyons) "The Hunting of the President: The Ten-Year Campaign to Destroy Bill and Hillary Clinton" (St. Martin's Press, 2000). Conason co-produced a 2004 documentary film, "The Hunting of the President," based on the book.



Putting Money in Workers’ Pockets

By DAVID McCALL

Libbi Urban’s co-workers broke into applause at the union hall last year when they learned that their new contract with Cleveland-Cliffs not only increased wages by a whopping 20%, but provided greater work-life balance, and even enabled them to retire earlier than planned.

They’d spent years fighting for some of the improvements. But this time, they wielded extra bargaining power because of the hot economy that President Joe Biden engineered with bold investments and a deep commitment to working people.

Workers in aluminum, auto, steel, tire, mining, paper, heavy equipment, service, health care and package delivery, among other industries, all racked up historic contract gains as the economy exploded under the current administration.

Biden inherited a nation battered by COVID-19. But under his steady leadership, America turned the tide.

His Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) unleashed \$1.2 trillion to upgrade transportation, communications and energy networks with union labor and union-made materials and parts. His CHIPS and Science Act catalyzed billions more to boost production of semi-conductors and rebuild crucial supply chains.

“We came out of COVID. The demand for steel was picking up,” said Urban, a longtime vice president with United Steelworkers (USW) Local 9231 in New Carlisle, Ind., recalling the backdrop for negotiations with Cleveland-Cliffs.

“People were starting to buy and build. Everything hit just right for us,” continued Urban, one of 12,000 USW members in six states to benefit from the new contract.

The same scenario is playing out in one industry after

another.

Wages nationwide are now growing at a faster rate than they did in the years before the pandemic. They’re outpacing inflation, which under Biden’s careful handling has dropped for months in a row without triggering the recession doubters feared.

The nation’s unemployment rate soared to 14.7% during the early days of the pandemic, the highest level since the Great Depression. But it’s plummeted since Biden took the helm, registering just 3.7%—a historic low—in November.

“Figures don’t lie. They’re telling a very good story,” observed Urban, noting the low unemployment helps to drive workers’ bargaining power.

“You can set your price,” she explained.

Even better, employers keep adding to the 14 million jobs already created during the past three years—about 800,000 of them in manufacturing—as Bidenomics continues to spur growth and grow worker power.

Cory Small and his 315 co-workers at Green Bay Packaging in Morrilton, Ark., took note of the strong contracts negotiated by workers at other employers in recent years.

And they went into bargaining this year realizing that this was their moment, too, thanks to a growing economy that Small, president of USW Local 13-011965, likened to a “rocket out of a cannon.”

“This was not going to be just another round of negotiations,” recounted Small, stressing that workers sacrificed to continue producing corrugated containerboard—an essential packaging product—during COVID-19. “We were demanding much more than we had expected to get in the past. We went in with high expectations.”

In the end, workers exceeded those expectations, achieving a wage package 7% higher than in previous labor agreements. They also preserved affordable health care and enhanced retirement security, among other improvements.

“It was a major win,” said Small, a third-generation union member, noting the gains enable workers to better support their communities.

Empowering workers to bargain stronger contracts is just one example of how Biden has workers’ backs.

He shored up dozens of struggling multiemployer pension plans, saving the retirements of 1.3 million Americans. He thwarted Republicans’ plans to cut Social Security. He also capped seniors’ insulin expenses at \$35 a month and took other steps to bring down prescription drug costs.

Bill Alexander, president of Steelworkers Organization of Active Retirees (SOAR) Chapter 31-9 in Southeast Chicago, said one of his family members previously spent \$300 a month on insulin.

“Now, he pays \$35,” Alexander said, noting the lower costs helped his relative afford a new car. “He can buy other things with that money, things he can enjoy, other than spending it just to live.”

Biden also stood up to oil company gouging, helping Americans keep even more money in their pockets.

Gas prices, falling for months, cost an average of 30 cents a gallon less than they did at this time last year. Alexander now fills up for about \$2.79 a gallon in nearby Indiana.

“He’s doing everything he can to bring prices down,” Alexander said, citing Biden’s bold use of strategic oil reserves to stabilize the market.

Urban planned to work another couple of years. But she retired in April because of the big pension boost provided by her new union contract and Biden’s economy.

“He’s just an average Joe,” she said of Biden.

“He talks about how the working class built the country. If it weren’t for unions and people of labor doing what we’ve done all these years, the country wouldn’t be where it is now. Without us, there wouldn’t be a 1%. I think he’s trying to bring that back into focus.”

Urban intends to spend some of her free time as a political activist, communicating with voters about the importance of re-electing Biden and putting pro-worker Democrats back in charge of the House.

“A rising tide floats all boats,” she said. “It’s imperative that we make sure people know that the economy is going in the right direction and we’re making progress.”

David McCall is International President of United Steelworkers. See the blog at USW.org.

It’s 2024. Where’s the Party of the Working Class?

Is it possible to build a political party that truly speaks to the needs of working people in an era of runaway inequality and incessant mass layoffs?

By LES LEOPOLD

A quarter century ago, the late labor leader Tony Mazzocchi issued a dire warning. Unless a labor party was created, working people would abandon the Democrats and flock towards authoritarians who would promise job protections and economic stability. Mazzocchi found enormous resonance among workers when he declared, “The bosses have two parties. We need one of our own.”

That rings even more true today for many working-class people. But is it possible to build a political party that truly speaks to the needs of working people in an era of runaway inequality and incessant mass layoffs?

Because neither Mazzocchi nor other labor leaders wanted to create a spoiler party that would siphon off Democratic votes and elect Republicans, the idea never found a way to gain significant traction. But the opportunity to create a new party would be more likely if one of the two major parties imploded, which might be happening right now to the Republican Party as it wallows in the fantasy world of Trump’s election lies and conspiracies.

Liz Cheney, the former number-three ranking Republican leader in the House of Representatives and the daughter of George W. Bush’s vice president Dick Cheney, has impeccable conservative bona fides. But she no longer has a home in a party dominated by Trump acolytes. After voting to impeach President Trump and having co-chaired the January 6th congressional investigation, she lost her Wyoming seat in the House to a MAGA Republican.

Cheney is currently considering a third-party presidential run which, in effect, would create a second Republican Party. Because she sees Trump as a clear and present danger to democracy, she wants to

defeat him by denying him ‘moderate’ Republican votes. (These days the definition of a ‘moderate’ seems to be anyone who accepts that Joe Biden won the 2020 election.)

She is aware that her presidential run could launch a rival Republican party, but said, “I don’t know if our party can be saved. We may need to build a new party.” And so, it is conceivable we could soon have three major parties—the Democrats, the Trump Republicans, and the Cheney Republicans.

Which of these is the party of the working class?

Not the Cheney Republicans. Her party would draw the corporate never-Trumpers who also are fiscal conservatives, seeking to balance the federal budget and trim social welfare programs. These corporate Republicans would have little use for labor unions and labor law protections. They would stand in opposition to raising the minimum wage and would oppose facilitating union organizing. They would also likely advocate for an increase in the Social Security retirement age, which harms many in the working class who tend to die younger than higher-income people. As a result, it’s highly doubtful that Cheney and her backers would be able to attract much working-class support or that of any labor unions.

The Democrats might be feeling cocky from a Republican Party implosion. That should make it much easier for Democrats to retain working-class support. Then again, there is the risk that the Democrats might move even closer to Wall Street as the Cheney party becomes a serious competitor for the backing of wealthy financiers who are socially liberal and alienated by MAGA. Unlike the Democrats, Cheney wouldn’t have to straddle between supporting policies that enrich the well-to-do while also claiming to support the working-class.

Starting with Bill Clinton, the competition for Wall Street cash pulled the Democrats further away from the working class, who the Dems thought had no place else to go. It could happen again.

Moving even closer to Wall Street could compound the difficulties that the Democrats already have. Not only are white working-class voters moving away from the Democrats, but so are Black and Hispanic voters. Biden’s support among non-White voters has fallen from the 70 percent he received in 2020 against Trump, to 53 percent today. And the decline has been dramatic among non-White voters with no

college education and whose incomes are less than \$50,000 per year. Many of those voters are unlikely to rush toward the Trump or Cheney Republicans, but they might instead sit out the election, which would be enormously harmful to the Democrats.

This creates an opportunity for the Trump Republicans to draw working-class voters by focusing on job security. But the Republicans seem fixated on culture wars and therefore run the risk of alienating working-class people of all shades and ethnicities who have become more liberal since 2010 on key social issues, including immigration. The research done for my book, “Wall Street’s War on Workers,” strongly suggests that the number one working-class issue is job security, not critical race theory, not gendered bathrooms, or Mickey Mouse. Taking on corporate power has resonance, and for good reason. These workers have suffered through nearly 30 million mass layoffs since 1996.

Right-wing Republicans have made a handful of selective anti-corporate gestures. Sen. J.D. Vance (R-Ohio) is going after Silicon Valley corporations over privacy issues and wants to break them up. Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.) is pushing legislation to help shareholders change corporate woke policies. Sen. Josh Hawley (R-Mo.) even introduced a bill to get corporate money out of politics. Also, there are Republican attacks against corporations over diversity policies. There are attacks against corporate climate change-oriented investment policies, and even attacks against Disney for opposing legislation that would be harmful to the LGBTQ+ communities in Florida. But if you have had the stomach to listen to the Republican presidential debates you have heard the candidates competing to flash their anti-labor credentials, too.

It’s unlikely that the current flock of Trump Republicans will accelerate working-

class support. But that could change in a hurry if they dared to attack corporate mass layoffs, the way Trump did by successfully pressuring the Carrier Corporation to refrain from moving a facility from Indiana to Mexico in 2017.

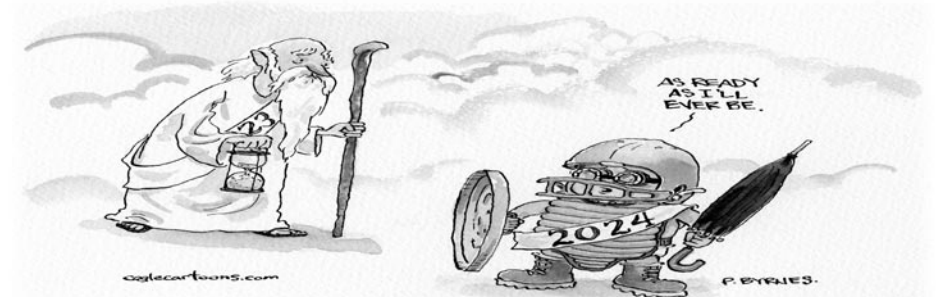
A much better outcome for the working class and the country would be for the Democratic Party to attack wasteful mass layoffs caused by stock buybacks and leveraged buyouts. When GM recently announced a \$10 billion stock buyback designed to please Wall Street, the Democrats were silent. They missed an opportunity to hold the company to account for enriching Wall Street instead of investing more in clean car research and development. Rather than compete with Tesla, the top officers and Wall Street hedge funds pocketed the money. Stock buybacks before 1982 were considered stock price manipulation. The Democrats should call for their elimination.

Allow me to walk out on a limb and make an early projection: The party with the nerve to take on Wall Street and fight against each and every mass layoff is likely to become the party of working people.

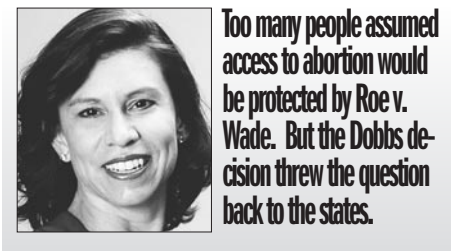
Having worked all my adult life in support of labor, it saddens me even to speculate about a battle for the allegiance of the working class between the corporate Democrats and the right-wing Republicans. It just shows how far the Democrats have drifted away from the real needs of working people.

And sadly, Tony Mazzocchi’s statement may soon need amending: “The bosses have three parties: we need one of our own.”

Les Leopold is the executive director of the Labor Institute and author of the forthcoming book “Wall Street’s War on Workers: How Mass Layoffs and Greed Are Destroying the Working Class and What to Do About It.”



MARY SANCHEZ



Abortion Wars of 2024 – Could Women Be Criminally Charged for Miscarrying?

Decades ago, the abortion debate often involved photos of bloodied fetuses paraded around on placards and plastered across the sides of over-the-road trucks by groups like Operation Rescue. The intention was to horrify. Revulsion was the goal. Developing fetuses, umbilical cord attached, covered in blood, were thought to be jarring images, enough to force pro-choice advocates to reconsider. Back then, too many people naively

assumed that access to abortion, under limited conditions, would be legally protected by the *Roe v. Wade* decision of 1973. Then came the US Supreme Court's *Dobbs v. Jackson* in 2022, a decision that removed federal protections, throwing the question of abortion's legality back to the states. And we've been digressing ever since, floundering to remain calm and reasonable as states decide where they stand legally. Too often, medical science is undercut by politics, by the same politically minded activists who once thought bloodied images of fetuses driven through city streets was a viable tactic. Here's an overlooked stat: As of 2020, the majority of abortions in the US – well over 50% – were carried out with a pill, by simply taking medication. Increasingly, there is no medical procedure akin to a surgery. Women seeking an abortion often follow a protocol of taking two different types of pills over several days. If done early, before 11 weeks, the pills are effective. Medication abortions have been available for more than 20 years as an FDA-approved method. The medications are not allowed, nor are they effective, far later in a pregnancy. This truth about how most abortions occur, however, doesn't hold the same ability to mortify, like a bloody fetus. There's no clinic, no sedation protocols, no doctor readily available to demonize. All of this is important to understand in the case of one young mother in Ohio. Brittany Watts, 33, miscarried at home in September, over the toilet. And yes, she probably panicked or was

too distraught to manage well what she did next. She later told a nurse that she'd put some of the discharge – blood, tissue, her own feces from the miscarriage – into a bucket outside of her home. Eventually, some of the remains of the 15-ounce fetus were found by police when they took the toilet apart to get into the plumbing. Watts was charged with a felony, abuse of a corpse. If found guilty, she could be imprisoned for up to a year. The charge underscores the idea of a fetus as a child, a baby, a life lost. And for the ghouls who prey on this type of thing to push their messaging, the fact that Watts wanted the child, that she didn't try to abort, doesn't seem to matter. There are no protocols for what to do if you miscarry at home. No one addresses such a terrifying scenario during a class on human development. Charging Watts with a crime is a disturbing precedent, implying that women can be judged as criminals if they fail to carry a child to term. The background here is important. Conservative legislatures, often dismissing science and the expertise of doctors, are rushing to create laws that they think will "protect babies and life." In November, voters in Ohio (where Watts resides) approved the right to an abortion within the state constitution. It's one of the states where people are pushing back, trying to reestablish reasonable standards for when abortion is allowed. Such standards should include the high percentages of miscarriages, especially early in pregnancy. But in September, when Watts began

hemorrhaging blood clots, and was in and out of the hospital for several days, her medical team hesitated. Because she was in her second trimester (about 22 weeks) the medical staff was concerned they could be charged with a crime. Up to 22 weeks is the cutoff for abortion in Ohio. The team had already determined that the pregnancy wasn't viable. And a later autopsy revealed that the fetus had died before Watts miscarried over the toilet. Social media has lit into the medical staff, critical of the delays that kept Watts from obtaining care. She left the hospital against the staff's advice, a decision that led to the miscarriage at home. But doctors, nurses and administrators now need to balance patient care against the prospect of being charged if they dare step too close to what legislators determine is criminal. The county prosecutor is being pressured to drop the ridiculous charge against Watts. And a grand jury is deciding whether to indict her. And the nation now has Watts as an example of legal overreach when medical expertise should have governed. We've circled back to macabre imagery to stake claims in the re-energized abortion wars. Delayed in this case is what should have been offered right away from the beginning: compassion and care for a grieving woman who miscarried. Mary Sanchez is a syndicated columnist for Tribune Content Agency, formerly with the **Kansas City Star**. Email msanchezcolumnn@gmail.com and follow on Twitter [@msanchezcolumnn](https://twitter.com/msanchezcolumnn).

Fake Generational Warfare A guide to the latest efforts to undermine trust in Social Security

By ROBERT KUTTNER

The effort to promote generational warfare against Social Security is on one of its periodic upswings. The granddaddy of this campaign was the late Peter G. Peterson. He spent decades and at least a billion dollars of his own fortune trying to persuade younger Americans that Social Security would not be there when they needed it, and that they'd be better off with personal accounts run by Wall Street. (Peterson had headed Lehman Brothers and later co-founded the Blackstone Group.) The latest entries in this never-ending propaganda campaign are an op-ed piece by former Sen. Phil Gramm and Mike Solon. Their title is a cheeky "Social Security

Was Doomed From the Start." For a doomed program, Social Security has done pretty well over its nearly 90 years, keeping hundreds of millions of elderly Americans out of poverty in old age. Gramm's story is that FDR's mistake was setting up Social Security as pay-as-you-go, in which one generation's payroll taxes pay for the previous generation's retirement. He's right that the program would be even stronger if it banked a large surplus, the income on which could partly pay the cost of Social Security checks. But the right way to fund that is by raising taxes on the rich. How about it, Phil? Another recent contribution to this crusade is a Dec. 18 piece in *Newsweek*, headlined "Young Americans Turn Against Boomers Over Social Security." *Newsweek* cites a poll that it commissioned. But the actual poll shows nothing of the sort. I quote: "According to the poll, 56 percent of Gen Zers, 76 percent of millennials and 69 percent of Gen Xers believed the system should be reformed, against 50 percent of boomers." But "the system should be reformed" could mean almost anything, from the kind of privatization long advocated by Peterson, Wall Street, and ideological opponents, to the kind of shoring up advocated by the likes of me. What gives the issue new resonance is that the trust funds will not be able to pay all of the benefits owed within a decade or two. We need to act soon, either by increasing the revenues to Social Security or reducing benefits. That's the real debate we should be having. Donald Trump, who is a psychopath but no fool, has avoided weighing in. What is true is that Americans of my generation got a much better economic deal than generations who came after. We had affordable homeownership, whose increase in equity over a lifetime gave us nest eggs for retirement. Half of us had real pension plans, as opposed to inadequate 401(k)s and the like. We were able to get college degrees without the burden of debt. Those of us without college had good unionized blue-collar jobs that provided a middle-class

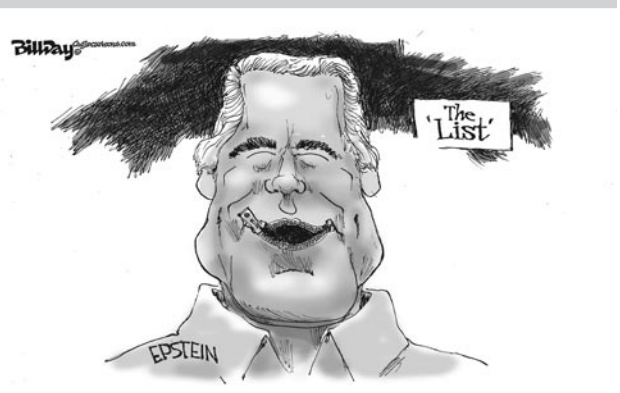
lifestyle, often on one income. Younger generations have every right to feel cheated. But contrary to the generational warfare fable, that rip-off was not the fault of boomers. It was the work of conservatives of all ages who denied younger Americans the secure social contract that my generation enjoyed. And contrary to the attacks on social insurance, Social Security is a relatively small part of that larger story. If we want to keep it strong for future generations, the path is to strengthen its finances, not to weaken its coverage. Social Security is more essential than ever, given the collapse of decent pension plans engineered by corporations and Wall Street, to transfer all the risk to workers and retirees. The real generational warfare is class warfare. Robert Kuttner is co-editor of *The American Prospect* (prospect.org) and professor at Brandeis University's Heller School. Like him on facebook.com/RobertKuttner and/or follow him at twitter.com/rkuttner.

2023 Review and 2024 Outlook for Earth By FRANK LINGO

After a hollow climate conference in Dubai, under whose sand lies a mother lode of fossil fuels, hope is hanging by a thread to reverse our climate crisis. The United States, whose President Biden has declared a climate emergency, produced a record level of oil and natural gas in 2023. Biden is seemingly suffering from schizophrenia, having approved the Willow drilling project in Alaska, and according to the *New York Times*, the Prez is considering approval of natural gas export terminals which would assure decades of producing methane, a potent cause of global warming. This all comes after Congress passed and Biden signed The Inflation Reduction Act in 2022, a bill with the most environmental provisions since the 1970s. It provides tax credits for buying electric cars which will reduce pollution. The IRA also commits \$60 billion to clean up toxic waste dumps and fight pollution in low-income areas, which have been long-neglected. Good luck reconciling these contradictions in old Joe Biden! A happy thing in 2023 was the court victory of a case brought by children and young adults against the state of Montana for promoting the use of fossil fuels, which harm them, instead of Montana following its duty by protecting them as the state constitution requires. California also brought suit against the big oil companies for downplaying the risks that global warming poses to the public. Whether or not these cases win after appeals, it's still a positive trend.

A scary prospect for the Earth in 2024 is Donald Trump getting elected President again. Authoritarians worldwide prefer profit over planet and Trump fits the mold. If he's re-elected, expect lax to zero enforcement of US environmental laws. Good-bye Endangered Species Act, good-bye Clean Water Act and Clean Air Act, good-bye environmental justice for people of color. Good-bye cooperation with other countries to reduce the climate crisis. In a desperate lunge for the positive, I clicked on happyconews.com. The site claims that the ocean itself could reduce the climate crisis causing the ocean temperatures to rise. Citing research from the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel On Climate Change (IPCC), the ocean can provide under-used methods like wind, waves, tidal, thermal and algae to deliver about 35% of the emission reductions required to meet the goal of holding global temp rise to 1.5 degrees Centigrade. All that it would take is leaders more concerned with the planet's health than with pleasing their rich supporters. Simple, right? The IPCC report lists ocean shipping with its massive use of fossil fuels that could be drastically reduced by using more efficient routing and methods. And the report cites over-fishing as a way that puts the seas out of balance with its natural process of carbon reduction and diminishes the production of oxygen for the atmosphere. So bringing the fishing down to safe sustainable levels would benefit the oceans and the Earth writ large. Another plus for the new year is battery technology rapidly improving for electric vehicles, including everything from lawn mowers (terrible polluters) to jet aircraft (also terrible polluters). Some cities are banning plastic bags and some stores are voluntarily leading the change to reusable

bags. Vegetarian alternatives are abounding to replace the cruel and carbon-heavy meat industry. Many people find them tasty and reasonably priced. The other day I had vegan eggs to make my omelette and I liked it. Such changes are little examples of how we all can help to lower the damage we're doing to our world. Macro changes like government and corporate policies matter greatly and we can influence those thru our votes and voices. Micro changes like our choices in food and fuel matter greatly also, and that puts us in the driver's seat as we steer into the new year. Frank Lingo, based in Lawrence, Kansas, is a former columnist for the **Kansas City Star** and author of the novel "Earth Vote." Email: lingofrank@gmail.com. See his website: Greenbeat.world



Why Don't Americans Know Who's Manipulating our Political System and Why?

The White Republican base has been so lied to and abused over the past 40 or so years that they've become easy marks for the predators in both big business and the GOP...

By THOM HARTMANN

While many trace the beginning of the modern rightwing fascist-friendly MAGA-type movement to the 1954 Brown v Board decision and the way it put the John Birch Society on steroids, another interesting origin story for today's GOP base is grounded in the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). In the years immediately leading up to the 1970 creation of the EPA, pollution in America had gotten so bad, it was impossible to ignore, and was quickly becoming a political issue. Rachel Carson had published "Silent Spring" in 1962, a book about how DDT was killing birds worldwide, that electrified Americans and launched the nation's first real environmental movement. The following year, smog killed 400 New Yorkers, and Lake Erie had largely died because it was so

polluted. In 1969, a spark from a passing train lit the Cuyahoga River on fire, and that same year a massive oil spill off the California coast covered over 400 square miles of beach and coastline with oil, killing thousands of birds and other wildlife. Car exhaust, scientists reported in 1969, was so severe it was causing birth defects and cancer. Major American cities like St. Louis smelled, as Time magazine reported at the time, "like an old-fashioned drugstore on fire." Richard Nixon, a canny politician who'd always had a pretty good take on the pulse of America, stepped up in 1969, creating the Environmental Quality Council. That was well received but didn't make a dent in the problem, so Nixon did what was probably the only good deed for America of his presidency and helped create the EPA in 1970. The wealthy oligarchs of American industry — particularly fossil fuel and chemical industry oligarchs — hated the EPA from the get-go. Environmental regulations cut into their profits, and they felt persecuted after generations of their predecessor fatcats had poured their poisons into our air and water without a peep from the government. It was almost as infuriating as having to pay a 74% income tax on everything they earned after their first \$3 million (in today's dollars). In response to public opinion, the sentiments of the morbidly rich back then went along the lines of, "So what if kids got cancer? We didn't live in the neighborhoods of our refineries and manufacturing facilities: Screw them! They should be happy we

keep them employed and shut up about all this hippy-dippy environment stuff!" Regulating polluting industries and fossil fuel emissions was all the rage in the 1970s, and people loved it. But the billionaires hated it. As the EPA historian noted, by the time Russell Train had become the EPA Administrator in 1973, they were starting to get organized and active: "During Train's tenure at EPA, clean air issues continued to cause contention between environmentalists and industry representatives. "The entire environmental program was under siege by the energy crowd. It was a major accomplishment that we were able to keep environmental programs on track," said Train. "Many efforts to trim EPA's authority — to kill requirements for tall stacks, to curtail efforts to prevent significant deterioration of air cleaner than national air quality standards, and the like — were beaten back." That was also the year that America's industrialists got serious about taking tobacco lawyer Lewis Powell's Memo's advice: the rich needed to step up and start buying off politicians and judges, seize control of the media, and use their endowments to stock universities with rightwing professors while pushing out the old-line liberals. They got a big boost in 1976 (Buckley) and 1978 (Bellotti) when five Republicans on the Supreme Court ruled that billionaires and corporations buying off politicians was no longer considered criminal bribery: from those years forward it was, instead, "Constitutionally protected First Amendment free speech" and corporations were no longer legal fictions but fully "persons" who

could claim protections under the Bill of (Human) Rights. Lewis Powell himself, in fact, wrote the 1978 Bellotti decision giving corporate "persons" — including foreign corporations — the right to pour unlimited amounts of "dark money" into political campaigns. (Five corrupt Republicans on the Court would double down on this in 2010 with Citizens United.) The fossil fuel billionaires, however, were still groaning under what seemed like an unending regulatory assault. The EPA was demanding that they clean up refineries that were spewing tons of cancer-causing benzene into the air, stop dumping radioactive and arsenic-containing coal tailings and drilling waste into rivers, and limit the exposure of workers. It was all too much. So the fossil fuel billionaires and their fellow travelers got organized. They set up and funded policy think-tanks in every state in the union, each one devoted to the two main goals of the billionaires who birthed them: deregulation and tax cuts. The challenge was convincing Americans that regulations were bad things, and that rich people should have their taxes cut from the 74% rate. That top tax bracket, after all, was the main thing preventing billionaires from grabbing all the money that was instead, then, going into the homes and pockets of unionized working-class people. The think tanks got to work, backstopping the GOP at every opportunity. Money flowed to Republican politicians, both state and federal. A small army of commentators was organized, some of them scientists and economists willing to go on-the-take, to con-

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Ukraine and the End of Magical Thinking

Time for reassessment and a change of course.

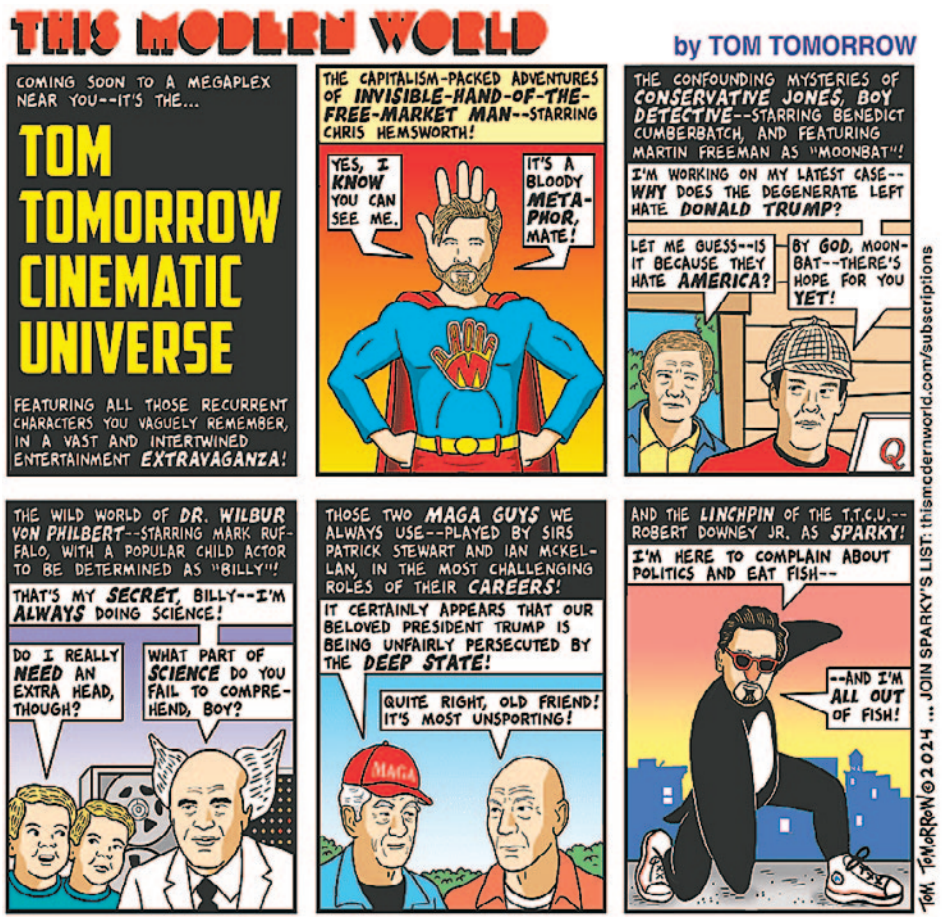
By KATRINA VANDEN HEUVEL

In early November, Ukraine's top general, Valerii Zaluzhnyi admitted that the war with Russia was at a stalemate. In December, Republicans in the US House of Representatives torpedoed the Biden administration's request for billions in new military assistance to Ukraine. At the European Union, Hungary vetoed desperately needed monetary assistance. President Biden's mantra that the allies would support Ukraine "as long as it takes" became a pledge to support the country "as long as we can." From Europe, a stalwart Ukraine supporter, Lithuania's Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis reported that "apparently as long as it takes means as long as we can agree." Clearly, the time of magical thinking is over. Ukraine's startling early success in repelling the Russian attempt to take Kiev produced widespread euphoria. Russia's military was exposed as incompetent and bumbling. The US mobilized its allies to provide arms and support and impose harsh sanctions on Putin. NATO was galvanized and expanded. Putin would be handed a defeat without NATO troop involvement. As the noxious Lindsay Graham put it, "Russians are dying" as Ukrainians fight "to the last person," so aid to Ukraine is "the best money we've ever spent." Sanctions would isolate and bankrupt Russia. China, Iran, North Korea and other adversaries would learn that aggression doesn't pay. Putin might even be deposed and hauled before the International Criminal Court. In little more than a year, the US alone rushed \$75 billion in largely military aid to Ukraine, a sum nearly as great as the entire annual Russian military budget. That was then. Now as another harsh winter descends, the much-ballyhooed Ukrainian "offensive" has failed. With China, India and much of the Global South stepping in, Russia's economy has rebounded from the sanctions. Putin has geared up for a long war. Ukraine, the second-largest country in Europe, is locked in a war of at-

trition with a country that is bigger, with more people, more troops, more artillery, and control of the air. The Pentagon, we're told, has plans to increase production of 155 million artillery shells from 30,000 per month to 90,000 or 100,000 in 2025. Russia is headed toward generating 2 million a year. Russia, according to a US intelligence estimate, lost a stunning 87% of its active-duty military in the first months of the war. But Ukraine's losses have been nearly as great and not as sustainable. It is running out of men, guns, and ammunition. Its economy is battered. Over 20% of its people have been displaced, including 6.3 million refugees. It is estimated that it will take 757 years to rid the country of the mines now strewn across the countryside. The price tag for rebuilding is estimated to be north of \$400 billion. With NATO at its side, Ukraine can possibly hold out. But the problem with a proxy war is that war fever is hard to sustain without lives at risk. The administration's sales pitch has grown more and more shrill—from "Russia will collapse quickly," to "using Ukraine to weaken Russia is a cheap investment," to "if Russia wins, US men and women will end up fighting them in Europe to aid to Ukraine is a job program at home," to (as former Trump national security adviser Fiona Hill puts it), Putin is fighting to "remove the United States from the world stage." Enough. It is time for a sober reassessment. In the end, Barack Obama got it right nearly a decade ago. When the Russians entered Crimea after the 2014 coup against an elected Ukrainian leader who was sympathetic to Russia, Obama rejected plans to get involved militarily, arguing that "the fact is that Ukraine, which is a non-NATO country, is going to be vulnerable to military domination by Russia no matter what we do." The Mexicans have a saying—"Poor Mexico, so far from God and so close to the United States." Ukraine shares that same fate with neighboring Russia. Rather than providing the West with a proxy force to weaken Russia, it had to find a way to co-exist with its bigger, more powerful neighbor. A Way Out After the casualties and destruction, no settlement will be easy. Both sides have good reasons not to trust the other. Putin's speeches decrying the breakup

of the Russian empire stoke fears that he will use any settlement to reload for the next target. Former German chancellor Angela Merkel's admission that the West used the Maidan accords to buy time to build up the Ukrainian military gives Putin good reason to question any new agreement. Putin clearly intends to consolidate Russia's hold on Crimea and the Donbas region, if not more. No Ukrainian government would survive if it acceded to Russia's land-grab. Ukraine needs massive aid in rebuilding its country. Putin has little appetite to bear the cost of the destruction that his invasion has created. Yet both sides have reason to explore a cease-fire. The damage and casualties inflicted on Ukraine can't be sustained. Outgunned and outmanned, with its allies distracted and faltering, it can only lose more ground and suffer more destruction in a war of attrition. Putin has announced plans to wage the war through 2026, expanding the territory that he claimed, leaving Ukraine a much diminished rump state. He won't give up Crimea, with its warm water ports. He'll

demand that Ukraine become a neutral state and stay out of NATO. He'll certainly want to incorporate much if not all of the Donbas into Russia. Yet Putin has a real stake in a settlement, one that doesn't stoke furies that lead to constant terrorist attacks. He'll want an end to sanctions and an agreement on the damage claims around Ukraine's ruin. The stability he would desire couldn't be had without a settlement that sticks. What's clear is that any continued support for Ukraine must be tied to a serious exploration of a negotiated settlement with the Russians. That requires a reassessment and a change in course and moving toward negotiations, a cease-fire, and reconstruction—not the continued war of bloody attrition, the senseless killing and fighting to the last Ukrainian in the hope that Putin will collapse. Katrina vanden Heuvel is editorial director and publisher of The Nation. She served as editor of the magazine from 1995 to 2019. Follow @KatrinaNation.



10 Working-Class Victories to Celebrate in 2023

From the picket lines to state houses to the White House, champions in the fight against inequality landed huge wins.

By SARAH ANDERSON

1. The ‘Year of the Strike’
More than half a million American workers walked off the job this year. In October, companies lost more workdays to strikes than in any month during the past 40 years.

Big 3 auto workers, Hollywood writers and actors, Las Vegas and Los Angeles hotel staff, and Kaiser Permanente health care employees were among those who used strikes to score big bargaining table wins. For UPS drivers, the mere threat of a Teamsters strike was enough to secure historic wage hikes and safety protections.

After renewing contracts with Ford, GM, Stellantis, and UPS, the UAW and the Teamsters doubled down on efforts to organize the unorganized. The Teamsters picketed outside 25 Amazon warehouses, demanding a fair contract for unionized drivers at a California-based delivery service for the notoriously anti-union retailer. The UAW set their sights on non-unionized car companies, causing so much indigestion among Nissan, Toyota, Honda, and Hyundai executives that they immediately hiked wages for their US employees.

2. Black worker organizing in the South

To move the needle on the country’s dismally low 6 percent unionization rate, the labor movement will need to make inroads in tough territory, particularly in historically anti-union southern states that have been magnets for investment.

Two union victories in 2023 are the latest proof that this goal is not impossible. The United Steelworkers won an election at a Blue Bird bus factory in Georgia with nearly 1,500 predominantly Black workers. In three Alabama cities, AT&T Mobility workers at In Home Expert hubs joined the Communications Workers of America.

3. A crack in the anti-union tech sector

The past year also saw union progress in another historically union-averse territory: the tech sector. Earlier this month, Microsoft forged an agreement with the AFL-CIO to remain neutral in organizing drives among their U.S.-based workers. This will make it easier for about 100,000 Microsoft employees to unionize, with potential ripple effects across the industry.

4. New trifecta states

In Michigan and Minnesota, pro-worker state legislators hit the ground running after Democrats won state trifectas in 2022.

Minnesota passed a blizzard of pro-labor reforms, including paid sick leave for most workers, minimum pay and benefits for nursing home staff, and wage theft protections for construction workers. Teachers will be able to negotiate over class sizes and nurses will have a greater say in staffing levels. The new laws also ban non-compete agreements and “captive audience” meetings designed to undercut union support.

This year Michigan became the first state in six decades to roll back anti-union “right-to-work” laws. They also restored a “prevailing wage” law requiring construction contractors to pay union wages and benefits on state-funded projects.

5. Cities lead the way on low-wage worker protections

The federal minimum wage for tipped workers has been stuck at \$2.13 since 1991. In that vacuum, states and cities are taking action. This year, restaurant servers and other advocates in the nation’s capital successfully beat back last-ditch industry attempts to undercut a victorious 2022 ballot initiative to phase out the local subminimum tipped wage. After a multi-year, hard-fought campaign, DC’s tipped workers got their first raise this past summer, putting them on track to earn the full local minimum wage by 2027. The Chicago City Council also passed a five-year tipped wage phaseout plan, set to begin in 2024.

App-based delivery drivers in New York City had to fight back in 2023 against Uber, DoorDash, and other corporations’ efforts to block introduction of the nation’s first minimum wage for their occupation. Gig companies finally lost their legal challenges to the pay rule in late November. Delivery driver pay rose to \$17.96 an hour on Dec. 4 and will increase to \$19.96 when the legislation takes full effect in 2025.

6. College campuses as labor hotbeds

Organizing among graduate and medical students continued to explode in 2023, with the highest number of union elections among these groups than in any year since the 1990s. In the first four months of 2023 alone, over 14,000 graduate students on five campuses voted to join the United Electrical union — all by margins of over 80 percent. Campuses across the country coordinated organizing efforts through a series of teach-ins and other events under the banner of Labor Spring, an initiative that will continue in 2024.

7. Stock buyback blowback

Many of the labor battles of 2023 skewered corporate executives for underpaying workers while blowing money on

stock buybacks, a financial maneuver that artificially inflates CEO stock-based pay. Two precedent-setting federal policies to rein in buybacks also took effect in 2023. For the first time, corporations faced a one percent excise tax on buybacks. The Biden administration also began giving companies a leg up in the competition for new semiconductor subsidies if they agree to forgo all stock buybacks for five years. This important precedent should be expanded to all companies receiving any form of public funds.

8. Collective bargaining requirements on federally funded construction projects

With megabillions in new public investment flowing into infrastructure projects, it’s critical that the administration ensure these taxpayer dollars support good jobs. In December, Biden officials took an important step forward by finalizing regulations requiring the use of “project labor agreements” between employers and workers for large federal construction projects. The terms of these pre-hire collective bargaining agreements must cover all parties — contractors, subcontractors, and unions. This important rule should be expanded beyond construction to contractors that provide goods and other services.

9. Trashing “junk” fees

Working class Americans fork out tens of billions of dollars every year on deceptive, hidden charges that raise the cost of banking and internet services, concerts and movies, rental cars and apartments, and more. In October, President Joe Biden announced a plan to put these “junk fees” where they belong — in the trash.

Under the plan, the Federal Trade Commission aims to force companies to disclose the total price of goods and services up front and slap violators with big fines. This will mean no hidden fees — and more money in working families’ pockets.

10. NLRB rulings on Amazon and Starbucks

Anyone wondering whether our labor laws need fixing need look no further than the fact that Starbucks and Amazon have been able to get away with refusing to negotiate with workers who voted to unionize for well more than a year. (Two years for the path-breaking Buffalo, New York Starbucks workers). On the positive side, Biden appointees at the National Labor Relations Board seem to be making the most of their current authority and capacity.

In August, the labor board issued a ruling that will make union-busting harder in cases where a majority of workers have signed union cards but the employer still demands an election. Under the ruling, bosses who engage in unfair labor practices in these situations will now be forced to recognize and bargain with the union without an election.

In the meantime, the NLRB is continuing to try to hold

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ROBERT REICH



Trump is almost as old as Biden, and Trump’s public remarks are ever more unhinged — suggesting that advancing age may be a bigger problem for Trump.

Corporate Media Keeps Door Open for Trump’s Return

Every time the mainstream media reveal another move by the Republican Party toward authoritarianism, they point out some superfluous fault in the Democratic Party in order to provide ‘balance.’ It’s nonsense. And it’s dangerous.

You wouldn’t know if you relied solely on the mainstream media that Americans face an election on Nov. 5 of this year in which one of the two likely candidates was engaged in an attempted coup and has given every indication of wanting to substitute neofascism for democracy.

Again and again, the mainstream media have drawn a false equivalence between Donald Trump and Joe Biden — as-

serting that Biden’s political handicap is his age, while Trump’s corresponding handicap is his criminal indictments.

But Trump is almost as old as Biden, and Trump’s public remarks and posts are becoming ever more unhinged — suggesting that advancing age may be a bigger problem for Trump than for Biden.

Why isn’t the mainstream media reporting on Trump’s increasing senescence?

Similarly, every time the mainstream media reveal another move by the Republican Party toward authoritarianism, they point out some superfluous fault in the Democratic party in order to provide “balance.”

So readers are left to assume all politics is rotten.

A recent *Washington Post* article was headlined: “In a swing Wisconsin county, everyone is tired of politics.”

“How do Americans feel about politics?” The *New York Times* asked recently, answering: “Disgust isn’t a strong enough word.”

But where is it reported that the mainstream media have contributed to making people tired and disgusted with politics?

And where is it acknowledged that this helps Trump and his Republican allies?

They want voters to be so turned off of politics that they’re unaware of Biden’s accomplishments, such as an economy that continues to generate a large number of new jobs, with real (adjusted for inflation) wages finally trending upward, inflation dropping, and no recession in sight.

Plus, billions of dollars pumped out to fix and improve the nation’s roads, ports, pipelines, and internet. Hundreds of billions allocated to combat climate change. Medicare now lowering the cost of prescription drugs. Billions in student debt canceled. Monopolies attacked. Workers’ rights to organize, defended.

One person interviewed by the *Post* admitted, “I can’t really speak to anything [Biden] has done because I’ve tuned it out,

like a lot of people have. We’re so tired of the us-against-them politics.”

As if the “us-against-them politics” is the fault of Democrats as much as it is Republicans, when in fact the GOP is the party of dysfunctional politics.

Much of the GOP no longer accepts the rule of law, the norms of liberal democracy, the legitimacy of the opposing party, or the premise that governing requires negotiation and compromise.

Why isn’t this being reported?

Trump and his allies want Americans to feel so disgusted with politics that they believe the nation has become ungovernable. The worse things seem, the stronger Trump’s case for an authoritarian like him to take over: “I’d get it done in one day.” “I am your voice.” “Leave it all to me.”

By focusing on Trump’s rantings and

ignoring Biden’s steady hand, the mainstream media are playing directly into Trump’s neofascist hands.

What can you do?

When you see the mainstream media commit these errors, write to the editors and point them out. Second, don’t rely exclusively on the mainstream media for your news. (I read *The Guardian* every day. Please offer us your suggestions for reliable sources of news and analyses.) Also: Boycott all advertisers on Fox News.

Robert Reich, former secretary of labor during the Clinton administration, is professor of public policy at the University of California at Berkeley. His latest book is “The System: Who Rigged It, How We Fix It.” He blogs at www.robertreich.substack.com.



When It Comes to Slogans, Pro-Palestinian Activists Should Stick to Those Whose Meanings Aren’t Disputed

By CLARENCE PAGE

As someone who has appreciated the power of protest and activism on achieving progress in the US and the world, it’s hard for me to watch the current high emotions over the Middle East devolve into arguments about the meanings of slogans.

Not only are those at loggerheads over Israel and Hamas taking the temperature to extreme levels, they won’t even agree on how to argue. Is, for example, “from the river to the sea” fair comment?

For those advocating for the Palestinian point of view, using phrases that the other side views as hateful is self-defeating and, frankly, hateful.

That’s why I appreciate the bold new effort by Cenk Uygur (“pronounced Jenk, like

short for Jenkins” and You-ger) — host of the popular left-wing YouTube political commentary show, “The Young Turks” — to eliminate that oft-voiced and problematic slogan: “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free.”

“Can everyone please stop the dumb ‘from the river to the sea’ chant?” Uygur posted on X, formerly Twitter. “It is incredibly hurtful to our Jewish brothers and sisters. It’s also incredibly counterproductive to protecting Palestinians. Do not chant something that the majority thinks is a call for genocide. Not complicated.”

I appreciate his call for clarity in sloganeering. I felt the same way when “Black Lives Matter” first appeared on the national scene during the great racial reckoning that followed George Floyd’s death. Passionate but leaderless movements often have too little control over their messaging. We all witnessed that when the political right took BLM’s name and attached their own cynical meanings to it.

The furor over “from the river to the sea” isn’t the same, but it’s leading similarly to needless disputes over meaning and intentions behind slogans.

The slogan is controversial enough to have led to the censure last month of Michi-

gan Democratic Rep. Rashida Tlaib, the only Palestinian American member of Congress.

Tlaib, like other Palestinians I know, claims a very different understanding of the phrase going back to the time when the territory historically called Palestine stretched between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea under British rule from 1920 to 1948.

When Israel was established, the Palestinian territory was divided. Now the West Bank lies on the Jordan River, the Gaza Strip is on the Mediterranean coast and Israel lies between them.

As a result, the phrase “from the river to the sea” sounds like a call for the destruction of Israel, the country that now occupies that location.

Which is why antisemitism watchdog groups such as the Anti-Defamation League and the American Jewish Committee understand the phrase to mean calling for the removal of Jews from Israel, while others — particularly on the Palestinian side — hear the slogan as an expression of hope for Palestinian unity and autonomy.

Uygur’s critics are pointing out that, when it comes to problematic political rhetoric, he might need to get his own house in order.

He wrote: “We can all see the genocide in Gaza with our own eyes. Yet, almost every one of the politicians in Washington is pretending that it isn’t happening. And that we should send \$14 billion to help Israel commit obvious war crimes because they are being oppressed by the Palestinians.”

In another post, Uygur accused the US government of hypocrisy for reprimanding college administrators who have allowed anti-Israel rhetoric on campuses while supporting what he called Israel’s so-called genocide in Gaza.

Uygur, like numerous others on the left, uses words such as “apartheid” and “genocide” to describe Israel’s treatment of Palestinians. As a journalist who reported in apartheid South Africa on the Soweto uprising in the 1970s, I learned firsthand how real apartheid worked for — or against — those of us who deemed the underclass by that regime.

Gaza, you’re no Soweto, although the difference surely isn’t meaningful to those whose neighborhoods are being bombed.

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Hartmann... Continued from page 12

vince Americans that regulations weren’t something that would protect average people but were, instead, instruments of socialism or communism.

Their factotum, Jude Wanniski, even came up with a bizarre new economic theory that included techno-sounding phrases like “trickle down” and “supply side” to justify massive tax cuts for the morbidly rich.

The agencies like the EPA that were doing the regulating would, henceforth, be known as the “deep state,” a designation so creepy that few would choose to defend them.

After Ronald Reagan stopped enforcing antitrust laws in 1983 and Clinton deregulated the media in 1996, an army of radio and TV hosts were added to the mix, with over 1,500 local rightwing radio stations and Fox “News” rising into prominence. By 2000, Republicans were openly campaigning on platforms promising deregulation along with giant tax cuts for the “job creator” billionaires.

Now sufficiently indoctrinated to believe up is down, Republican voters became the nation’s useful idiots.

The think tanks told them climate change was a hoax, and they believed them. Trump told them the economy during his tenure was “the best in the history of the world” (it was only mediocre before the pandemic hit) and they believed him. He said he needed to cut taxes on the morbidly rich by around \$2 trillion, and Republican voters nodded their heads in agreement.

Alexander Hamilton is often quoted as saying, “Those who stand for nothing will fall for anything.” It’s become the motto of the brahmins of the GOP, who only stand for their own greed and that of their wealthy patrons.

The White Republican base has been so lied to and abused over the past 40 or so years that they’ve become easy marks for the predators in both big business and the GOP.

They’ve ceased to stand for anything other than blind obedience to Republican

politicians, who lie with impunity (The *Washington Post* has identified over 30,000 lies Trump told while in office, for example), and as a result they’re “falling for anything” right in front of God and the world:

- Democrats running child sex rings out of a DC pizza parlor? Sure! Let me bring an assault weapon!
- Teachers hate kids and are hell-bent on screwing up their lives. Of course: Why else would they study for all those years for a job that pays squat?
- Treating a deadly new virus with horse de-wormer or a drug that kills the malaria parasite? Why not? Better than having to wear one of those terrible masks! How about injecting bleach? Sounds reasonable!
- There’s even been a recent explosion in followers of flat-Earth theories and the antisemitic claim that Jews run the world and are intent on “replacing” White Americans with Black and Brown people.
- Even as never-before-seen violent weather is destroying Red state communities, they continue to vote for Republicans who refuse to do anything to slow down the ferocity of climate change.
- Republicans who claim Christianity bind themselves to a man who committed adultery with all three of his wives, repeatedly ran fraudulent businesses and charities, quotes Hitler, and tore babies from their nursing mothers and then sold them into fake adoption charities that trafficked over 1,000 of them to nobody-knows-where to this day.

The indoctrination of the Republican voter is so complete that when then-President Trump gutted over 100 environmental regulations — making it more toxic and dangerous to live or work in America and putting our children at risk of childhood cancers and birth defects — there wasn’t a peep. Most Republican voters don’t even know it happened, although the *New York Times* kept a list of the regulations he killed that you can read (via the online version of this column).

And it’s not like America’s wealthiest oligarchs are having second thoughts. The Ford Foundation sponsored an investigative

report by *The Guardian* into the political funding policies of our 100 richest billionaires. While most people know about Koch, Soros and Gates, few have ever heard most of the others’ names.

But the majority of America’s morbidly rich are totally down with the GOP. As *The Guardian* reported:

“Our new, systematic study of the 100 wealthiest Americans indicates that Buffett, Gates, Bloomberg et al are not at all typical. Most of the wealthiest US billionaires — who are much less visible and less reported on — more closely resemble Charles Koch.

“They are extremely conservative on economic issues. Obsessed with cutting taxes, especially estate taxes — which apply only to the wealthiest Americans. Opposed to government regulation of the environment or big banks. Unenthusiastic about government programs to help with jobs, incomes, healthcare, or retirement pensions — programs supported by large majorities of Americans. Tempted to cut deficits and shrink government by cutting or privatizing guaranteed social security benefits.”

So why don’t Americans know who’s manipulating our political system and why? Again, from *The Guardian*:

“The answer is simple: billionaires who favor unpopular, ultraconservative economic policies, and work actively to advance them (that is, most politically active billionaires) stay almost entirely silent about those issues in public. This is a deliberate choice. Billionaires have plenty of media access, but most of them choose not to say anything at all about the policy issues of the day. They deliberately pursue a strategy of what we call ‘stealth politics.’”

So, here we are.

America’s billionaires got the tax cuts they wanted: instead of paying 74% like before Reagan, or even the high 50% range like most European billionaires, the average American billionaire pays around 3% in income taxes, which is probably a hell of a lot less than the average Republican voter.

The fossil fuel billionaires also got much of the deregulation they wanted (although Biden has reversed some of Trump’s worst excesses), and the Supreme Court jus-

tices they’ve bought off with million-dollar vacations and parental homes will soon debate whether to gut the Chevron deference and thus end the EPA’s ability to regulate the fossil fuel industry altogether.

As a result, over \$50 trillion has been transferred from the paychecks and homes of working class people into the money bins of the top 1% while our environment continues to deteriorate. Meanwhile, Republicans in Congress, relying on the largesse of the fossil fuel billionaires and their industry colleagues, fight every attempt by those concerned about our children’s environmental future.

This 50-year-long plot executed by some of the richest men (with few exceptions, they’re almost all men) in America to gut income taxes and environmental regulations has been a stunning success. Without the burden of income taxes, they’re now richer than any humans ever before in the history of the Earth. Richer than the pharaohs, richer than the Caesars, richer than any king in European, African, or Asian history.

Do they care that they’re leaving the rest of us a dying planet? That their actions have created a toxic brew of paranoia and distrust — along with an obese orange-faced monster — that is on the verge of ending the American experiment? That Americans are dying every day from the pollution and climate change their products produce?

Apparently not, at least as long as they can keep their tax cuts and deregulation. Oxfam International, for example, “found that 125 billionaires create more emissions through their investments and lifestyle than all of France.”

Mission accomplished, America’s rightwing billionaires. And thanks for nothing.

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Starbucks and Amazon accountable for rampant labor rights violations. The board has 240 open or settled charges against Amazon in 26 states and they’ve issued more than 100 complaints against Starbucks, covering hundreds of accusations of threats or retaliation against union supporters and failure to bargain in good faith. Most recently, the NLRB ordered the re-opening of 23 Starbucks cafes, alleging the company had closed them to suppress union activity, in violation of federal law.

Reflecting on 2023, Starbucks barista

and union organizer Shep Searl marveled at how diverse workers, “from Teamsters to actors,” demonstrated that there are many ways to win through collective action.

“Every day, we’ve been absorbing that information and utilizing it in our mobilization and escalation plan,” Searl told Inequality.org. “We aren’t going anywhere and so much of that is inspired by the other campaigns. If we stand together, there’s no mountain we cannot climb.”

Sarah Anderson directs the Global Economy Project of the Institute for Policy Studies, and is a co-editor of Inequality.org, where this appeared.



HEALTH CARE/*Joan Retsinas*

A Valentine to Immigrants

To Immigrants: welcome. Enough with the Nazi-tinged rhetoric about keeping a blood line “pure,” free from “impure” (a.k.a. Black, Brown, colored) strains. Enough with blocking those who would pollute our native-born (not the same as our native) population. Please, Donald Trump and fans: stop lambasting the “others” in our midst.

Immigrants: Healthcare USA needs you.

Consider the physician workforce. In 2021 more than 200,000 physicians who were not citizens, and who graduated from medical schools abroad, were working in clinics, hospitals, and nursing homes. Put more starkly, one in five physicians in the United States was born and educated abroad. Since 2004, their numbers have increased by more than 30%. (The Association of American Medical Colleges news, Feb. 23, 2023).

Those immigrant physicians work in the places desperate for physicians. At the University of North Dakota School of Medicine and Health Sciences, roughly 50% of internal medicine residents are foreign-born, foreign-trained. Go into a hospital in any inner city: you will find physicians who hail from Lebanon, from Ghana, from India.

Today, the United States still needs more than 17,000

primary care practitioners and more than 8,000 mental health practitioners. By 2034, we may need 124,000 more than we train domestically. In fact, some primary care residency slots, even with foreign graduates, do not meet their “match.”

The foreign graduates run a gauntlet, from qualifying examinations to immigration hurdles. Some visas require the physician to return home after training; CONRAD 30 waivers (30 per state — a number in place for 20 years) require the physician to serve in an underserved area for three years; still other visas will let the physician remain.

In fact, one ingenious new program, The Idaho Health Neighborhood Center in rural Nampa employs three doctors from foreign countries as “physician extenders.” The clinic gets much-needed expertise, the employees get a head start on joining the ranks of physicians.

The scarcity of American-born, American-trained physicians has no one bogey, no easy fix. As the American population has aged, we have needed more physicians. Twenty-somethings might rarely see a primary care physician; sixty-somethings depend on those visits.

The correlation is direct: as we have aged, the visits per capita, the prescriptions per capita, the treatments per capita have risen. At the same time, we have not dramatically expanded the training slots. Training, moreover, remains not just lengthy, but expensive, leaving graduates in debt. While a thoracic surgeon might easily repay the debt, a primary care physician will struggle under it. To complicate the scarcity, many older physicians have tired of bureaucratic paperwork, utilization review roadblocks, and electronic records ad nauseam. They didn’t train to work in this new world, and they are exiting.

Anybody, particularly patients, concerned about health-

care in the United States should want to open the doors to more foreign-trained physicians.

On to nurses. We depend on the foreign-born, and we need more. Avant Healthcare Professionals in Florida is fielding requests for 4,000 nurses at jobs throughout the country. Billings Clinic in Montana, for instance, reached out to nurses from the Philippines, Thailand, Kenya, Ghana and Nigeria.

The shortage of nurses reflects the economics of health-care USA. The National Nurses United cites data showing one million more registered nurses than are employed, as well as an increase in the number of candidates who pass the nursing exam. But many nurses have left the field, due to burnout, COVID, or more lucrative opportunities outside nursing. And nursing, particularly in hospitals, is difficult.

The complaint rings throughout the discussion: hospitals have been scrimping on staff, making work-conditions intolerable for too many nurses. Nurses have gone on strike, primarily because of staff shortages. California recently distinguished the “nurses per capita” number from the “nurse to patient” ratio. When California passed mandatory nurse-to-patient ratios, nurses returned to nursing. (Oregon is slated to pass such a law in 2024). Regardless of the reason behind the shortage, though, it is real — and the foreign-born, foreign-trained nurses have filled the gap.

So, to all the people who want to bar immigrants, think carefully. When you are sick, the person who treats you may hail from India or Ghana or the Lebanon. Do you want to bar them?

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GRASSROOTS/*Hank Kalet*

The Real Rot in Higher Ed

There is something very wrong with higher education — but it’s not what right-wing critics want us to believe. American colleges and universities are not bastions of elitism and “wokeness,” but among the few institutions in the United States that are truly diverse and egalitarian.

What ails higher ed institutions — both public and private — is the decades-long takeover by corporate interests, which has reinforced a shift in what colleges and universities have long been designed to do. The shift has led to skyrocketing tuition, cuts in aid, the use of contingent workers, and crippling student debt.

But that’s not what conservative critics are concerned with. They want you to believe that campuses are bastions of antisemitism, Marxism, and anti-American activity (which one should read as meaning anti-White). They want you to believe that, as US Rep. Elise Stefanik (R-N.Y.) has claimed, “there are deep institutional rots” (sic) at Harvard and other prestige schools — which they then use as stand-ins for the broader higher education community.

Harvard President Claudine Gay resigned in January, less than a month after Elizabeth Magill resigned her post as president of the University of Pennsylvania. Both testified at a Dec. 5 Congressional hearing billed as an inquiry

into campus antisemitism, but that ultimately focused on “the influence of diversity, equity and inclusion programs, the inclusion of trans athletes, foreign funding for Middle Eastern studies, the paucity of conservative faculty and the declining percentage of Jewish students on campuses,” as the *New York Times* reported.

A clip of Stefanik grilling the presidents — one that mischaracterized pro-Palestinian slogans as genocidal — went viral, followed by big-name conservative donors threatening to withhold their contributions. As I wrote in December, right-wingers are using antisemitism like a point guard uses a pump fake — to get their critics back on their heels so that they can bully through their true agenda, described by the CBC as “a broader right-wing effort to remake higher education, which has often been seen as a bastion of liberalism.”

“Republican detractors have sought to gut funding for public universities, roll back tenure and banish initiatives that make colleges more welcoming to students of color, disabled students and the LGBTQ community. They have also aimed to limit how race and gender are discussed in classrooms.”

Lost in the noise over the hearing and the resignations is the real rot in higher ed — the takeover of public and private institutions by the corporate mindset, which prioritizes the returns on its investment of its endowment funds and other reserve money over nearly everything else.

Tuition and fees have increased, along with student debt, and the number and cost of administrators. And state and federal funding appear to be down on a per-student basis, but this is hard to track — pinning down exact figures is difficult, because higher ed funding comes from multi-

ple budget lines and is distributed in multiple ways, and rules have changed over the last four decades. One can find dozens of studies and papers that take opposing positions on the data.

Classes are now taught increasingly by a contingent workforce (graduate students, adjunct instructors, and full-timers not on the tenure track) — a workforce approached modeled on the auto industry’s “just-in-time” approach to inventory.

Humanities programs — particularly those in the arts — are being forced to justify their existence and, in some cases, have been made to charge a premium on their tuition even as students are told to consider their own “return on investment,” i.e. to consider whether their choice of major will affect their future wages. Enrollment in these programs has fallen, likely because of this ROI language and because of attacks by politicians like Ron DeSantis. Rather than defend these programs — which are central to higher ed’s mission of research and education — administrators are eliminating them, which will diminish students’ experience and choice and further the “vocalization” of the college and university in the United States.

The logical end point of this is the creation of a compliant — though skilled — workforce focused only on advancing the goals of corporate America. This is the rot at the heart of higher ed today, not the “woke-ism” decried by DeSantis, Stefanik, and the right-wing establishment. And they know it.

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Infections and Falls More Likely at Private Equity-Owned Hospitals: Study

Patients at hospitals acquired by private equity firms saw a 25% increase in adverse events, new research shows.

By JAKE JOHNSON

A study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* Dec. 26 found that patients are more likely to fall or suffer infections at hospitals owned by private equity firms, whose role in the US healthcare system has grown exponentially in recent years.

The study uses Medicare claims data from between 2009 and 2019 to compare patient complications at private equity-acquired hospitals and control facilities not owned by private equity. Dr. Sneha Kannan, a critical care physician and the study’s lead author, told the *New York Times* that she was surprised by the extent of the differ-

ence between the two.

Patients at private equity-owned hospitals saw a 25.4% increase in adverse events such as falls and dangerous central-line bloodstream infections in the three years after the acquisition, according to the new study—even though the private equity hospitals analyzed in the paper tended to have younger and lower-risk patients.

“Surgical site infections doubled from 10.8 to 21.6 per 10,000 hospitalizations at private equity hospitals despite an 8.1% reduction in surgical volume; meanwhile, such infections decreased at control hospitals,” the study shows.

The results indicate that the quality of inpatient care is significantly worse at hospitals owned by private equity firms, which are notorious for bleeding companies dry for a quick profit at the expense of workers and local communities. Over the past decade, private equity companies have dramatically extended their reach in US healthcare, purchasing physician practices, hospice care facilities, nursing homes, and hospitals.

The new study in *JAMA* offers the latest evidence of the private equity industry’s increasingly harmful effects on the US healthcare system, which already leaves tens of millions of people uninsured and vulnerable to medical and financial disaster.

A report released this past year by the

consumer advocacy group Public Citizen notes that “private equity has targeted segments of the healthcare industry since at least the 1990s, with many predictable outcomes.”

“Among them, shocking lapses in safety have occurred, prices have risen faster than at non-private-equity-acquired entities and patients have been subjected to price gouging schemes,” the report states. “The conflict between providers’ obligations to provide the best care and private equity investors’ insatiable appetites for maximized provides is clear.”

The new peer-reviewed study was published just weeks after the Senate Budget Committee launched a bipartisan investigation into the negative impacts of private equity ownership on US hospitals.

“As private equity has moved into healthcare, we have become increasingly concerned about the associated negative outcomes for patients,” Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse (D-R.I.), chair of the budget panel, said in a statement earlier in December.

“From facility closures to compromised care, it’s now a familiar story: Private equity buys out a hospital, saddles it with debt, and then reduces operating costs by cutting services and staff—all while investors pocket millions,” the senator added. “Before the dust settles, the private equity firm sells and leaves town, leaving communities to pick

up the pieces.”

Jake Johnson is a senior editor and staff writer for Common Dreams.



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The Looming Vietnam Analogy

As the Israel-Hamas war enters its fourth month with no clear ending in sight, an uncomfortable comparison has begun to make itself felt. Memories of my generation’s tragic forever war, Vietnam, which had receded into the background, are suddenly fresh in mind once more.

There are obvious differences, of course, between then and now. History doesn’t exactly repeat itself, as Mark Twain is supposed to have said, but it does rhyme. Much as we might like to ignore them, the rhymes are increasingly impinging on us.

Start with the position of the United States. Since the end of World War II, this country’s self-imposed mission has been to involve itself in all the world’s problems and try to solve them; it’s what America does. This leads inevitably to being militarily overextended and budgetarily stressed. From the 1950s through the 1970s, the height of the Cold War, the American agenda included resisting the spread of Communism by involvement in the wars and revolutions of Chinese and Soviet Third World client states.

The issues and stakes in these wars were seldom black and white; nationalism and post-colonial aspirations usually intruded. In Vietnam, the US foolishly took the side of one participant in an internal civil war. We’re doing something similar in Israel — not brokering a fair two-party peace agreement, but taking sides in an open-ended conflict.

If America’s direct, armed intrusion in

Vietnam was aimed at shaping Southeast Asia, its arms-length presence in Israel is geared to shaping the Middle East; the outcome won’t just affect Israelis and Palestinians, but Iranians, Syrians, Egyptians, Jordanians and Lebanese, as well. The world’s leading superpower wants to dictate the balance of power among the regional Arab nation-states and simultaneously support its primary client state in the region, Israel.

Unfortunately, we have at present a flawed client. Since the 1970s, the conservative Likud Party (the GOP of Israel), which supplanted left-leaning Labour, has with only brief interruptions run the Jewish state. And since the 1990s, Benjamin Netanyahu, as leader of that party, has usually been head of government, working his way toward reactionary and corrupt one-man rule under the guise of an increasingly undemocratic democracy. The romantic days of kibbutz-centered collectivism implanted by the early Zionist socialists are long gone.

The transition is a major reason why extremist Republicans in the US identify so strongly with present-day Israel; its governance, like that of Orbán’s Hungary, is an expression of their right-wing ideology. Old-line Democrats, for their part, cleave to Israel out of reflexive habit, preferring to believe in the Israel they remember, or think they remember, rather than the Israel that currently exists.

Self-proclaimed Zionist Joe Biden, the most uncritical pro-Israel president other than Trump — OpenSecrets lists him as the single biggest US recipient of political donations from the Israeli lobby (\$4.3 million since 1989) — is one of those nostalgic Democrats. His policy regarding the Jewish state is to be in lockstep with its leadership at all times, much more so than such Democratic predecessors as Barack Obama and Jimmy Carter.

The Biden embrace of Netanyahu’s

government extends to standing in isolation with it in opposing a UN-sponsored Gaza ceasefire supported by, literally, the entire world. The same applies to an administration acceptance of any and all Israeli intelligence claims regarding military operations, including a Biden denial of civilian fatality statistics produced by the Gaza health ministry (20,000-plus killed by air strikes) and endorsed as largely accurate by UN health officials.

Playing fast and loose with casualty figures is in keeping with the Vietnam analogy. From 1963 to 1975, Pentagon estimates of dead and wounded couldn’t be trusted; Vietnamese civilian deaths were minimized, and enemy body counts were vastly exaggerated. Israeli and American statisticians are apparently now playing the same game. To Netanyahu, it doesn’t matter. His expressed desire is for “a mighty vengeance.” Civilian deaths are just so much collateral damage made morally acceptable, he says, by precedents set by the US itself in its own prior wars.

The Israeli position is that Gaza’s agony is trivial compared, for instance, to Hiroshima and Nagasaki, where 200,000 Japanese were exterminated in 1945. Netanyahu’s blood lust is such that if dozens of Gazans have to die to eliminate one Hamas fighter, it’s a small price to pay in his eyes. Besides, extremist elements in his “unity” government want to impose a collective punishment on all Gazan Palestinians, who, after all, voted for Hamas in 2007, when it was perceived as the most viable governing alternative available. Left unsaid, of course, is that Israelis collectively voted for Netanyahu’s neofascists several times in the intervening years — six of one, half-dozen of the other.

In the long run, the Biden standpat position condemning Palestinians to either indefinite apartheid within their own homeland, or to a form of ethnic cleansing that would banish them involuntarily

to a neighboring Arab state (Egypt has been suggested by Israelis) is practically and morally untenable. Ultimately, there has to be a two-state solution, something both Hamas and the Netanyahu government presently oppose, but that the West Bank Palestinian Authority (PA) supports in theory.

The man best equipped to negotiate a workable two-state settlement on behalf of Arabs is Palestinian leader in absentia Marwan Barghouti, the Alexei Navalny or Nelson Mandela of his people, who is presently languishing in an Israeli prison on trumped up charges of terrorism. Barghouti, no fanatical Islamist, is a secular nationalist, a former participant in the first and second intifadas (1987 and 2000) who’s renowned violence and attacks on civilians in favor of peaceful reconciliation. Despite this and despite widespread international support, including among liberal Jewish voices like Peter Beinart, Israel refuses to release him — due, no doubt, to his potential political effectiveness.

Barghouti is the most popular living West Bank Palestinian leader, far more admired than ineffectual PA President Mahmoud Abbas, widely viewed as corrupt and compromised. Hamas fears Barghouti’s appeal; so does Benjamin Netanyahu’s Likud. Each of them seeks an all-out victory and total regional hegemony. Barghouti could split the difference and end the Middle Eastern forever war.

For that reason alone, the Biden administration should end its destructive complicity with the Netanyahu hard-liners and demand his release, using Israel’s outrageous blank check on American aid as leverage. Otherwise, it’s likely to fulfill the encroaching Vietnam analogy.

Wayne O’Leary is a writer in Orono, Maine, specializing in political economy. He holds a doctorate in American history and is the author of two prizewinning books.

Sandra Day O'Connor Was Irreplaceable

By JOEL D. JOSEPH

Sandra Day O’Connor, appointed by President Ronald Reagan in September 1981, kept the court in balance with her sense of fairness and justice for nearly 25 years. Currently, the court has no one in the center to balance the right and left wings of the court.

Justice O’Connor helped *Roe v. Wade* remain the law of the land for nearly 50 years. She dissented against abuses on the left and the right. She dissented in favor of veterans’ rights and the rights of property owners.

Justice Sandra Day O’Connor, the first woman on the court, wrote the decision in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* upholding *Roe*: “Liberty finds no refuge in a jurisprudence of doubt. Yet 19 years after our holding that the Constitution protects a woman’s right to terminate her pregnancy in its early stages, *Roe v. Wade*, 410 U.S. 113 (1973), that definition of liberty is still questioned.” O’Connor wrote: “Constitutional protection of the woman’s decision to terminate her pregnancy derives from the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. It declares that no State shall ‘deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law.’ The controlling word in the case before us is ‘liberty.’”

She continued, “Men and women of good conscience can disagree, and we suppose some always shall disagree, about the profound moral and spiritual implications of terminating a pregnancy, even in its earliest stage. Some of us as individuals find abortion offensive to our most basic principles of morality, but that cannot control our decision. Our obligation is to define the liberty of all, not to mandate our own moral code.”

After retiring from the Court in January 2006, she told the *New York Times*, “I step away for a couple of years and there’s no telling what’s going to happen.” Justice

O’Connor continued, “*Citizens United* was an increasing problem for maintaining an independent judiciary.” *New York Times*, Jan. 26, 2010.

Justice O’Connor continued, “in invalidating some of the existing checks on campaign spending, the majority in *Citizens United* has signaled that the problem of campaign contributions in judicial elections might get considerably worse and quite soon.” And she was right to predict that campaign spending would blossom into billions filling the airwaves with an onslaught to commercials with no limit in sight.

In *Kelo v. City of New London, Connecticut*, the city took Mrs. Kelo’s property for the private use by the Pfizer drug company. The Fifth Amendment allows the taking of private property for a public purpose. The Supreme Court allowed the taking of Mrs. Kelo’s longtime home for a private purpose. Justice O’Connor in a strongly-worded dissent argued: “Under the banner of economic development, all private property is now vulnerable to being taken and transferred to another private owner, so long as it might be upgraded — i.e., given to an owner who will use it in a way that the legislature deems more beneficial to the public—in the process.”

She continued, “New London does not claim that Susette Kelo’s and Wilhelmina Dery’s well-maintained homes are the source of any social harm. Indeed, it could not so claim without adopting the absurd argument that any single-family home that might be razed to make way for an apartment building, or any church that might be replaced with a retail store, or any small business that might be more lucrative if it were instead part of a national franchise, is inherently harmful to society and thus within the government’s power to condemn.”

Justice O’Connor warned America: “The specter of condemnation hangs over all property. Nothing is to prevent the State from replacing any Motel 6 with a Ritz-Carlton. ...”

Justice O’Connor wrote a bitter dissent in the LSD case, *United States v. Stanley* 483 US 669 (June 5, 1987). In 1975, James Stanley received a letter from the Walter Reed Army Medical Center asking if Mr.

Stanley would participate in a follow-up study concerning the LSD testing that took place in 1958. Stanley was, understandably, extremely upset. He finally understood what had happened to him, his family and his mind. Because he was angry at what his government had done to him, he sought justice in the courts.

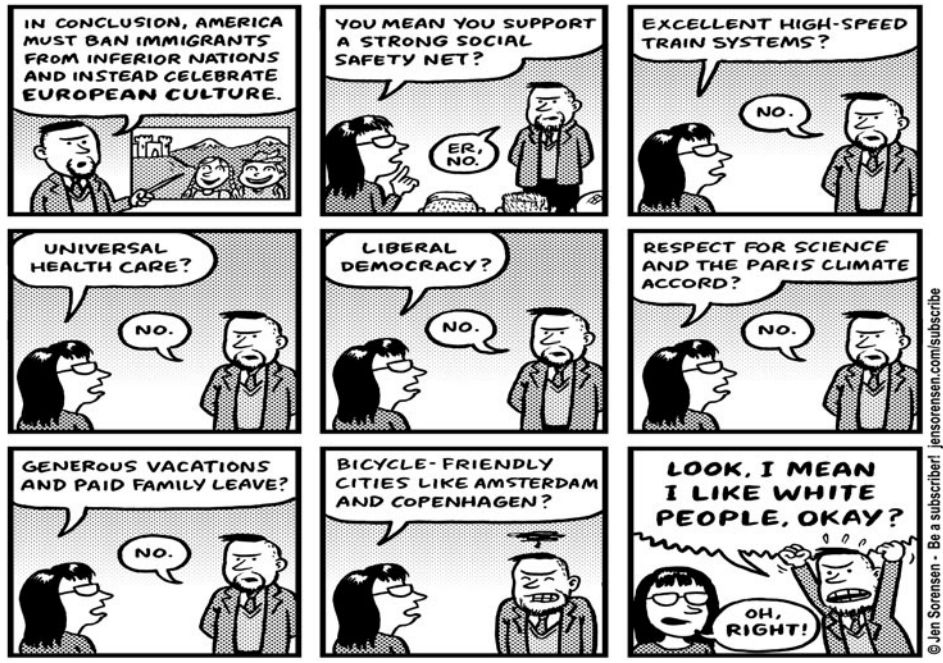
By the slimmest of majorities, the court ruled that the government was immune from suit by those who were in the military. According to the court, lawsuits of this type would interfere with military discipline. They ruled that it would be “inappropriate for soldiers to be allowed to sue their superior officers.” The court did not say what the effects of the suit would be on Army morale: our soldiers are being treated like second-class citizens and are being forced to give up their constitutional rights.”

Justice O’Connor dissented, “In my view, conduct of the type alleged in this case is so far beyond the bounds of human decency that as a matter of law it simply cannot be considered a part of the military mission ... [and we] cannot insulate defendants from liability for deliberate and calculated exposure of otherwise healthy military personnel to medical experimenta-

tion without their consent, outside of any combat, combat training, or military exigency, and for no other reason than to gather information on the effect of lysergic acid diethylamide on human beings. No judicially crafted rule should insulate from liability the involuntary and unknowing human experimentation alleged to have occurred in this case.”

Without a sensible middle justice on the court, there is no one to replace Sandra Day O’Connor. We have lost a Republican with a strong sense of fairness and justice who balanced the court and kept the court focused on right and wrong, not right and left.

Joel D. Joseph is a lawyer and author of 15 books, including “Black Mondays: Worst Decisions of the Supreme Court” and “Inequality in America: 10 Causes and 10 Cures.” He is founder and chairman of the Made in the USA Foundation, a non-profit organization dedicated to promoting American-made products. He testified and lobbied successfully for the American Automobile Labeling Act and the Country of Origin Labeling Act. These federal laws provide consumers with information about where products are made.



Extreme Right Israeli Government Brands ‘Illegal’ Supreme Court’s Upholding of Judicial Review; Divisions Loom amid Gaza War

By JUAN COLE

ANN ARBOR – In the midst of Israel’s brutal total war on Palestinian civilians in Gaza and its apparent failure to attain its basic war goals, the country’s Supreme Court has issued a ruling sure to throw the country into an unprecedented constitutional crisis. Members of the government criticized the court for issuing its ruling in the midst of the Israeli campaign against Gaza, while others feared that it would reignite deep divisions in Israeli society that had provoked regular, massive demonstrations in the first eight months of 2023. The Israeli newspaper *Arab 48* reports that the Supreme Court voted 8 to 7 to reaffirm its prerogative of judicial review based on the country’s Basic Laws enacted by parliament, giving the Court the authority to strike down the July 24, 2023, law passed by the extremist parliament. The latter had removed the Court’s ability to interfere in cabinet decisions and appointments on the basis of what is called “the reasonableness doctrine,” which is rooted in British common law. Israel does not have a constitution but Parliament (the Knesset) has passed a series of Basic Laws, beginning in 1958, which have constitutional implications. This is especially true of two important laws of the early 1990s, the 9th and 10th. The Center for Israel Education notes, “The Tenth Basic Law of Israel was passed by the Twelfth Knesset on March 17, 1992. It states that human rights are based on recognition of the value of man, the sanctity of life and the fact that he is free. Its aim is ‘to defend Human Dignity and Liberty, in order to establish the values of the State of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state.’ It defines human freedom in Israel as being the right to leave and enter the country, to privacy, intimacy, and refrainment from searches of private property, body, possessions, speech, writings, and notes. Violations of the dignity or freedom of man is permitted only in accordance with the law.” The current extremists in power in Israel would like to roll back these liberties, and their attempt to gut the “reasonableness” doctrine was only the first step toward neutering the Supreme Court entirely. About a year ago, as the extreme, fas-

cist government of Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu was consolidating itself, the PM tried to appoint Aryeh Makhlouf Deri as Minister of Health and the Interior. Deri, the leader of the fundamentalist Shas Party, had had several run-ins in with the law and even gone to jail for corruption, and the court held he recently had made a deal to stay out of political office to avoid going to jail yet again, on which he and Netanyahu reneged. The Supreme Court intervened to strike down Deri’s appointment, invoking the reasonableness doctrine. The Supreme Court had also ruled against Israeli sovereignty in the Palestinian West Bank, castigating vigilante Israeli squatting there. The law that the far-right Israeli Knesset passed on July 24 forbade the High Court of Justice from in any way appealing to the reasonability standard to check the power of the government, whether in making cabinet decisions or appointments. Twelve of the 15 justices ruled that the Supreme Court has the prerogative to exercise judicial review based on the Basic Laws, including any parliamentary attempt to abrogate those laws, which form the basis of the future constitution of Israel. The Supreme Court plays this role, they said, to prevent “harm to the democratic values of the state.” The reaffirmation that the court could use the reasonableness doctrine to overrule cabinet decisions and appointments despite the new Knesset legislation, however, was only passed by a margin of one vote. The Jan. 1 Court decision noted that “judicial review (judicial oversight of the decisions of the legislative and executive branches) is the only effective brake on the great power concentrated in the hands of the government and its ministers.” It added that last July’s legislation curbing the court’s ability to abrogate cabinet decisions and appointments “exceeds the authority of the Knesset, and contradicts the principles of democracy, and undermines an essential part of the court’s role in defending the individual and the public interest.” The majority decision observed, “As a result of the extreme and exceptional wording of the amendment, and given the existing constitutional situation, it causes unprecedented damage, by its scope, to the principle of the separation of powers.”

The legal issues are complicated inasmuch as the July legislation was itself considered a Basic Law, and this is the first time the Supreme Court has overruled such a Basic Law. It essentially pitted the previous Basic Laws against this one and found it incompatible with its predecessors. Netanyahu’s Justice Minister, Yariv Levin, responded to the ruling by complaining that the “decision of the Supreme Court justices to publish the ruling during the war contradicts the ‘spirit of unity’ required these days for the success of our fighters at the front.” He went on to reject the principle of judicial review, charging that the justices “have effectively monopolized for themselves all the prerogatives that are supposed to be divided in a balanced manner among the three Powers in democratic systems.” Not only did Levin reject judicial review, a basic principle of democracy that has been increasingly embraced around the world since WW II, he went on to put forward a fascist principle that the masses should be able to subvert the rule of law, saying that a “situation in which it is impossible to enact a basic law or take any decision in the Knesset or in the government without the approval of the justices of the Supreme Court deprives millions of citizens of their voice and their basic right to be equal partners in the decision-making process.” Actually, in a parliamentary system where the government only has 64 of 120 seats, for it to act in an unrestrained manner would disenfranchise nearly half the citizens, in what is known as a “tyranny of the majority,” of which James Madison was terrified. The Likud, rooted in the Central European far right thinking of the twentieth century interwar period, actively seeks a tyranny of the majority and so of course is annoyed by checks and balances such as judicial review. The web page of the US Supreme Court contains this language: “Hamilton had written that through the practice of judicial review the Court ensured that the will of the whole people, as expressed in their Constitution, would be supreme over the will of a legislature, whose statutes might express only the temporary will of part of the people.”

Thus, it is Levin who is being anti-democratic and favoring a violation of the rule of law. Levin pledged to continue the battle “on various fronts” and said that the ruling “will not weaken us.” The far right Likud Party and the fundamentalist Shas Party both basically repeated Levin’s talking points. The convicted racist, and obviously fascist, minister of national security, Itamar Ben-Gvir of the Jewish Power bloc, erupted, saying, “The Supreme Court decided to weaken the morale of the fighters in Gaza and harm them first and foremost.” He continued, “The Supreme Court’s ruling is illegal, and includes an unprecedented cancellation of a basic law, in the absence of a source of constitutional powers, while the judges have a conflict of interest. This is a dangerous and undemocratic event – and at this time, the Supreme Court’s ruling is harmful to the war effort.” Branding the court’s ruling “illegal” is a declaration of war by the executive and the parliamentary majority against the national judiciary, and presages dire internal conflict as soon as the artificial unity fostered by the Gaza campaign subsides. Opposition leader Yair Lapid of the Yesh Atid Party wrapped himself in the patriotism of the Gaza campaign from the other direction in expressing approval of the Court decision. He said, “Today the Supreme Court faithfully stood up for its role in protecting the citizens of Israel, and we give it our full support.” He continued, “If the Israeli government once again begins its struggle with the Supreme Court, then it will not have learned anything. They have not learned anything from October 7th. They have learned nothing from 87 days of war to defend the homeland.”

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As We Look to 2024, Here’s What Hope Looks Like

When it felt like the world was falling apart, these movements brought people together to make what seemed impossible, possible.

By SHAILLY GUPTA BARNES

After a year of economic hardship, climate disasters, and war, few could be blamed for feeling like our leaders have let us down. As we look ahead to a new year, I find it helpful to remember examples of those who not only saw the problem clearly, but brought people together to find solutions. In 1967, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. called for a “radical redistribution of political and economic power” to address poverty, war, and racism. To do so, he turned to those who were on the frontlines of these crises, not those who perpetrated them. He worked tirelessly to organize the original Poor People’s Campaign, bringing together welfare advocates, farm workers unions, antiwar advocates, and Native, Chicano, Puerto Rican, and poor white organizers together with the civil rights movement. King never wavered in his commitment to unite those who’d been divided for

too long by politics, race, religion, and geography. “It has been one of my dreams that we would come together and realize our common problems,” he said just a few weeks before his assassination, and to “make the power structure of this nation say yes, when they may be desirous to say no.” More than 50 years later, the power structures of our nation are invested in systems and structures that are destroying our lives and our planet. A new report from Oxfam USA, for example, blames the wealthiest people in the world for our climate breakdown – not only because of their lavish lifestyles, but also their influence on politics, media, and the economy. Every year their emissions cancel out the carbon savings of some of the best green technologies we have. The report calls for a “radical increase in equality” to save our planet. We know that those invested in the status quo won’t come forth with solutions to these crises that compromise their interests. That’s true whether we’re talking about the climate, inequality, poverty, or war. The answers will come from those who are confronting these systems directly. And that’s the good news. In many places, people standing up against injustice are shifting what’s possible. This fall, the United Auto Workers went on strike for six weeks, targeting each of the “Big Three” auto manufacturers. To confront these corporate behemoths, who’ve extracted nearly \$250 billion in profits over the past decade by exploiting workers, the UAW called on specific locals to “stand up” and strike, while others continued to work even with expired contracts.

President Shawn Fain rallied their members over social media, reminding them they weren’t trying to wreck the economy, but to wreck “their” economy – the economy of the Big Three and Wall Street. This clarity helped maintain the union’s united front. It shaped their demands for higher wages, better benefits for all workers, and an end to tiered wages. Significantly, it opened the door for workers to influence the electric vehicle market – breaking new ground for labor to find common cause with the climate movement. The union’s wins were nothing short of historic. More recently, the UAW became the largest union to join the call for a permanent ceasefire in Gaza. This is not just a testament to the union, but to the many, many

others who are coming together across politics, race, religion, and geography to demand peace, life, and freedom for Palestinians as well as Israelis. This is what hope looks like in times of great crisis, war, and inequality. It’s not foolishly romantic to celebrate this hope. It’s what gives us the courage and compassion to stand up another day, to find each other, and to make what seems impossible, possible. May it be so.

Shailly Gupta Barnes is the policy and research director for the Kairos Center for Religions, Rights, and Social Justice. This op-ed was distributed by OtherWords.org.



Five Angry Men on the Supreme Court

By JAMIE STIEHM

Is American democracy a match for the Supreme Court?

The John Roberts Supreme Court hangs menacingly over the land, with five angry men ready to undo the American people’s verdict on the presidency. The 6-3 Republican majority is truly a force to be feared in 2024: the war within, wearing black robes.

The worst part is their power has no checks and runs amok. There’s no end in sight, because the Court refuses to reform itself.

Congress urges the court to adopt a binding ethics code, but Roberts balks. The public has lost confidence in the court’s legitimacy, but that’s just tough on us.

The angriest men are Justices Samuel Alito and Clarence Thomas, by common knowledge. They may not care how legally pristine the Colorado State Supreme Court ruling is, finding former President Donald Trump cannot be on the primary ballot.

Those two, joined by the younger members named by Trump, are rocking the bench in their pursuit of raw political power.

Appointed by George W. Bush, Alito waited years to overturn reproductive rights. His Republican majority opinion opened with a snarl: that *Roe v. Wade* was “egregiously wrong.” He’s openly hostile to constitutional rights for women and girls, and progressive causes in general.

Thomas? Since the day he made it to the court, by a 52-48 vote, 32 years ago, smoke has come out of his ears. He was credibly accused of sexual harassment by Anita Hill, a dignified law professor. He refused to even listen to her testimony, and proved himself a rough coal-slinger, accusing the Senate committee (led by Joe Biden) of a “high-tech lynching.”

At 43, Thomas vowed to stay on the court long enough to get revenge. Chilling. It’s worth noting he was the older George Bush’s gift to democracy.

Ever since, Thomas has been a conservative darling, given lavish gifts and vacations by wealthy donors and the Federalist Society. One gave him a loan for more than \$250,000 for a fancy RV, which he never repaid in full.

Thomas’s former law clerks formed a phalanx to defend him from more damage to his reputation, according to the *New York*

Times. His wife Virginia acts as a gatekeeper, organizing reunions, websites and some such.

“Ginny” Thomas actively joined the conspiracy to deny that Biden won the election and was interviewed by the Jan. 6 House Committee. Yet her husband will not recuse himself from Trump cases.

There is no price to pay for all that so far. Alito is also a regular at glittering Federal Society galas.

The “FedSoc” is known in Washington circles as the engineer of the Supreme Court as we know it. In the four Trump years, Leonard Leo (the head) handpicked Neal Gorsuch, Brett Kavanaugh and Amy Coney Barrett to fill three vacancies.

The three are well-matched in ideology, no questions asked, though all hedged on *Roe v. Wade*, pretending they would leave it alone.

Gorsuch carries anger against Washington, and the federal government, since his mother Anne made a hash of the Environmental Protection Agency. A Ronald Reagan appointee, she was forced to resign.

Gorsuch and Kavanaugh both studied at the elite Catholic “Prep,” a boys school in Washington.

Kavanaugh, louder and more aggressive, was a Yale fraternity party boy. He was also accused of sexual harassment in his

Senate hearing, but a cursory FBI hearing let it go.

He was red-faced, bitter at being called out.

Also bad, Kavanaugh served as Kenneth Starr’s right-hand man in investigating and interrogating Monica Lewinsky for hours. She had no lawyer and committed no crime.

The fifth angry man is Roberts, because it’s not his court anymore.

Kavanaugh is perhaps the most shameless partisan. He organized the infamous “preppie riot” in Florida, during the deadlocked 2000 election, on behalf of George W. Bush.

So, the Supreme court has done it before, in the *Bush v. Gore* case in 2000, handing the Texan a tied presidential election by one vote, 5-4. It flew in the face of the popular vote, which Al Gore won.

That 2000 Court was less extreme and set the stage for tragedy. American democracy can’t afford to go to court again.

Jamie Stiehm is a former assignment editor at CBS News in London, reporter at The Hill, metro reporter at the Baltimore Sun and public policy scholar at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. She is author of a new play, “Across the River,” on Aaron Burr. See JamieStiehm.com.

We Are All In The Next Building

By BARRY FRIEDMAN

“Some of my friends are still waiting around to go home. I don’t know any more than anyone else ... I will echo the thanks to the first responders.”

That’s my friend Michael Green, professor of History and department chair at the University of Nevada Las Vegas, who posted that on the afternoon of Dec. 6.

“I was in the next building ... I heard gunfire, about 8-9 shots, sometime after noon. Within the hour the police took us out of the office and across the street. Some of us have stuff inside or outside our buildings.”

He was *in the next building*.

I teach a writing workshop in Tulsa, Oklahoma. One of my students, Warren, a Methodist pastor, sees an orthopedist.

What does that have to do with Michael?

On June 3, 2022, Warren had an appointment, which had to be cancelled, because on June 2, a man walked into the Natalie Medical Building on the campus at Saint Francis Hospital and shot and killed Dr. Preston Phillips, Warren’s doctor.

I have had my prostate checked in the next building.

The man, Michael Louis, also killed Stephanie Husen, Amanda Glenn, and William Love before killing himself.

Louis brought an AR-15 that afternoon. Louis bought the AR-15 that afternoon.

On the day of the shooting, Tulsa’s mayor, G.T. Bynum, Oklahoma’s governor, Kevin Stitt, its senators and representatives — all Republicans — said it was too early to talk about guns in America.

It’s always too early. It’s always too late.

I was crosstown when the shooting happened.

We’re all in the next building.

We’re all next to The Tops Friendly Supermarket in Buffalo, next to Robb Elementary in Uvalde, next to Virginia Tech University in Blacksburg, next to the Pulse Night Club in Orlando, next to Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, next to UNLV.

A few days after the shooting, I wrote a piece for *Esquire* and I got to muse about violence and serendipity.

“It was early. Local television news was now saying one dead, maybe not five as reported earlier. One could be an angry spouse, a disgruntled employee. One doesn’t make you think of renting an apartment in Reykjavik. Maybe the earlier report was wrong. It wasn’t. Later, another reporter said, “Five people were killed, including the killer.” Still another said, “Four people were killed, plus the shooter.”

Humanity is in the parsing. The dead don’t get to muse.

What does a bullet actually feel like when it pierces your body? When does the blood happen? When do you realize this is no ordinary day? When do you realize you’ll never see your daughter again?

Maybe you have Christmas gifts in the car that need wrapping.

Who knows about that?

University of Nevada, Las Vegas professors Naoko Takemaru, Cha-Jan “Jerry” Chang, and Patricia Navarro-Velez know, but they were murdered on Dec. 6.

The people killed in Tulsa at the Natalie Medical Building also know.

The people killed in ... also know.

On the news, there were tips about the importance of practicing active shooter drills at home, at play, in malls. Online, you can find bulletproof backpacks for your children.

This is how a country surrenders.

That night in Tulsa, I took a walk around the University of Tulsa campus — I have joked with Michael that my university is much more serene and beautiful than his — when a man came up behind me and followed me for what seemed like too long. I passed an angry man at a bus stop who was half on the curb, half on the street, punching his arms and kicking out his feet in all directions. I then saw a man sitting under a tree screaming at his dog who was sitting in his lap.

According to the Rand Corporation, 54.7% of adults in Oklahoma have guns.

When I returned home, my wife had already gone to bed. I turned on the TV. The killer wanted pain meds and was refused — maybe that was it. There was a report of a bomb in a Muskogee home — maybe some connection there. But then there was a report on grain problems in Southwest Oklahoma. Rain was forecast. There were car commercials, campaign ads.

We had moved on. Same day. But we had moved on.

One of the anchors wished us a good-night.

The Late Show with Stephen Colbert

opened with a skit about Elon Musk and horse sex.

Michael told me in the days that followed the shooting, he remembered getting strength from helping others. Allaying others’ fears helped allay his.

“Then at home,” he wrote, “Deb [his wife] couldn’t find something, and I hit my head on a cabinet and damn near got a concussion.”

They were having friends over — Hanukah was approaching — and his wife, inexplicably, bought ham.

“When she gets home,” Michael wrote, “she is going to get both barrels from me.”

A gun joke. Michael got to laugh.

Who gets to laugh?

On Facebook, America’s Waiting Room after shootings, he reminded us:

“Here’s what matters: Some are dead or injured. Our hearts are with them. Some are suffering other anguish. Our hearts are with them. Some are saying gun control is not the answer. They can go to hell.”

*Barry Friedman is an essayist, political columnist, petroleum geology reporter — quit laughing — and comedian living in Tulsa, Okla. His latest book, “Jack Sh*t: Volume One: Voluptuous Bagels and other Concerns of Jack Friedman” is out and the follow-up, “Jack Sh*t, Volume 2: Wait For The Movie. It’s In Color” is scheduled to be released in February. In addition, he is the author of “Road Comic,” “Funny You Should Mention It,” “Four Days and a Year Later,” “The Joke Was On Me,” and a novel, “Jacob Fishman’s Marriages.” See barryfriedman.com and friedmanoftheplains.com.*

A World Away?

By SETH SANDRONSKY

Our 24/7 reliance on technology plays a big role in “Leave the World Behind,” a film streaming on Netflix now. Set in Long Island, the film stars Julia Roberts, Ethan Hawke and Mahershala Ali.

Roberts and Hawke are the parents of a teenage daughter and son. Roberts is the alpha of the married couple, members of the professional managerial class who no doubt vote for Democrats.

She hates people. Her occupation in the corporate world explains in part this hatred of others.

In time, odd occurrences begin to affect the family’s vacation. These oddities, from failed internet connectivity to unusual animal activity, increase when Ali and Myha’la Jael Herrold, who plays his daughter, appear at the vacationers’ front door.

Ali is a terrific actor. His smile masks rage, reminding me of a young Morgan

Freeman.

In time, suspicions of the strangers’ presence gives way to appreciation of their assistance. Necessity in the face of danger and fear rules the day as access to our modern communication system weakens, and so-called smart technology as self-driving Tesla cars crash one after the other.

We are all in this together is a conclusion that the Herrold character articulates. She is an acute observer of individual and social fault lines, in my opinion, while poking and prodding the Hawke character, an academic, in a biting scene of marijuana and frank comments.

Under a system that rewards possessive individualism and produces alienated individuals, Herrold’s character makes a revolutionary observation. It delivers much to think about in our time of multiple social fractures, a legacy, I suggest, of the corporate government coopting and crushing of labor unions and progressive movements for decades.

On that note, the Ali character speaks about market signals that he failed to take seriously. That failing, we learn from him,

well might have led to his wife’s demise. Interestingly, he depicts the market in almost mystical terms.

That is of course capitalist ideology. It serves in large measure to make the role of the government in the market invisible. It is, for one instance, government policies that line the pockets of Big Tech and Big Pharma.

Government-granted copyrights and patents do not fall from the clouds, and they are hardly as natural as sunrise and sunset. You know, the best democracy money can and does buy on Capitol Hill and statehouses across the US.

Further, and perhaps most strikingly, the Ali character talks of a coup d’état underway in the USA. The irony, of course, is that Uncle Sam has armed and financed scores of such government overthrows around much of the Global South, from Guatemala and Iran in 1953 to Libya in 2011, harming the poor and working classes in the former colonized nations.

That history of coup d’état as a foreign policy of Uncle Sam is absent largely in the K-12 American public and private school

system. Instead, omission of this imperial history dominates.

There is much of interest to watch in “Leave the World Behind,” an intriguing film adapted from Rumaan Alam’s 2020 novel.

Seth Sandronsky lives and works in Sacramento. He is a journalist and member of the Pacific Media Workers Guild. Email sethsandronsky@gmail.com.



Biden, Pope Francis, and the Matter of Faith

We and many other organizations and peaceful protesters in our country have worked in vain to persuade President Joe Biden to use his influence to have the Israeli regime agree to a ceasefire that would allow hundreds of humanitarian aid trucks daily into the devastated graveyard that is now the Gaza Strip. Biden regularly begs Israel to let in more trucks, paid for by the U.S. At the same time the Biden Administration exercises veto power on the UN Security Council blocking a ceasefire, truce, or negotiations toward a permanent two-state resolution. A ceasefire would at least allow aid to reach the besieged.

According to Professor Devi Sridhar, chair of global public health at the University of Edinburgh, “[U]nless something changes, the world faces the prospect of almost a quarter of Gaza’s 2 million population – close to half a million human beings...” can die within a year. (See, *The Guardian*, Dec. 29, 2023 article:).

We have appealed to Biden’s duty to apply vigorous diplomacy to this cascade of genocidal war crimes by Netanyahu. This means suspension of hostilities, and the immediate flow of critical food, water, medical, shelter, and other supplies for civilians, followed by serious negotiations toward a two-state solution. Instead, Antony Blinken, his Secretary of State, behaves as a Secretary of War shuttling between the US and

Israel. We have appealed to Biden’s political sense and how he is losing the support of more Americans every day as the slaughters of children, women, the elderly and other innocents worsen. None of these appeals has moved this co-belligerent in the White House. All that is left is to appeal to what he has said his practicing Catholicism means to him every day. The following letter addresses his conscience as a matter of his professed religious faith.

Dec. 29, 2023
Honorable Joe Biden
President of the United States
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
The White House
Washington, D.C. 20500
Re: Your Catholic faith. Aiding and abetting Israeli government genocide in Gaza including bombing the Holy Family Catholic Church and Convent. Abuse of power is a cardinal sin.
Dear Mr. President:

You describe yourself as a “practicing Catholic.” During an interview with *The Jesuit Review* on September 21, 2015, you emphatically asserted that all faiths have an “obligation to fight against abuse of power:” as a cardinal sin worse than all others that should be arrested and defeated. You added that “every human being is entitled to be treated with dignity.”

In late October, Pope Francis decried the Israeli government’s post-Oct. 7, 2023, attack on Gaza in a phone conversation with Israeli President Isaac Herzog: “It is forbidden to respond to terror with terror.” On Dec. 17, 2023, the Pope deplored as “terrorism” the bombing and killings by the Israeli government of two Catholic women, an elderly mother, and her grown daughter,

a war? One of the most famous examples is the Christmas Truce of 1914, when German and British troops crawled out of their trenches and met in no-man’s land to exchange presents, play soccer and celebrate the holiday together. A day or two later, however, World War I resumed. It’s a cute story that changed nothing.

Israel owes the people of Gaza nothing less than an immediate cessation of hostilities and official acceptance that the current conflict is a war crime for which top Israeli governmental and military officials should be prosecuted. The IDF should withdraw. Israel should pay to rebuild everything it destroyed and compensate the families of dead and wounded Palestinians. It should house everyone it has displaced on Israeli territory, in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem if need be. It should recognize a free and sovereign Republic of Palestine in Gaza and the West Bank, with East Jerusalem as its capital, within 1967 borders along with a safe corridor to connect the currently non-contiguous borders. The 700,000 settler-colonists should leave the West Bank and return to Israel.

A ceasefire seems so tiny by comparison. Which is why it’s proving effective as a demand.

When people confront two parties engaged in a conflict, one of their first reactions is to try to assess which, if either, is right (or at least more right). This determination is affected by such cognitive biases as

and the wounding of seven others who had taken refuge in the Holy Family Catholic Church and Convent.

The Israeli government’s defense minister has dehumanized 2.3 million Palestinians in Gaza as “human animals” and pledged to treat them, accordingly, denying them the dignity to which you insist each person is entitled according to your Catholic Gospel.

You have acted unswervingly in support of the Israeli government’s genocide in Gaza, including a siege that according to the Israeli defense minister’s proclamation means “No electricity, no food, no fuel, no water...” Article II (c) of the Genocide Convention in 1949, born of the Holocaust, defines genocide as, “Deliberately inflicting on [a national, ethnical, racial, or religious] group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part.”

To complement the physical destruction caused by the siege, the Israeli government has bombed and invaded Gaza killing tens of thousands of civilians and displaced virtually its entire population targeting hospitals, ambulances, journalists, water mains, houses, apartment buildings, schools, offices, marketplaces, United Nations marked schools, UNRWA personnel, places of worship, and crowded refugee camps, roads, generators and electric networks, and more.

This is genocide by any yardstick. Pope Francis has denounced the Israeli government’s actions in Gaza as “terrorism.” As a self-proclaimed observant, practicing Catholic, you have not only failed to heed Pope Francis’ figurative encyclical regarding Gaza but are shipping billions of dollars of weapons into the arsenal of the Israeli government to assist its Gaza terrorism, including attacking the Holy Family Catholic Church. In your many expressions of support for what Netanyahu is destroying in Gaza, you have not found any room to express condemnation of this Israeli government’s attack on this lone Catholic Church in Gaza.

whether one side looks or acts more like the person making the assessment. In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, some Americans have baked-in personal allegiances because they are Jewish or Muslim.

Which leaves the other 97% of the population. Citizens of the United States are notoriously ignorant about politics and cultures beyond their borders. To the extent that they pay attention to the Middle East conflict, there has been a historical bias in favor of Israel, a fact that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his ally President Joe Biden relied upon at the beginning of the war in Gaza. As we have seen in the past, however, Israeli overreaction has prompted the public to take a closer look and, following the usual practice, led them to a “pox on both of their houses” stance. Deputy National Security Adviser K.T. McFarland repeated that trope in 2020 when she claimed on Fox News that in “... the Middle East, they’ve been fighting for 4,000 years. It’s been an ethno-sectarian battle and psychodrama, and they’ve been killing each other for millennia. Their normal state of condition is war.” (This is not even a little bit true, but let’s leave that for another time.)

Some 20,000+ dead Palestinians into the latest episode of the conflict, the Gaza war has become a catastrophe too big to ignore or dismiss with glib inanities. Day after day, as Americans’ social media feeds fills with bloody images of dead Palestinian babies, initial public sympathy for Israel has given way to a feeling that the Palestinians

You have made the U.S. government into a “co-belligerent” under international law and have given a greenlight “with powerful weaponry” to what Netanyahu is doing to Gaza, including enabling him to block most humanitarian aid from starving, sick and mortally injured Palestinians, a majority of whom are women and children.

The Israeli government has no self-defense justification for the genocide. It targets Palestinian civilians throughout Gaza wherever they are gathered, fleeing, sheltering, starving, and dying.

Practicing Catholics are made of more holy and peaceful convictions.

King Henry VIII was excommunicated by Pope Paul III in 1538 for divorcing Catherine of Aragon, a far lesser sin by your standards than the United States’ and Israeli government’s continuing “abuse of power” in Gaza, i.e., terrorism, war crimes and genocide, promoted by American weapons, intelligence, and repeated lone vetoes in the United Nations Security Council—a cardinal sins according to your own yardstick.

What do you think Pope Francis should communicate to you?

Sincerely,
Bruce Fein, Esq.
Ralph Nader, Esq.

Ralph Nader is a consumer advocate, lawyer and author. See www.nader.org or facebook.com/ralphnader. Bruce Fein is a lawyer who specializes in constitutional and international law. He served in the Department of Justice and was general counsel for the Federal Communications Commission during the Reagan administration, is active on civil liberties issues, was a co-founder of the American Freedom Agenda in 2007 with Bob Barr, David Keene and Richard Viguerie and Fein has worked for the American Enterprise Institute and The Heritage Foundation, both conservative think tanks, as an analyst and commentator. He is also a resident scholar at the Turkish Coalition of America.

of Gaza are victims at least as much as the Israelis of Oct. 7. Choosing sides is no longer easy. But one thing is clear: the carnage has gone on too long and, even if a long-term conclusion like a two-state solution is impossibly elusive, the bombing simply has to stop.

By mid-December, three out of five American voters—with few differences between political parties—supported a ceasefire, up significantly from October. The public had caught up to the pro-Palestinian activists. By not asking for much, the Left appears moderate and reasonable.

Meanwhile, voters keep reading headlines in which the Israeli government is refusing a ceasefire. To the contrary, Netanyahu says the war will continue for “many more months.” Israel is framing itself as rabid, overreaching and bloodthirsty.

Because it is out of sync with public opinion, good will for Israel is ebbing like the pulse of a man bleeding to death from a gunshot wound. Although older voters still tend to support Israel, a mere 28% of voters between ages 18 and 29 told the latest *New York Times*/Siena College poll that they believed Israel was seriously interested in a peaceful solution. On the other hand, half said the Palestinians do want peace.

Ted Rall, political cartoonist, columnist and graphic novelist, co-hosts the left-vs-right DMZ America podcast with fellow cartoonist Scott Stantis. Write him c/o his website (rall.com), Twitter @tedrall



Ski Bum Culture Hits Reality

By HEATHER HANSMAN

Nearly two decades ago, I moved to the mountains to be a ski bum, chasing snow. I was a stereotype—an East Coast kid pulled west by the promise of bigger adventures and higher mountain ranges. I was also part of a counterculture that rejected social norms in favor of 100-day ski seasons.

In ski towns in western Colorado in 2005, risk was everywhere, but in a way that felt exciting. I liked the brag of drinking too much, and I was too naïve to notice harder drugs. Climate change seemed theoretical, and no one I knew had died in the mountains yet.

Corporate entities were just starting to binge-buy resorts while I somehow thought that living in my car was cool and I could exist like that forever.

But myths are complicated things to keep alive, and I eventually left ski towns to work as a writer, already seeing the ski-bum dream changing. I saw friends struggling to build careers, families and community while

still chasing the fragile dream that a powder day topped almost everything.

So recently, I went back to see what was going on, to try to track the evolution of what had been my own obsession. I looped through mountain towns across the West, from Aspen, Colorado to Victor, Idaho and Big Sky, Montana, to assess the current state of ski bums.

What I found was that everyone trying to build a life in those towns was struggling, from my old colleagues who had stuck around and wished they’d bought real estate to “lifties” fresh out of school.

“A lot of people here are living a fantasy I can’t obtain,” said Malachi Artice, a 20-something skier working multiple jobs in Jackson, Wyoming.

At the most basic level, the math just didn’t work. In most mountain towns, it’s now nearly impossible to work a single full-time service job, the kind that resort towns depend on, and afford rent. The pressure shows up in nearly everything, including abysmal mental health outcomes like anxiety and depression.

Ski towns have some of the highest suicide rates in the country, and social services haven’t expanded to meet demand. Racial gaps are also widening in an industry that often depends on undocumented immigrants to fill the poorly paid, but nec-

essary, jobs it takes to keep a tourist town running.

On top of all that, abundant snowfall, the basis of a ski resort’s economy, is getting cooked by climate change.

And sure, you can argue skiing is superficial and unimportant, but ski towns—some of the most elite and economically unequal places in the country—are microcosms for the way our social fabric is splitting.

Ski towns face crucial, complicated questions: Can they build affordable housing and also preserve open space? What happens when healthcare workers or teachers won’t take jobs because they can’t find a way to live in the community they serve? Will a town willingly curb growth when that’s what supports the tax base?

There are no easy answers because the problems are entrenched in both that slow-moving nostalgia that stymies change, and in the downhill rush of capitalism, which gives power to whoever pays the most: The housing market always tilts toward high-end real estate instead of modestly priced homes for essential workers.

What we value shapes our lives, and so I think we must hold the ski industry to higher standards. If these rarefied places can find ways to support working as well as leisure-based communities, they could serve

as lessons for change elsewhere.

During my tour, I saw necessary workers in the ski industry facing hard economic choices, but I also saw positive, community-scale change. In Alta, Utah, for instance, the arts nonprofit Alta Community Enrichment added mental health support when its employees reported an urgent need.

If ski-resort towns are going to survive, the lives of their workers need to matter, and that means caring about them—from affordable housing to accessible mental health support.

Heather Hansman is a contributor to Writers on the Range, writersontherange.org, an independent nonprofit dedicated to spurring lively conversation about the West. She is the author of Powder Days: Ski Bums, Ski Towns and the Future of Chasing Snow, and lives in Durango, Colorado.

Editor’s Note: “Outrage in Wyoming,” by Savannah Rose, in the 1/15/24 TPP, urged the state not to auction off 640 acres within Grand Teton National Park. Her piece helped raise the number of angry objectors to 9,000, with 7,000 comments coming in the last week. The pressure worked: Wyoming officials postponed a decision on an auction until sometime in 2024.

It Was 60 Years Ago When The Beatles Began to Play in the USA

By ROB PATTERSON

Back then fans said “Beatles 4ever,” and they have proven to be eternal. In 1964, when The Beatles first led the pop-rock music British Invasion of America, there were observers, commentators and crusty old farts who predicted that the beat group out of Liverpool would be little more than a passing fancy. At this juncture it’s safe to say that they were dead wrong.

Last year we were treated to the final new song from the full Fab Four, “Now and Then.” And for the first time with a Beatles song, its songwriting credits are John, Paul, George and Ringo (on the final version), as maybe they should have done all along. The track started with a Lennon piano/voice cassette recording made in 1977 during his years as a house husband and loving father to his son Sean at his and

Yoko’s Dakota apartment. It is the last possible recording to feature all four Fabs, as detailed in a 12-minute minute mini-doc, “Now And Then — The Last Beatles Song,” streaming on YouTube and other channels.

Released as a two-song “single” — few even issue 45rpm seven-inch vinyl records? — with the band’s first single, “Love Me Do” (remastered) on the “flipside, The word from the Beatles camp is that the release “bookends” their career.

Let’s not cue up the resonant orchestral chord at the end of their song “The End.” Yes, the new song is the final note on their recording career. But by now The Beatles are eternal.

As they deserve to be. The group started out as a totally smoking and tight-as-a-knot four-piece rock combo — as good as any that ever hit the stage, thanks to the seasoning they got playing long nights in Hamburg in their early years. John Lennon and Paul McCartney quickly developed into masterful pop-rock songwriters and then evolved into splendid composers and writers of songs. And George Harrison and Ringo Starr became better and more creative as musicians and also songwriters while producer George Martin expanded his studio and recording skills alongside the band’s stunning progressions.

be put in camps and forced to fight in cage matches—Muslim vs. Jew, Jew vs. Muslim.

“May the best religion win,” said Elon. “What we need is good old-fashioned competition to work out the kinks of their animosity, thereby saving the world from their endless wars.”

Also according to the whistleblowing aide, Elon plans to bulldoze every square inch of Israel’s land, ridding the country of the very foundation of religious conflict: Bethlehem, Jerusalem, the Western Wall, the Dome of the Rock, Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the Mount of Olives, Golgotha, the Garden Tomb and other sacred religious triggers.

Elon finally revealed his intentions to his top engineer, Andrew, who exploded and threw up his hands, “You can’t do this! You can’t allow your Asperger’s to get in the way of all human feelings.”

“Feelings?” hollered Elon, his face a massive smear of crimson, “You think I got to be the richest MOFO on the planet because I cared about feelings? Feelings have gotten us into this mess and I plan to end it. I’m going to bring the God of science and reason to the Middle East. Someone has to do it.” He paced in circles as he shivered out his intentions.

“Once I bring back the Jews and Palestinians to work in my new factories for Tesla, the Falcon Nine rockets and Starlink satellites, they will soon realize the benefits of getting along in the furtherance of my grand technology. Of course, they’ll have to work

What they accomplished in a mere seven-and-change years as a recording act over 13 studio albums — averaging two albums a year; virtually no one does that anymore — is a musical legacy pretty much without compare within the 1950s and after rock era. Although I am loathe to use the words “best” or “greatest” when talking about music — my mantra is that music is qualitative not quantitative — I would have to say that The Beatles catalog is just about the finest by any rock band.

Which is one big reason why The Beatles remain popular today. To wit, “Now And Then” hit #7 on the *Billboard* Hot 100 (then did drop to #76 the next week) and #1 in England, and was something of a media sensation.

Last year also saw the publication of “Living the Beatles Legend: On the Road With the Fab Four: The Mal Evans Story,” taken from the diaries of the band’s driver and dogsbody.

The allure of The Beatles isn’t just limited to boomers like me, who saw them debut on “The Ed Sullivan Show” and had the trajectory of my life blast off towards becoming involved in rock music. I have come to know on Facebook a young woman here in Austin, Texas, who’s some 30 years younger than I am and chose the Beatles as

70 hours a week, but that will build their character like no God ever could!”

Andrew spluttered, “You know, of course, that if you put a few bends in the arms of your beloved X it becomes a swastika!”

“So?”

“So the US Government can’t be too happy about all of this!”

Elon smiled when he replied, “Capitalists in the United States will make them fold. They always do. They’re my biggest supporters.

“A side benefit for Netanyahu is that my takeover of Israel and its government keeps him out of jail, forever. As long as the

her field of academic study, and earned a Ph.D. in The Beatles from Liverpool Hope University.

Successive generations continue to be wooed and wowed by the Fab Four just as I was six decades ago, and it shows no signs of fading away. Beatles 4ever? You bet!

Populist Picks

TV SHOW: “Archie” — This dramatic look at the life of Cary Grant, based around a memoir by his wife Dyan Cannon, is an entertaining and insightful tale that shows well how stardom and success can’t alone heal the traumas of a horrid childhood.

TV SERIES: “My Life as a Rolling Stone” — In four segments focusing on Mick Jagger, Keith Richards, Ronnie Wood and the late Charlie Watts, the curtain is pulled back to show their real lives and how music became their lives within the legendary group whose legacy most rivals The Beatles, and how the band overcame fractures in the ‘80s that could have ended it to now thrive as vital elder statesmen of rock’n’roll.

Rob Patterson is a music and entertainment writer in Austin, Texas. Email orca@prism-net.com.

SATIRE/ Rosie Sorenson

Elon’s Final Solution

Elon Musk travelled to Israel on Nov. 27, 2023, to meet with Benjamin Netanyahu and tour the remains of an incinerated village.

No reason given for the trip, but many felt it was an apology tour on Elon’s part for having agreed with the X (formerly Twitter) user who claimed Jews hated White people.

Elon had posted this response to the user’s screed: “You have said the actual truth.”

During his tour, Elon was reported to have tweeted (or is it Xed?), “Actions speak louder than words.”

Thanks to an aide traveling with Elon and Netanyahu, we now understand the true nature of those actions.

The aide has disclosed that Elon secretly agreed to buy Israel from Netanyahu, promising a down payment of \$5 billion worth of shekels, to be sent immediately to Netanyahu’s secret Swiss bank account.

In what Elon hopes to be a surprise in March of 2024, he plans to round up all Israelis and whatever is left of the Palestinians and move them to Texas where they will



CAPSULE REVIEWS/ED RAMPPELL

Four films screened at American Film Institute Fest: ‘Memory,’ ‘Menus-Plaisir,’ ‘Io Capitano,’ and ‘Albert Brooks: Defending My Life’

Memory: Can Love Conquer All?

Writer/director Michel Franco’s moving “Memory” is one of AFI FEST 2023’s most memorable movies. Jessica Chastain plays Sylvia, who works at an adult daycare facility and is first glimpsed in an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting where the recovering ex-drinker participates in a 12-step program in Brooklyn. At a subsequent high school reunion, Sylvia has a strange encounter with Saul (Peter Sarsgaard), who she goes on to (wrongly) accuse of having sexually abused her when they were students. As it turns out, Sylvia has a history of incestuous sexual molestation, which likely triggered her substance abuse. Saul, too, has his own afflictions.

To make a long story short, “Memory” poses the question as to whether or not two damaged souls can overcome their troubles through contact, closeness, connection and communications? Chastain and Sarsgaard will likely – and most deservedly – be Oscar contenders for their poignant performances as suffering individuals reaching out for love and solace, despite the slings and arrows of dubious “well-meaning” relatives. The supporting cast, too, is well-directed, with Jessica Harper as a harpy of a mother; Merritt Wever (of “Nurse Jackie”) as a sister striving to be supportive; and Brooke Timber as a teenaged daughter who is in-the-know about how love may just be the cure-all.

Beautifully acted, over the course of 100-minutes “Memory” sometimes seems like a slice of life, about real people with real

problems, trying to figure it all out and find happiness and meaning in their lives. It is currently in theaters. Don’t miss it!

Menus-Plaisir—Les Troisgros: Bon Appetit!

If “Memory” offers filmgoers a slice of life, Frederick Wiseman’s “Menus-Plaisir – Les Troisgros” is, with the running time of four hours, the cinematic equivalent of a 10-course meal. Ironically, despite its length (likely AFI FEST 2023’s longest title), “Menus-Plaisir” was one of only a couple of films playing at this year’s film fete that requested critics to only file capsule reviews of it at this time. So, to honor the veteran documentarian’s wishes, here goes:

This is a 240-minute homage to the Troisgros dining dynasty that exhaustively covers their three Michelin star restaurants in France. With his usual cinema verité verve, Wiseman exhaustively takes us behind the scene, from the dining rooms to the kitchens, where all of the magic happens, and beyond – to the dairies and farms where cheeses are produced, vegetables and fruits grown and animals raised, before finding their way to the tables of the elegant establishments for very fine (and very pricey) dining and imbibing of bottles of vino, some worth thousands of euros each.

Strangely, important exposition as to who, what and where we’re seeing on-screen only makes a brief appearance towards the very end. And as the aging chef discusses retirement with one of his older clients while they’re served supper, we get a glimpse into where Wiseman’s at now – and that it may not be time to say “au

revoir” to this venerable 93-year-old filmmaker and his work yet. Watching “Menus-Plaisir – Les Troisgros” unspool is often like observing real life. Those into Wiseman’s painstaking cinematic techniques will probably be enthralled (as I was), while more impatient viewers may wish the director learned how to say “cut!” Either way, this documentary, which is currently in release, will make you hungry – for food and film.

Me Captain (Io Capitano): Fantastic Voyage

In this gripping feature based on a true story, Italian director/co-writer Matteo Garrone takes us behind the scenes of the immigration crisis rocking Europe. Viewers are used to seeing these desperate migrants in battered, barely seaworthy boats at the end of their quests, but, as Garrone told festival goers, in “Me Captain” he “put the camera on the other side ... Their journey is an adventure, this is the reverse shot of what we see in Europe,” with epic odysseys that have resulted in “27,000 people dead,” due to their risky seeking of better lives against all odds.

In “Me Captain,” Seydou (Seydou Sarr) is a 16-year-old Senegalese dreaming of leaving his basic life in the former West African French colony far behind in order to migrate to Italy, where he imagines fame and fortune awaits him as a pop singer. Sneaking away from his loving mother and family, Seydou pays the African equivalent of “coyotes” – people traffickers – and crosses Senegal then, eventually, the dangerous Sahara Desert by truck and foot, ending up enslaved and imprisoned in Libya.

When he finally sets sail for Italy in a rickety, overcrowded ship, the adolescent finds that he’s forced to be the pilot of it for a perilous journey that makes Ulysses’ jaunt across the Mediterranean look like a hop, skip and a jump in comparison. Me Captain is a tremendously powerful film that tells the migrants’ and refugees’ side of the story. What the movie doesn’t tell us is why Seydou and so many like him are willing to undergo such hazardous, arduous journeys to seek better lives? Senegal has been independent for 60 years now; why can’t Sene-

gal provide adequately for citizens like Seydou? Is it because of the IMF? French neo-colonialism? The Senegalese national bourgeoisie? I don’t know the answer, but that’s clearly another film – probably a documentary. “Io Capitano” is scheduled to be released in February.

Albert Brooks: Defending My Life: High-Larious!

You don’t have to be Jewish to love “Albert Brooks: Defending My Life,” real Jewish humor. And *oy vey!* oh boy! we – all of us – can use some levity now to help us get through these grim war-torn times. Directed by Albert Brooks’ longtime friend and fellow comedian, Rob Reiner, this nonfiction biopic covers the career and offscreen existence of the actor, standup comic, writer and director, whose birth name is actually (no kidding!) “Albert Einstein.”

Interwoven with Reiner’s interview with his subject, this 88-minute documentary includes copious clips from movies Brooks has appeared in and/or written and directed, including his Oscar-nommed role in 1987’s “Broadcast News,” 1985’s “Lost in America” and 1991’s “Defending Your Life.” There are moments from many of his singularly offbeat, often hilarious, routines that Brooks performed on TV variety shows hosted by tube luminaries such as Ed Sullivan, Steve Allen, Johnny Carson and David Letterman. The talking heads who offer commentary are a who’s who of contemporary American comedy, from Jon Stewart to Chris Rock to Larry David to Judd Apatow to Ben Stiller to Sarah Silverstein, etc. It would be indefensible to miss “Albert Brooks: Defending My Life,” which is good fun from the first to final frame. It is available on HBO.

For more info see: <https://fest.afi.com/>.

Ed Rampell is a film historian and critic based in Los Angeles. Rampell is the author of “Progressive Hollywood, A People’s Film History of the United States” and he co-authored “The Hawaii Movie and Television Book,” now in its third edition. This originally appeared at HollywoodProgressive.com.

What Tom Harkin Would Do If He Were Running For Office in 2024

By DOUGLAS BURNS

Tom Harkin still has it. The pulse of Iowa on instinct auto dial. And a force of moral clarity and that defining doggedness, an aw-shucks ease with voters, and a rhetorical sledgehammer ever ready when he needs it.

He’s fast, too, on the draw with a prescription for Democrats in Iowa in 2024.

It’s discipline of message, the former Democratic senator told me in an interview recently in Council Bluffs.

“If I were running for the Legislature in Iowa there are only three issues I’d run on, no matter what part of the state I was in,” Harkin said. “First, no public tax money for religious schools, period. The second issue I would campaign on: government should not be able to take your private property for a private company, period. And the third issue would be reproductive freedom for women. I’d just do those three issues. I wouldn’t talk about anything else.”

The boost to private schools through vouchers/education savings accounts, will come at an expense to the public schools, many Democrats and others argue. And the threat to property rights with pipeline proposals and roll back of women’s rights on abortion also leave Republicans vulnerable, Harkin said.

Simply put, Democrats should be focusing on economic messages more than cultural issues, he said, adding that Democrats also need to get back to a shoe-

leather approach, face-to-face work with voters.

“We Democrats have to get every one of our voters out,” Harkin said. “We have to double down on door knocking. We have to do better at making sure our voters are registered.”

There are big challenges looming for Democrats in the next year.

Politics are nationalized in the modern era. And more than a third of Democrats themselves don’t want to see President Biden run for re-election in 2024.

Harkin has a response to that. “I would use Joe Biden’s favorite phrase, ‘Don’t compare me to the almighty. Compare me to the alternative,’” Harkin said. “You ask about Joe Biden, and they think, ‘Oh, there’s got to be somebody better and younger and all that kind of stuff. But when it gets down to Biden and Trump all those Democrats are coming home. And I think a fair amount of Republicans who just could not abide about Trump being president again – and then really taking over the Republican party lock, stock and barrel. There are enough moderate Republicans out there who still don’t want that to happen.”

Harkin, 84, a native of Cumming, Iowa who graduated from Iowa State University, and first ran for Congress in 1972 (winning election in 1974) said he became involved – “came of age,” he said – in Iowa politics in the 1950s.

“The Democrats in the Iowa Legislature (in the 1950s) always joked that they could caucus in a phone booth,” Harkin said. “But then we just worked hard, and we started electing a few people that became good leaders so we came up.”

“These things kind of have a wave,” Harkin said. “I would say right now there is a lot of turbulence politically, and people are upset and they don’t know which way to go right now, so a lot of people gravitate

toward a Trump for various reasons.”

Recent election have shown working-class, non-college-educated voters fleeing the Democratic Party.

“Well, bring them back home,” Harkin said. “I don’t think we have done a good job of responding to the base. We drifted off under Clinton and maybe Obama, those years, of appealing only to the educated class in America. What we forgot was our base was getting decimated and we didn’t do things necessary to keep their wages and income up where it should have been. For probably 30 some years our base kept losing ground and we wonder why they left us. We never responded to them.”

At the the end of the interview I asked Harkin if he ever planned to write a memoir about his 40 years of service in the U.S. House and Senate – and his 1992 presidential run. He left office a decade ago.

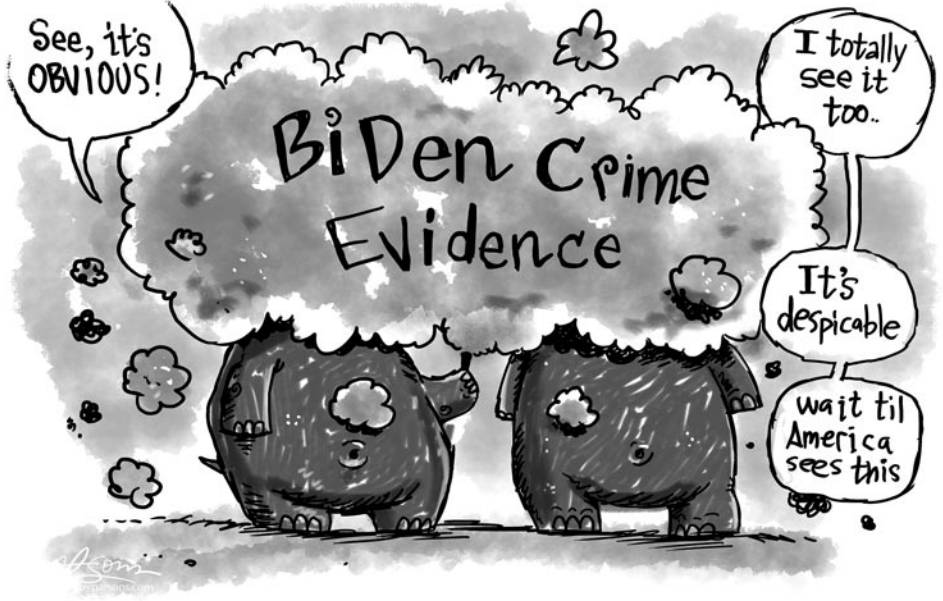
Don’t expect one, Harkin said.

“Oh, I’ve thought about it, but I just never got around to it,” Harkin said. “But you know, I don’t know, a lot of these memoirs written by congressmen and senators, you know, they really aren’t worth very much. I’d rather put my effort into the (Harkin) institute.”

The non-partisan Tom and Ruth Harkin Institute is located in Des Moines on the Drake University campus. It assists in developing policies based on facts, data, he said.

“I’m hoping the institute will act as kind of a thing that maybe can even get the Republican Party back to a more moderate stance,” Harkin said.

Douglas Burns of Carroll, Iowa, is a fourth-generation Iowa journalist and a member of the Iowa Writers’ Collaborative. See his writings at theiowamercury.substack.com. (Dave Zirin is off this week.)



AMY GOODMAN



Bishop Barber suffers from a debilitating form of arthritis that requires him to sit in a special high chair, but the theater wouldn't allow it.

Accommodate Me Caringly: Bishop Barber Confronts ADA Discrimination at AMC Theaters

Bishop William Barber is taking a stand, after being denied a place to sit down. It happened on the day after Christmas.

Barber is a renowned civil rights activist, co-chair of the Poor People's Campaign, a theologian and preacher. He's a Yale Professor and Founding Director of the Center for Public Theology and Public Policy at Yale Divinity School, and, for almost 30 years, was Pastor of Greenleaf Christian Church in Goldsboro, NC.

Barber's 90-year-old mother wanted to spend Christmas with him. They planned to go see the just-released remake of "The Color Purple," the 1985 film based on the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel by Alice Walker. They drove to the AMC Theater in Greenville. That's when his problem began.

In a news conference days later, Barber, whose typically thunderous oratory has been likened to that of Martin Luther King, Jr., choked up as he described what happened:

"We had to come to Greenville because you all know in eastern North Carolina there ain't a whole lot of theaters, in our small rural towns like Roper, and Piney Woods, and Jamesville and Bertie, and Chocowinity, Plymouth. We went to enjoy the music and the story of that movie of triumph over adversity ... the movie was a gift to my mother who came to North Carolina as a federal government administrative professional in the 1960s to help integrate public schools with my father who was asked to come here by EV Wilkins, the former principal of what was then the all black Union School in Roper, North Carolina. Going to this movie this week was supposed to be a gift to me, and a gift to her."

Barber's younger brother died of pancreatic cancer several years ago, making him an only son again, so time with his mother was that much more important. Barber described his struggle with his own disability:

"For more than 30 years now, I've suffered from a form of arthritis. This is rare, but one of the most dangerous. debilitating

forms called ankylosing spondylitis ... I'm walking now with two canes, I have to carry a high chair with me everywhere I go ... I cannot begin to sit in a low chair nor rise from a low position."

Managers at the AMC theater in Greenville, North Carolina, told Barber that he could not use his special chair in the theater. They called armed security and the police and had Bishop Barber removed.

Barber saw purple – just not "The Color Purple."

"I think about all the other people in the world, people who don't get up and try to enjoy public accommodation, because of their fear. The law says you have to reasonably accommodate. There was no attempt to accommodate, there was an attempt to say no, period, end of story. You're not coming in," said Barber on the Democracy Now! news hour. Barber has brought this chair with him everywhere, from Yale to jail, from Broadway to the Vatican to the White House, without any issues.

The 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act, the ADA, bans discrimination against differently-abled people in employment; bans discrimination by state and local government (a similar ban in federal facilities and federally-funded programs preceded the ADA); in public places like movie theaters and restaurants; and requires websites to be accessible.

Yet, more than 33 years after the ADA was passed and signed into law by Republican President George H.W. Bush, differently-abled people still face discrimination and exclusion on a daily basis.

"Of all the things we have to be fighting at this time of war, anti-semitism, Islamophobia, homophobia, of fight for voting rights, the fight for living wages, the fight for health care, that these two would choose to fight me, to fight somebody who has a visible disability, and saying no to me going in and watching a movie that's about triumph and family, which is why my mother really wanted to see it on that day."

It's ironic that Bishop Barber would suffer discrimination attempting to take his mother, herself a civil rights activist, to see "The Color Purple," a story that plumbs the experiences of Black people in the Jim Crow South in the early decades of the 20th century – experiences that shaped Barber and his family.

But Barber is an organizer. Following the incident, Adam Aron, the CEO of AMC Theaters, the world's largest movie theater chain, flew to Greenville to meet with him. Barber says the conversation has just begun.

"This is about what systemic changes and policy changes to training need to be done to ensure this happens to no one," the bishop said at his news conference. "AMC should mean this when somebody says 'AMC': I know they will Accommodate Me Caringly."

Denis Moynihan cowrote this column. Amy Goodman is the host of Democracy Now!, a daily international TV/radio news hour airing on more than 1,400 radio and TV stations. Her sixth book, co-authored with Moynihan and David Goodman, is "Democracy Now!: Twenty Years Covering the Movements Changing America."

Be Brave And Dream Big This Year

By BONNIE JEAN FELDKAMP

Cleaning out a storage bin I found one of my journals from high school. The entry on Sunday, Nov. 3, 1991, grabbed my attention. It was about big dreams I had for myself. I wrote, "How do I know I have what it takes? ... the talent ... the potential ... the drive?"

I have so many things I want to tell 16-year-old me. Mainly, that she had all of those attributes and more to do whatever she put her mind to. Everyone else in the world will tell you no. Don't do it for them by letting fear stop you. Your job is to decide who you

want to be and what you want that to contribute to this world. Then, go for it with everything in you. I somehow thought that because I wasn't a good student that I wasn't cut out for high achievements. But the world is far bigger than any high school experience. No one cares now that I failed algebra in high school. No one.

A lot of my childhood was submerged in the arts, and I'm incredibly grateful. I took music and dance lessons. I performed in plays and commercials, and I journaled constantly. My stepmom fostered my love of the arts while other adults in my life questioned its long-term purpose, stressing that I also had to have some other plan to back it up with. What was my realistic view of a career? They'd ask. What could all of these hobbies possibly add up to in "the real world"?

I didn't have a backup plan, and I didn't

want one either. The world needed thriving arts programs in every community. I wanted to make music and I wanted to write. Originally, I saw my future with a career in music, playing percussion in an orchestra pit somewhere. Writing was cathartic and I thought I might publish a book someday, but I didn't envision it as my profession.

Life showed me other plans. A career in symphonic music took professional training, which took money that I didn't have. Writing simply took the desire to read, learn and practice. It took the willingness to reach out and find those editors who would give me a chance. It took humility to find mentors and learn from my mistakes. But most of all it started with being brave enough to dream.

Writing is my profession now. Music took a back seat as my hobby and sometimes a side gig. I don't have any hit songs or huge

performances and I am not disappointed. I'm still very much living a life that began with a dream: aspirations of a young girl that started long before anything resembled grownup reality.

So, what are your dreams for the new year? Write them down. Be brave. Write them without judgment or fear of sounding foolish. Dream big with your whole heart. I'm still dreaming and making plans and I have no intention of stopping any time soon.

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Dispatches ...

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lion total is likely just a fraction of the true total. In a report released in April 2023, Citizens for Ethics and Responsibility in Washington (CREW) estimated that Trump made up to \$160 million from international business dealings while president.

Rep. Jamie Raskin (D-Md.), the top Democrat on the House Oversight Committee, wrote in the forward to the new report that "by elevating his personal financial interests and the policy priorities of corrupt foreign powers over the American public interest, former President Trump violated both the clear commands of the Constitution and the careful precedent set and observed by every previous commander-in-chief."

"In the face of these stunning findings and conclusions, Oversight Committee Democrats are prepared to act in defense of the Constitution," Raskin added. "We will develop a package of proposed legislative reforms to ensure that all occupants of the Oval Office abide by the Constitution's unequivocal language commanding loyalty to the interests of the American people—not the interests of homicidal Saudi monarchs, totalitarian Chinese bureaucratic state capitalists, or other foreign actors looking to obtain policy favors and indulgences by paying off a president or his wholly owned businesses."

Congressional Republicans responded dismissively to the new report, with House Oversight Committee Chairman James Comer (R-Ky.)—who is currently leading an impeachment push against President Joe Biden—saying in a statement that Trump has

"legitimate businesses" and that it was "beyond parody that Democrats continue their obsession with former President Trump."

JOB GROWTH EXPANDS IN DECEMBER, UNEMPLOYMENT STABLE AT 3.7%. Many voters still appear to be uncertain about the strength of the economy, but 216,000 jobs were created in December, exceeding most projections, economist Dean Baker noted (1/5). The unemployment rate remained at 3.7%, the 23rd consecutive month below 4% unemployment, the longest stretch in over half a century.

The strong December job gains were partially offset by downward revisions of 71,000 to the figures reported for the prior two months. This brings the average for the last three months to 165,000, a pace close to what should be sustainable.

It is also worth noting that job gains were widely spread across sectors in December. There were some concerns that, after adjusting for the return of striking workers, the November job gains were entirely in health care, government, and restaurants. By contrast, in December, most sectors reported job gains.

The second and third quarters also showed remarkably fast productivity growth, with annual rates of 3.6% and 5.2%, respectively, Baker noted. While no one expects these sorts of numbers to be sustained, it is plausible that with recent developments in AI and other technologies, we could be on a faster productivity growth path.

The average hourly wage jumped by 15 cents in December, bringing the annual rate over the last three months to 4.3%. This is likely somewhat faster than would be consistent with the Fed's inflation target, although the data are erratic. (The pace through No-

vember had been just 3.4%.)

TRUMP'S FAKE CURE FOR COVID RESPONSIBLE FOR NEARLY 17,000 US DEATHS. Donald

Trump began shilling for the use of hydroxychloroquine at the very first of what became his daily White House updates on the COVID-19 pandemic. The drug is primarily used as an anti-parasitic, mostly in the treatment of malaria, and there was never any good evidence that it was effective in addressing COVID. Hydroxychloroquine can lower the number of infection-fighting white blood cells, making it possibly the worst type of medication for anyone trying to fight off an infection, Mark Sumner noted at Daily Kos (1/4).

In the earliest days of the pandemic, Trump declared the drug a "game changer" and began stockpiling millions of pills. Under pressure from Trump and TV host Dr. Oz, the FDA authorized emergency use of hydroxychloroquine as a potential treatment for COVID. The drug didn't work. The US ended up with a mountain of worthless pills. But Trump went on promoting its use long after the FDA officially warned consumers not to use it.

A new study in *Biomedicine and Pharmacotherapy* puts an estimated number on deaths directly resulting from the use of this drug to treat COVID-19 patients: 16,990.

Those same results have now been confirmed by researchers in France who looked at the use of hydroxychloroquine across six countries. In all cases, the use of the drug with COVID patients increased the rate of deaths. Overall, patients who were administered hydroxychloroquine were 11% more likely to die than those who were not.

Due to the level of promotion hydroxychloroquine received, that 11% increased rate

of death extends across millions of patients, both in the US and overseas. In some locations, as many as 84% of patients diagnosed with symptomatic COVID-19 were prescribed hydroxychloroquine.

The result is that an estimated 16,990 people died unnecessarily.

Because Donald Trump can never be wrong, plenty of other Republicans were happy to hop on the quack medicine train. That included Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis.

For his new surgeon general, DeSantis went straight to hydroxychloroquine promoter, anti-masker, and anti-vaccine guy Dr. Joseph Ladapo. ...

Lapado was back in the news in January after he appeared on Steve Bannon's show to tell people to stop getting vaccinated. Because mRNA vaccines are an affront to God.

Thanks to his sage advice and the guiding wisdom of DeSantis, Florida ended up with its own unused stockpile of hydroxychloroquine. DeSantis bought 1 million doses from Israel, so the fact that the number of left-over pills was listed as "thousands" is disturbing. Nearly 87,000 people died of COVID-19 in Florida. How many of them were given ineffective snake oil rather than a vaccine that Ladapo finds spiritually offensive?

Overall, it seems clear that hydroxychloroquine is a killer, not a cure, when it comes to COVID-19. But still, it's not as big a threat as Trump, DeSantis and Ladapo.

KEEPING UP WITH VACCINES GREATLY REDUCES CHANCE OF LONG COVID. The US is experiencing a surge in new cases of COVID-19. By some metrics, this is the biggest increase in new cases in over a year and one that is threat-

Continued on next page

Worst. Congress. Ever.

By DANA MILBANK

A year ago, I assigned myself to the Capitol to cover the new House Republican majority, suspecting that this erratic crowd of lawmakers would provide some lively material.

They did not disappoint. What I could not have known then, however, was that this would turn out to be the most ineffective session of Congress in nearly a century — and quite possibly in all of American history.

The year began with chaos and incompetence. It ended with chaos and incompetence. In between were self-created crises and shocking moments of fratricide — interspersed with more chaos and incompetence.

“This will go down as ... the least productive Congress since the Great Depression,” Rep. Joe Neguse, Democrat of Colorado, observed in mid-December as the Rules Committee marked up plans for an impeachment inquiry into President Biden for imaginary crimes.

Neguse almost certainly understates the case. While it’s true, as HuffPost’s Jonathan Nicholson pointed out, that Congress got even less done in 1931, this is only because it didn’t start its session that year until December. It seems probable that no Congress in American history has spent so much time accomplishing so little as this one.

What do House Republicans have to show the voters for their year in power? A bipartisan debt deal (on which they promptly reneged) to avoid a default crisis that they themselves created. A pair of temporary spending bills (both passed with

mostly Democratic votes) to avert a government-shutdown crisis that they themselves created. The ouster of their speaker, nearly a month-long shutdown of the chamber as they sought another, and the expulsion of one of their members, who is now negotiating himself a plea deal.

Among the 22 bills in 2023 that became law as of December was landmark legislation such as: H.R. 3672, “To designate the clinic of the Department of Veterans Affairs in Indian River, Michigan, as the ‘Pfc. Justin T. Paton Department of Veterans Affairs Clinic.’” Also, H.R. 5110, the “Protecting Hunting Heritage and Education Act,” which authorizes federal education funds “to purchase or use dangerous weapons” for instruction.

On Dec. 14, the House, exhausted from its labors, recessed for a three-week vacation, leaving behind a pile of urgent, unfinished business, including funds to arm Ukraine and fortify the southern border. When the lawmakers return, they will have just eight legislative days to pass something to avoid the latest government shutdown — on which they have made no progress so far. But before rushing home for the holidays, Republicans did manage to approve, in a party-line vote, a formal impeachment inquiry into Biden for imaginary crimes that even they could not identify.

“It’s been an up-and-down year,” Majority Leader Steve Scalise of Louisiana said in a year-end news conference. (He was half right.) “I know for those of you in the press, there’s never been a week where it was boring for you.” (This was true.) “Next year is going to be just as busy,” he went on. (That shouldn’t be hard.) He acknowledged, “There’s talk about how hard it’s been,” but he blamed the Democratic Senate for the in-

action.

Nice try. This Senate, with a similar majority, was highly productive in the last Congress. And Congress, even under divided government, has routinely found ways to function — until this gang took over the House.

The final week was typical. In the Senate, Democrats and Republicans feverishly negotiated a compromise that would allow the United States to keep sending arms to help Ukraine fight off Russia’s invasion while also toughening U.S. border policies. Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer pleaded with Speaker Mike Johnson (R-La.) to keep his chamber in session so that the emergency spending package could be passed before year-end. Johnson refused — prompting Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell to say it would be “practically impossible” to pass the desperately needed bill.

Likewise, Johnson, who, as Punchbowl News noted, has proved to be “unwilling or unable to make tough decisions,” couldn’t decide which of two competing bills the House should pass to reauthorize a program known as Section 702 that falls under the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act and is vital to national security. So he scheduled House votes on both of them — which caused the House Republican Caucus to devolve the evening of Dec. 11 into yet another round of bickering, with Rep. Warren Davidson (Ohio) accusing Intelligence Committee Chairman Mike Turner of “f—ing lying.” Once again paralyzed, House GOP leaders yanked both bills from consideration on the floor. Instead, they moved on to the Duck Stamp Modernization Act of 2023 — no doubt a matter of great importance to waterfowl hunters.

The dysfunction shows every sign that

it will continue in the new year. The House Freedom Caucus, whose members routinely kneecapped Republican leaders and derailed proceedings in the House in 2023, just elected as their new leader Rep. Bob Good (Va.), one of the most doctrinaire members of the caucus and one of the eight Republicans who ousted Kevin McCarthy as speaker. Davidson, in a letter to colleagues intercepted by Axios’s Juliegrace Brufke, alluded to Good’s bomb-throwing tendencies and asked that the group “prayerfully consider electing someone else.” They went with the legislative terrorist anyway.

As a holiday gift, Freedom Caucus members lobbed one more bomb on the final day of the session. They were furious that their various attempts to ignite culture wars over abortion policy and LGBTQ+ rights had been stripped from the annual National Defense Authorization Act in negotiations with the Senate. So Chip Roy (Tex.) and 22 other Republicans delayed its passage by forcing a vote to adjourn. The bill passed anyway — as usual, with mostly Democratic votes.

As the year ended, Ukraine will have to wait for more ammo. The federal government will have to wait for its 2024 funding to be settled. But there was one priority so urgent that it absolutely could not wait until after vacation, and it united every single Republican in the caucus. The day before skipping town, they voted in an entirely party-line vote of 221-212 to put the House on an all-but-inevitable course toward impeaching Biden for the high crime and misdemeanor of having a drug-addicted son.

Dana Milbank is a political columnist for the Washington Post, where this appeared. Follow him on Twitter @Milbank.

GOP Baffled That ‘We Don’t Care if You Die’ is Not a Winning Slogan

By ALEXANDRA PETRI

“Republicans struggle as they keep getting forced to talk about abortion” — Politico headline, Dec. 15

Huh! It turns out “Well, with luck, you probably won’t die being forced to give birth to a nonviable fetus over the objections of your doctor!” — even if you say it in a warm, human-sounding way — is not actually what people want to hear when deciding how to cast their votes. Fascinating!

People keep hearing stories like that of Kate Cox, whose medically recommended abortion to end a nonviable pregnancy and preserve her fertility was shut down by the Texas Supreme Court, and saying, “Wait, is that actually your policy? Jesus!” and it turns out that “Yup!” or “Pretty much!” is not a winning answer. Also not great: “Please hold while the Supreme Court figures out if it wants to impose even more restrictions on what medical care you are allowed to receive!”

“Nobody would wish this to happen on anybody,” Ron DeSantis said this past week during a CNN town hall — which is true, except in the strict, limited sense that policies the governor and presidential aspirant has signed into law in Florida have imposed that exact situation on people. I guess it’s the thought that counts! Maybe he imposed it, but he didn’t wish it.

Nikki Haley said “we have to humanize the situation,” which, I guess, are words! “So, you want a 13-year-old to be forced to bear her rapist’s baby at tremendous physical and emotional cost?” has one easy answer: “No!” And if you aren’t allowed to say that, that’s a problem! A messaging problem, of course.

“Wait, you seriously don’t want any exceptions, and you are going to weaponize government against people with reasonable medical needs?” is a question to which “Don’t worry your pretty little head about it” is not a great answer. Or maybe they could stop trying to dehumanize half the population? No. It’s the words. It’s got to be the words.

There’s no changing the underlying policy. That’s just out of the question! It’s just unfortunate that so many people see these stories of people struggling to get their abortions and say, “That could be me!” The time-tested Republican response of, “Nonsense! You don’t have a

uterus!” only works about 50% of the time. If it fails, they are stuck saying things such as “Yikes!” and “Woof!” and “With a condition like that, are you sure you should be voting?”

I wonder why this is so difficult to talk about! Maybe what Republicans need is a better slogan. “Sometimes, too many rights are actually a burden” and “Do you ever get tired of making decisions for yourself?” and “Relax: We’ve got it! But let us know if you think you’re bleeding to death” turn out not to be winners, as far as slogans go. Same for, “You Don’t Get a Say, and We Don’t Care if You Die,” even if you say it with a lot of warm eye contact. Also bad: “You Don’t Get a Say, We Will Laugh at What Your Doctor Says, and We Want You to Do Everything But Die.”

Maybe they should add some exclamation points at the end to make it clear there are no hard feelings! Or try the TikTok approach of calling these “Girl Rights!” like “Girl Dinner!” but it’s a plate of just one or two rights, not enough to support a whole person?

Hmm, what about this isn’t a winner?

Alexandra Petri is a Washington Post columnist offering a lighter take on the news and opinions of the day. She is the author of “AP’s US History: Important American Documents (I Made Up).”

Dispatches ...

Continued from previous page

ening to strain hospital capacity. In late December, hospital admissions for COVID exceeded 29,000 a week and deaths were up 10% week over week. The rise in cases, as well as rises flu and RSV, has caused some health care facilities to reinstitute mask mandates, Mark Sumner noted at Daily Kos (1/4).

And all these new infections are sure to result in new cases of long COVID. Estimates of how many Americans have suffered from long COVID vary wildly, from 7.5% to 41% among nonhospitalized adults. And even relatively minor initial cases can result in lasting disease, which can severely affect even healthy, young people for months or years.

With all of this bad news, there is some very good news. A new series of studies and meta-analyses have concluded that there is one thing everyone can do to greatly reduce the chances of getting long COVID: Keep up with the latest vaccines.

When COVID-19 vaccines first became available, many people expected the one-and-done, nearly perfect protection of many childhood vaccines. However, that isn’t the case. Not only does the protection afforded by existing COVID-19 vaccines wane over a few months, they are better at protecting people from de-

veloping severe symptoms than they are at preventing an initial infection. Getting a COVID-19 vaccination and then testing positive within a few weeks is a disheartening experience, one that might understandably lead to a reluctance to keep current with newer vaccines.

However, as *Scientific American* reports, those who have had multiple COVID-19 vaccines have an enormous benefit when it comes to preventing long COVID. One analysis looked at the long-term health of 775,931 people across 32 studies and concluded that those who had two vaccine doses reduced their chances of long COVID by 36.9%. Those who had three doses, though, saw a reduction of 68.7%. Cutting the chances of what could be a long-term, life-altering disease by another third is well worth going back for an extra jab.

A second study in *The BMJ* backs up these latest results. In a study involving 589,722 people in Sweden, those who had a single vaccination were 21% less likely than the unvaccinated to develop long COVID. Two doses brought this to 59%. Three or more doses reduced the chances of long COVID by a whopping 73%.

It’s worth noting that multiple infections do not have the same protective effect. According to a recent study, each new COVID infection increases the chance of developing long COVID. And each new infection increases the chance of serious, long-term illness including kidney disease, diabetes and mental health issues.

\$8.5T IN UNTAXED ASSETS SHOWS WHY WE NEED BILLIONAIRE TAX. An analysis released Jan. 3 shows that in 2022, the wealthiest people in the United States collectively held a “staggering” \$8.5 trillion in wealth that is not—and might never be—subject to taxation, Jake Johnson noted at CommonDreams (1/4).

Examining recently released data Federal Reserve data for 2022, Americans for Tax Fairness (ATF) found that the roughly 64,000 US households with at least \$100 million in wealth—less than 0.05% of the population—controlled more than one in every six dollars of the country’s “unrealized gains,” profits that aren’t taxable until the underlying asset, such as a stock position, is sold.

“But the ultra-wealthy don’t need to sell to benefit: They can live off low-cost loans secured against their growing fortunes. And once inherited, such gains disappear completely for tax purposes,” ATF’s Zachary Tashman and William Rice explained in the new analysis. “While most Americans predominantly live off the income they earn from a job—income that is taxed all year, every year—the very richest households live lavishly off capital gains that may never be taxed.”

That small, ultra-rich fraction of US society is sitting on more unrealized capital gains than the bottom 84% of the country—roughly 110 million households—combined, Tashman and Rice noted.

Most of the typical US household’s unrealized capital gains are in the form of their homes, which face state and local property taxes. But 93% of the unrealized gains of America’s wealthiest are tied up in businesses, stock portfolios, and mutual funds, ATF found. As a result, mega-rich individuals wind up paying little to nothing in federal income taxes.

Between 2013 and 2018, leading US billionaires paid an average federal tax rate of just 4.8%, according to a previous ATF analysis.

“This is why we need a billionaire income tax,” the group wrote on social media Jan. 3, pointing to legislative proposals reintroduced late last year in both chambers of Congress.

Sen. Ron Wyden’s (D-OR) Billionaires Income Tax would tax tradable assets of individuals with more than \$100 million in annual income or more than \$1 billion in assets for three consecutive years.

In the House, Reps. Steve Cohen (D-TN) and Don Beyer (D-VA) unveiled a bill that mirrors President Joe Biden’s call for a minimum income tax for billionaires. The legislation would require ultra-wealthy households to pay a 25% annual tax rate on their income, including unrealized gains.

In December, the US Supreme Court heard oral arguments in a case backed by right-wing groups aiming to preemptively outlaw any tax on unrealized gains.

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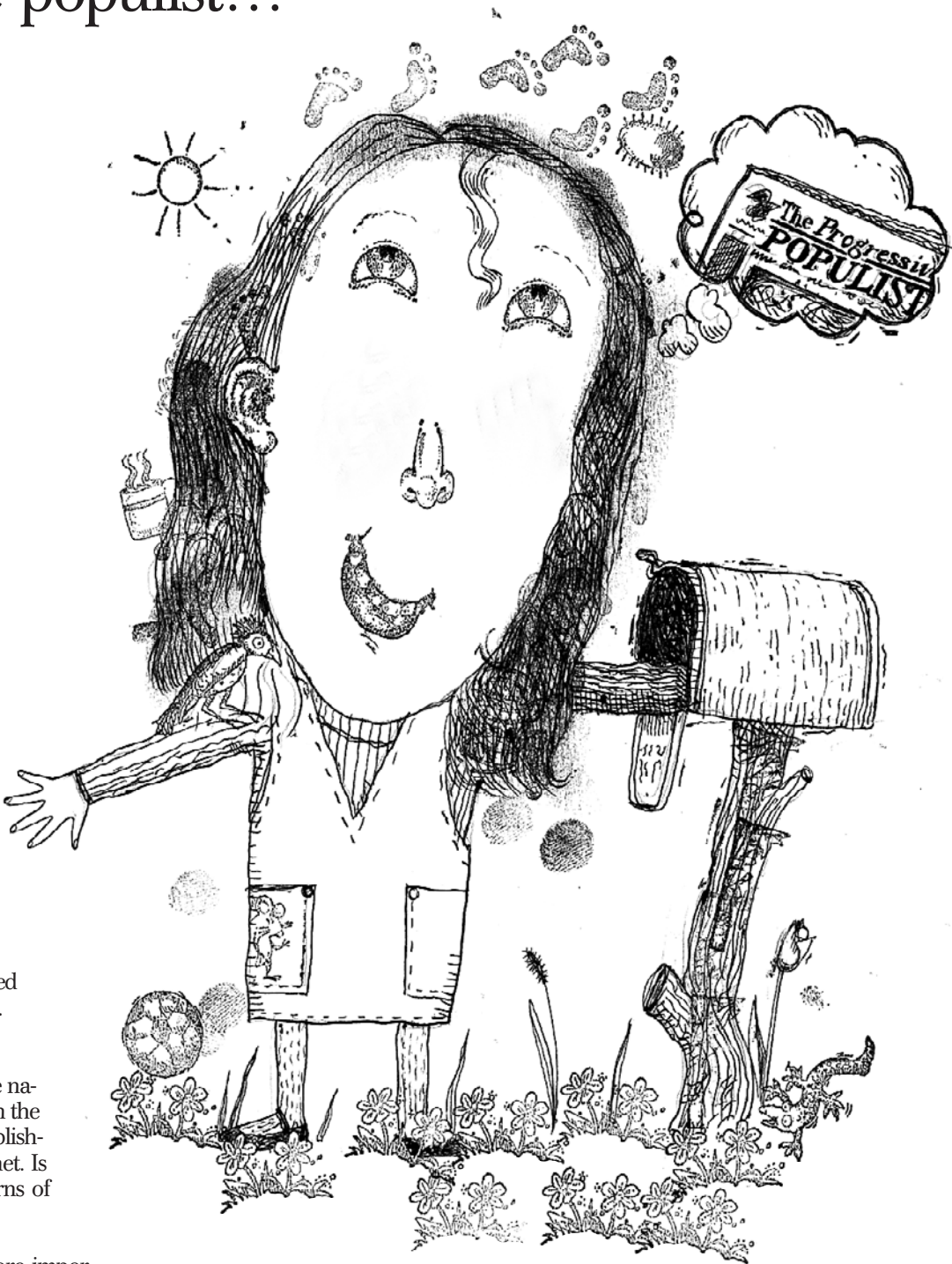
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