



## Breaking the Red Wall

*'We're not taking it anymore,' say Iowa Teamsters who are picking a fight with union-bashing Republicans, sensing a rebound.*

By ART CULLEN

It feels like Iowa hit bottom on a deep dive down a red rabbit hole and could come back on a rebound.

The big rigs circling the Capitol Feb. 21, blaring their horns, sounded the revolt, as a leader of Iowa's Teamsters declared that the brotherhood has had enough and will fight back every way they know how.

They were reacting to a bill put up by Senate Republicans that would kill public employee collective bargaining, said Jesse Case of Teamsters Local 238, who led the convoy and the charge against wiping out labor rights.

It's been a dreadful decade for progressives in The Tall Corn State. The congressional delegation used to be split between the parties. It's entirely GOP now. Likewise the legislature and the governor's office. Just one Democrat holds elected statewide office — Auditor Rob Sand, whose probative authority has been emasculated by Republicans afraid that Sand might see and say something.

Reining in labor rights is a central goal of the right-wing agenda, but that's just one of the lurches, overreaches and absurdities foisted on otherwise self-effacing folks who would rather not pick a fight or hear about lurid hang-ups.

They ban books by Mark Twain and Nikole Hannah-Jones, two of Iowa's most celebrated writers. (Twain of Keokuk and Muscatine, and Hannah-Jones of Waterloo.)

They bash gays and trans people, and spend innumerable hours debating bathroom use and such.

They pass an abortion ban at the heartbeat.

They give vouchers to private-schools and home schoolers, taking it out of the hide of K-12 public schools.

They cut breaks to commercial and industrial property owners, and shift the burden to residential.

They eliminate the statewide water quality monitoring program because it keeps sounding alarms about nitrate and phosphorus pollution from row crops and hog manure washing into the state's rivers.

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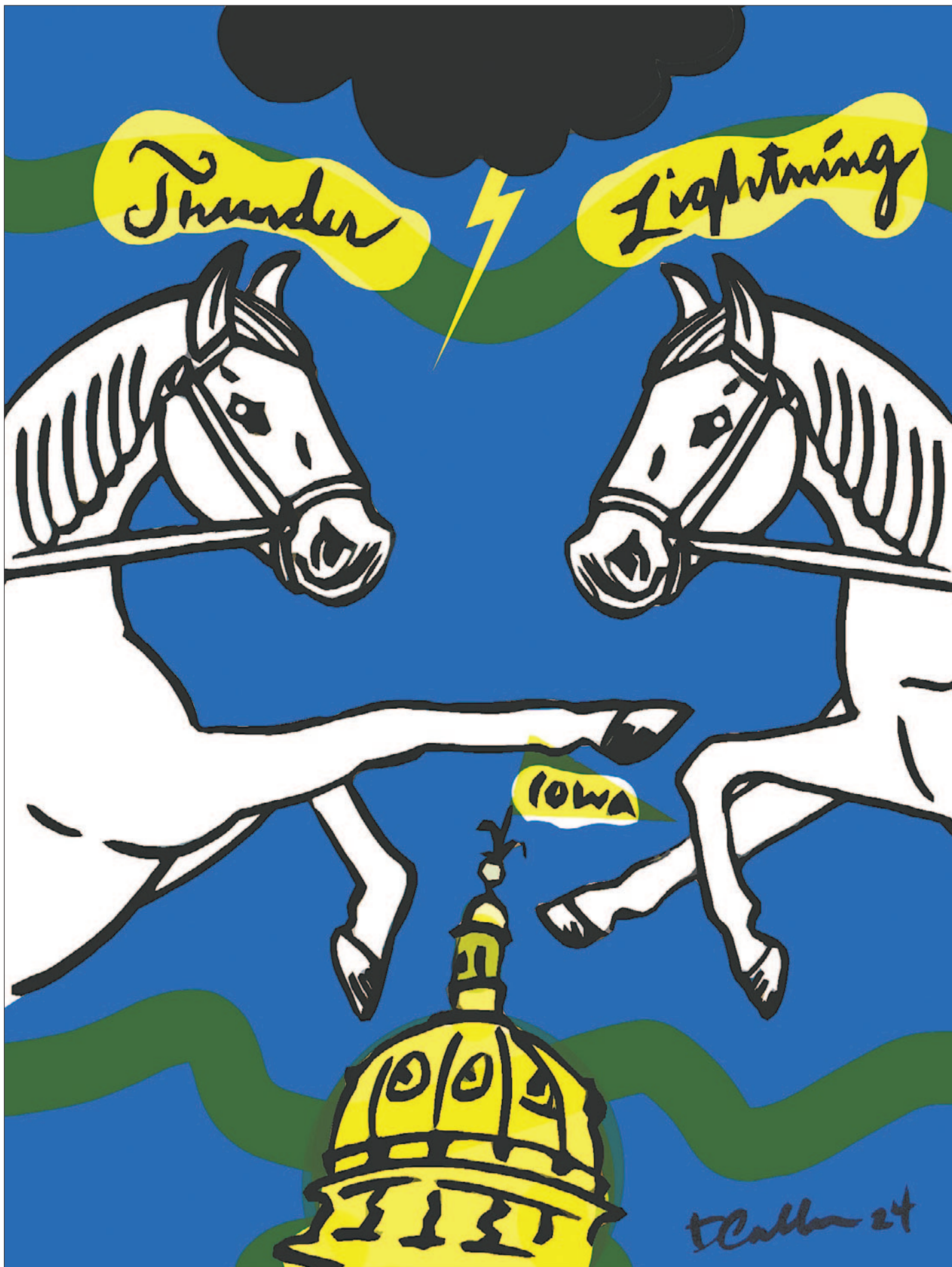


Illustration by DOLORES CULLEN

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**AN EDITORIAL**

**Bill for Trump's Lies Comes Due**

Donald Trump has been lying about his businesses for his entire career and now he's squealing like a stuck pig since a New York court called him on it.

Manhattan Justice Arthur F. Engoron ruled Feb. 16 that Trump engaged in a yearslong conspiracy with top executives at the Trump Organization to deceive banks and insurers about the size of his wealth and the true value of such properties as Trump Tower in Manhattan and his Mar-a-Lago club in Florida.

Engoron ordered the disgraced former president to pay \$355 million of his fortune, plus interest, which makes a total of \$454 million. And that's on top of \$88.3 million he owes E. Jean Carroll for lying about his 1996 sexual assault of the writer. That includes \$5 million in damages a federal jury in Manhattan assessed in May 2023 for the sexual assault, and \$83.3 million by another jury in January for continuing to defame Carroll after the original verdict.

Trump said the civil fraud decision was "election inference" and "weaponization against a political opponent," complaining to reporters at his Mar-a-Lago estate in Florida that he was being penalized for "having built a perfect company, great cash, great buildings, great everything."

New York Attorney General Leticia James sued Trump in 2022 under a New York statute that gives the attorney general wide scope to investigate and prosecute corporate fraud. She alleged that he lied for years about his wealth on financial statements he used to secure loans and make deals as he built the real estate empire that vaulted him to fame and the presidency. Trump has said repeatedly the loans were paid back and the banks he dealt with made money, and he accused James of singling him out for political reasons.

Trump claims he was singled out for prosecution, but the New York Times noted that the New York attorney general's office has relied on the law for years in high-profile cases, including against UBS, ExxonMobil and Juul — as well as Trump University and the Trump Foundation, which forced Trump to shut down both scams and pay \$25 million to Trump U clients.

It is a federal crime to make false statements on loan applications, but because James sued Trump and his business associates under the state law, the claims were decided in a bench trial — one decided by a judge, as the state law requires, rather than by a jury.

Trump disregarded that explanation and complained that he was denied a jury trial. Still, knowing that Engoron would decide the case, Trump showed contempt for the 74-year-old judge throughout the trial, in an apparent attempt to provoke Engoron.

Engoron started the trial in late September 2023 with a summary judgment that ruled the Trump Organization had committed fraud by inflating property values by as much as \$2.2 billion to get better loan and insurance terms. The bench trial began in October to examine other counts and determine penalties.

Engoron let Trump boil through the three-month trial with insults at the judge and Attorney General James, though Engoron fined Trump \$15,000 for disparaging remarks about the judge's clerk. Finally, on Feb. 16, Engoron ordered the former president and his company to pay \$355 million, which he determined were savings from the lower interest rates and windfall profits from the recent sale of two properties, as "ill-gotten gains" that should be paid to the state, with interest.

"The frauds found here leap off the page and shock the con-

science," Engoron wrote in a 92-page decision. "The English poet Alexander Pope first declared, 'To err is human, to forgive is divine.' Defendants apparently are of a different mind," he continued. "Their complete lack of contrition and remorse borders on pathological."

He said the "defendants are incapable of admitting the error of their ways ... Indeed, Donald Trump testified that, even today, he does not believe the Trump Organization needed to make any changes based on the facts that came out during this trial."

Engoron added, "the Court intends to protect the integrity of the financial marketplace and, thus, the public as a whole. Defendants refusal to admit error — indeed, to continue it, according to the Independent Monitor — constrains this Court to conclude that they will engage in it going forward unless judicially restrained."

Among other things, the court bans Trump and the Trump Organization and its affiliates from applying for loans from any financial institution chartered by or registered with the New York State Department of Financial Services for three years, and Eric and Don Jr. can't serve as an officer or director of any New York corporation or other legal entity for two years.

Meanwhile, Trumpublicans who narrowly control the House of Representatives continue to look for pretexts to impeach President Joe Biden, based on imagined corrupt relationships of the president to his son Hunter and brother Jim, even after a sketchy FBI informant, Alexander Smirnov, on whom the Trumpers were basing their case, was indicted on charges that he lied to federal investigators about the Biden family's business dealings.

These lies included claims that Joe Biden and his son each sought \$5 million bribes from Ukrainian energy company Burisma when Biden was vice president, in exchange for protecting the firm from scrutiny by Ukraine's national authorities. Now, Smirnov, a 43-year-old Israeli American, has admitted that "officials associated with Russian intelligence" fed him that information.

Republicans have based their attacks on President Biden on that apparent Russian disinformation. Sen. Chuck Grassley (R-Iowa), partnered with House Oversight Committee Chairman James Comer (R-Ky.) in May 2023, demanding the Justice Department release an FBI-generated Form FD 1023, which could reveal a "criminal scheme involving then-Vice President Joe Biden ... involving an exchange of money for policy decisions." That form contained statements that the FBI warned were unverified, but the Republicans insisted it be published.

"That to me is really the heart of this matter," House Judiciary Committee Chairman Jim Jordan (R-Ohio) said Jan. 11 on Fox "News." "The most corroborating evidence we have is ... from this highly credible, confidential human source." On Feb. 21, after the source of the information was disclosed, Jordan insisted the revelations about Smirnov's Russian connection don't "change the facts."

But other witnesses have sworn under oath that President Biden wasn't involved in any of his son's or his brother's schemes.

The facts that need to be established now include when Grassley, Comer and Jordan discovered that Smirnov, their "star witness," was a Russian agent, and whether the Republican inquisitors suborned perjury during the investigation. For people who claim to be Christians, they sure do seem to bear a lot of false witness.

Republicans need to swear off the lies, the bullying and unfounded slurs about the "Biden Crime Family" and instead straighten up, drop the impeachment nonsense and pass the budget that should have made it through Congress six months ago. — JMC

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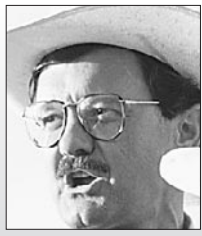
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## JIM HIGHTOWER



Only two years ago, Wall Street bankers proclaimed their conversion to environmental responsibility. Now the bankers are defaulting on their promises.

### What Is a Banker's Promise Worth?

Bruce King, former governor of New Mexico, often baffled people with his convoluted use of words. Like the time he vetoed a loan shark bill he'd previously agreed to sign. "But, Governor," squealed the lenders' lobbyists, "we had your commitment!" Unfazed, King said, "Now, boys, we all know that a commitment is not a promise."

In this case, King's linguistic backflip was virtuous, for it killed a bad bill. But now come banking giants themselves doing a shameful backflip on their widely publicized scout's honor promise to do the right thing for humanity on a true life-and-death issue: climate change.

It was only two years ago that Bank of America, JPMorgan Chase and other Wall Street behemoths loudly proclaimed their conversion to environmental responsibility. In ads, interviews and speeches, they solemnly vowed they would no longer finance new coal, oil and other fossil fuel projects, which are the major cause of global warming. The bankers promised to protect the "fragile ecosystem and the rights of Indigenous Peoples." Hooray!

But that was so yesterday — way back in 2022. Today, the prevailing political winds are coming from howling right-wingers denouncing environmental values and "woke capitalism." So, the pusillanimous bankers are now saying that a promise is not forever (or even two years) — as they default on their enviro responsibility. Instead, they're refocusing on a messy mix of fossil fuels, and — maybe — they'll toss in a few clean energy projects. Or not.

Chase bank weaseled out of its latest climate action commitment with corporate claptrap, declaring that reducing fossil fuel investments "will not successfully achieve the necessary transition of the global energy system." Yeah, so why bother? Forget what we promised way back when.

Then Wall Streeters wonder why people distrust and despise them!

### The Debacle of 'God's Army' at Eagle Pass

Perhaps you heard about the recent surge of invasive foreigners into Eagle Pass, Texas — the Rio Grande border town that finds itself at the hot center of the US-Mexico immigration crisis.

Only, this "invasion" (as Donald Trump's MAGA crowd likes to call it) was not by Latin Americans, but by Anglos descending on Eagle Pass from the North! Indeed, it was an invasion by Trumpista partisans claiming to be "God's Army." Organized as a Christian Nationalist crusade, they boasted that a mighty convoy of 700,000 trucks from all across the US would be streaming toward Eagle Pass to "Take Our Border Back."

What a show of strength! But just when you think the whole country has gone full-tilt bonkers, reality shows up. "God's Army" actually consisted of about 20 trucks, a babbling rant by Sarah Palin, and a forlorn crowd of ... maybe 200 people. Seriously. That was it. The greased pig contest for children at a small county fair in Texas draws more than that.

And, very significantly, many of the Trump "patriots" who came from afar were stunned to find that his frantic claims of

hordes of rampaging criminals flooding into the US didn't exist. "That's kind of eye-opening," said one who'd made the long trek to repel the "invaders." And a 29-year-old local resident expressed the rude truth about the loudly ballyhooed caravan: "What is all of this for? For show," he exclaimed!

Adding to the sleazy spectacle, Texas Gov. Greg Abbott had convened a dozen other immigrant-bashing GOP governors in Eagle Pass to take advantage of the caravan's political glow. Imagine their chagrin that their number of high-powered governors, political staffers and media entourages outnumbered the crowd.

For an honest depiction of God's Army, go to Vote Common Good: [votecommongood.com](http://votecommongood.com)

### Abortion-Ban Extremists Are Using a Slave Law to Repress Women

Here's our big word of the day: Extraterritoriality.

It expresses a sketchy legal theory asserting that rulers in one state have a right to enforce their laws in another state. The most prominent use of it was in the infamous Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, requiring officials in Northern anti-slave states to capture and return escaped slaves to their plantation "owners" in the South, thus applying Southern slave laws in Northern jurisdictions. This abomination was finally repealed in 1864.

But, 160 years later, here comes another faction of right-wing zealots trying to revive the slave-law concept of extraterritoriality — this time applying it to any and all American women who dare to make their own reproductive health decisions. I'm ashamed to say that this repressive use of the doctrine is being led by my state's misogynistic governor, Greg Abbott, and our corrupt attorney general, Ken Paxton — two tyrannical men who've already saddled Texas women with the most draconian abortion ban in the country, including piously forbidding abortion in cases of rape and incest.

Thus, for women to obtain their inherent right to control their own bodies, they're forced to travel to nearby states. Uh-uh, bark brutish Texas' political extremists, we'll ban that, too! Thus, they've pushed a flagrantly-unconstitutional scheme to outlaw the use of public roads to drive out-of-state for care, and they've even sanctioned right-wing vigilantes to follow suspected medical travelers to doctors beyond our borders. And, going full-tilt totalitarian, the Abbott-Paxton posse has demanded that out-of-state-care groups hand over the names and addresses of Texas women they've helped to get out-of-state care.

Talk about government overreach! Big Brother isn't just watching ... he's stalking you. To oppose this brutish repression — and to keep it from coming to your state — contact [RewireNewsGroup.com/abortion](http://RewireNewsGroup.com/abortion).

### Where Did Our Local Newspapers Go?

I no longer receive my local newspaper, the *Austin-American Statesman*. Oh, the paper still comes, but it's just paper, minus the news part — news that our community once counted on to keep up with local government doings, corporate shenanigans, citizen actions and other critical features of our city's democratic life. What happened? Wall Street profiteers swept in a few years ago to conglomeratize, homogenize and financialize the *Statesman*.

It's now a money cog in the Gannett/USA Today chain of some 200 major dailies that the syndicate seized. Indeed, Gannett itself is wholly owned by SoftBank, a Japanese hedge fund. Those distant bankers are not interested in local news, but in slashing news staffs to fatten their profits. In Austin alone, Softbank has cut two-thirds of the paper's journalists since taking over — and coverage of local stories has also plunged by two-thirds.

Interestingly, the *Statesman* recently ran a front-page piece about a local union

protest by flight attendants demanding fair wages. On that same day, the paper also reported that Uber and Lyft drivers were striking in Austin. But wait — at the same time, the *Statesman* journalists were picketing right in front of the paper's office, protesting the greed of SoftBank/Gannett and the demise of local news. Curiously, *Statesman* editors did not consider this local news about our newspaper to be news, so they cravenly kept this important information from the people.

Austin was not alone in this news blackout by the chain's managers. Journalists at a dozen other Gannett papers — from Akron to South Bend — were picketing, yet

none of those papers ran a peep about their journalists' defense of local news. Nor did Gannett's flagship paper, *USA Today*, mention this nationwide union rebellion by its own journalists.

To support journalists and real journalism, go to [newsguild.org](http://newsguild.org).

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### Peace and the Planet

By FRANK LINGO

Does protecting the Earth justify violence? A Jan. 21 *New York Times Magazine* article explores this question with Andreas Malm, a Swedish author and professor who espouses violence against property, like pipelines, but not against people.

"All attempts to rein in this problem [the climate crisis] have failed miserably," said Malm, "which means that, virtually by definition, we have to try something more than we've tried. I want sabotage to happen on a much larger scale than it does now. I can't guarantee that it won't come with accidents."

In America, the environmental movement spun off of the peace movement during the Vietnam War, so there was a similar sensibility about doing it the peaceful way. Not that everyone who opposed the war was peaceful. There was a tiny minority like the Weather Underground, which was responsible for several bombings. Likewise, the eco movement has its radicals, such as Earth First!, which has sabotaged some sites it regards as anti-ecological.

I'll admit to some inner conflict on this. In my youth, the Weather people seemed bold and radical and that appealed to me. In some possible circumstance, I might have joined them. I suppose it's lucky that I was such a stoner, because I never could have focused enough to carry out such deeds. And now half a century later, a little part of me sympathizes with the eco-warriors who want to blow up fossil fuel facilities.

Yet, when those thoughts pop up in my mind, I remember the ways of Mahatma Gandhi and Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., who taught us that violence only begets more violence, and peaceful protest is the most effective way to instigate change.

Malm is partially wrong when he said that all attempts to rein in the problem have

failed miserably. Scientists and entrepreneurs all over the globe have developed new, innovative methods of sustainable energy production. The cost of solar panels has dropped greatly in the last decade, while the efficiency of them has risen greatly. That makes them affordable to many business and home owners.

Wind power is being used more than ever, especially in northern areas, and even a moderate-climate state like Kansas, with a super-conservative legislature, is fourth in the US in wind energy. Furthermore, although the electric car revolution is just getting started, several major automakers are shifting it into high gear. If those EVs are charged on sustainable grids, their carbon footprint is very small.

Malm is right about many points. In 2023, the United States produced a record amount of oil. It is being burned as gasoline and fuel oil. That is serious backsliding to any effort to reverse the climate crisis. Also, 2023 was the Earth's hottest year on record, proving that our aspiration to reduce global warming isn't working yet.

The media is not getting the message out to the public that we are in a climate emergency. The public's awareness has risen dramatically in the last few years anyway, especially among the younger generation, but many people are still woefully uninformed on ecological issues. The trials of a certain ex-president are hogging the spotlight, and will continue to do so. But more than ever, voting for environmentally minded candidates could help move us in the right direction.

So, in response to Malm's suggestions, I worry that eco-terrorism would rock the public's tenuous support of changing our ways to protect the planet. Let's remember the friendly part of eco-friendly.

*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](mailto:lingofrank@gmail.com). See his website: [Greenbeat.world](http://Greenbeat.world)*

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### The Problem with Technological Advances

When Europeans first came to America they brought smallpox and alcohol with them. The results were a calamity to the native population. Having no previous exposure, they had little resistance to either peril. Our civilization is also at risk to forces that we have not had generations to develop a resistance to. I was the first in my lineage to be exposed to television ads, slanted news, or social media and the bots that are a part of that force. When we have opportunists using these forces, you can explain people waiting in Dallas for the Kennedy reincarnation or the storming of the Capitol.

This new technology is able to give credibility to the outlandish partially because people are already suspicious of current authority. Money has replaced thought or compassion as the driving force behind legislative priority or judicial appointments. Where else can a Supreme Court justice drive a free motor home or reform-minded politicians be likely to face a well-financed primary challenge?

My hope is that we can cleanse our political corruption within the structure of our Constitution. Functional visionary governments seldom face agitated masses.

PAUL BENSON, *Hawarden, Iowa*

### Israel's War on Gaza Inflicts Shame on US

Ralph Nader's superlative column *In the Public Interest* (1/1-15/24 *TPP*) exposing fully the obscene fiasco of the feeble Biden Administration's attempt to check Israel's genocide since early October perpetrated on the abandoned civilian population of Gaza, a segment of Palestine illegitimately decimated by a vicious Zionist regime, is backed by several other worthy correspondents, such as Wayne O'Leary, Amy Goodman, Dave Zirin and Ted Rall. Meantime, all the decent US citizens left should be demanding of their Wall Street-bribed "representatives" that they must quit their unholy sinecures at once. Each moment this Semitic-sponsored Holocaust goes on, the shame inflicted on US repute intensifies and deepens worldwide. Mostly women-staffed chat shows on "our" futile capitalist media keep on spinning out "the options" unavailable to anyone, pauper or billionaire. The underworld of Orwell's 1948 novel, "1984," is "suddenly" here with its soulless, nihilistic despotisms now in firm infirm command.

VIRGE MACLEOD, *Bonniers Ferry, Idaho*

### Israel's Butchers are No Match for Washington's

How is it that for the 20 years we attacked Afghanistan we could live with what was going on inside of Iran, but now we can't live with what is going on inside of Iran and need to attack Iran, yet we now can live with what's going on inside of Afghanistan, even though 20 years of attacking Afghanis changed nothing in Afghanistan?

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## A Puzzle, a Wonder and a Miracle

By DON ROLLINS

"Big Jim Justice, the Governor of the Great State of West Virginia (I LOVE WEST VIRGINIA!), is BIG in every way ... Strong on the Border, our Great Military & Vets, CLEAN COAL & Energy Dominance, the Economy, Stopping Inflation, & Protecting our 2nd Amendment, Big Jim will be a Great UNITED STATES SENATOR, and has my Complete & Total Endorsement ..." - Donald Trump, Truth Social Post, 10/18/23

At 6-foot 7 inches and somewhere north of 360 pounds, two-term West Virginia governor "Big Jim" Justice is a mighty formidable physical presence. Current Republican frontrunner for the US Senate seat soon to be vacated by the mercurial Joe Manchin, Justice's politics have proven just as imposing as his anatomy: As his admin-

istration enters its final months, Justice's approval rating stands at 64%, fifth highest among sitting governors.

But while the onetime Democrat, now Trump-beholden Republican will likely coast his way through the GOP state primary and general election, Justice's popularity belies a past and present that read more like a rap sheet than a resumé.

Running down the cornucopia of legal actions taken against Justice is like counting grains of sand; for, as is the case with many popular, deep-pocketed, chronically bad political actors, Justice and his sundry legal teams are practiced in the art of stalling the American legal system: fabricated grounds for delays, cascades of appeals and penny-on-the-dollar settlements. It's a smoke-and-mirrors approach that has shielded Justice from consequences only the truly well-connected can avoid.

Lawsuits against Justice-owned enterprises are fluid, but broadly consistent. Among the most egregious categories are those related to coal. But one example: Justice's strip mines have racked up tens of mil-

going down the list, and Iran is next. Washington works hard to keep "war" alive. You don't find it odd, suspicious, that Washington always has a "war" going on, or one brewing.

And in regards to the Gaza "War," Washington keeps going on an don about how Israel needs to take better precautions to protect civilians, but credible estimates for the Iraq "war" say a million Iraqis died. How then is it possible that the Iraq "war" was somehow "fought" differently than this current Gaza "war"?

The Israelis look like Boy Scouts, with only 30,000 dead so far. They have a long way to go to get to a million. Why do only the Jews get in trouble when they butcher defenseless innocents?

Our state media is much more comfortable showing us the truth when it comes to Israel's "war" in Gaza, than Washington's "war" in Iraq. No censoring of the blood and gore in Gaza, but there was never this type of reporting and photos about the Iraq "war." It's as if the Iraq "war" had no violence.

FRANK ERICKSON, *Minneapolis, Minn.*

### Reorganize Political Primaries by Regions

A political primary is a preliminary election in which the registered voters of a political party nominate candidates for office. The key word here is preliminary. The current system allows small states such as Iowa and New Hampshire (assisted by the media) to award front-runner status to the victorious candidate.

From there the candidates travel a path determined by which states wants to "leap frog" the other by moving up their primary dates. Candidates are whisked across the country without any real ability to distinguish regional issues from national issues. Consequently, party platforms are determined by a make-it-up-as-you-go approach. If the primary process were organized on a regional basis, candidates would be able to study the regional issues, campaign to confirm those issues and then receive votes based on the solutions they propose. A regional approach would also prevent a premature selection of a front runner because success in one region certainly would not guarantee success in the next region. This would also further validate the process because each state would still have a say all the way down to the end. Finally, the number of delegates awarded in each state should be determined by the percentage of votes won by each candidate. And yes, convert the caucuses to primaries.

Accordingly, the political primaries should occur between January and June of each presidential election year. Each of the six regions would be assigned a particular month. A lottery held in June of the previous year would determine which month each region holds its primaries.

JOE BIALEK, *Cleveland, Ohio*

### Only In America

"Only in America," as journalist Harry Golden would have likely said, would the likes of Donald J. Trump be considered twice to be the most powerful man on Earth. And the mystery remains intact, that untold millions in the US electorate idolize the fellow, while others wouldn't trust him any farther than they could throw a cow by her tail!

Separating the goats from the sheep is highly unscientific, believe what you will, but please refrain from trying to convert others to your opinion. It could be dangerous.

Talk of political division! It has NEVER been so vocal and conspicuous — nor so deeply held opinion — as we are presently seeing. To paraphrase a familiar comment made by Mark Twain (1835-1910), It's not what I don't understand of chatterbox Donald that troubles me; it's what I do understand that troubles me.

WILLIAM DAUENHAUER, *Willowick, Ohio*

### What 'We the People' Actually Stand For!

We have allowed the "societal scourges" amongst us who've been literally bought and paid for the dereliction and accompanied incompetence of those who have been charged with serving "We the People" to become an absolutely meaningless lie. We've been duped, conned, scammed, lied to, B.S.'d and have essentially become "the servants of our employees." If "We," as "an employer" of all it portends is a reality, whereby "We" can, with justified cause, penalize an employee for some form of wrongdoing to our corporation in order to deter or negate the harm caused, we certainly don't have to wait two to four to six years to do so.

The loss of our democracy and our present plutocratic era of pillaging of "We the People" and the political tactics that are now being primarily and predominantly used by our politicians throughout our nation have now supplanted our humanity and have done so within the hypocrisies of our proclaimed religious realm as well. "We the People"/employer have go to take immediate and expeditious steps to do more than put "a shot across the bow" analogy. "We" need a strong, indisputable, punitive action that puts that other analogy regarding "putting the fear of God in someone" to have them understand clearly "We the People" are your employer!

FRANK G. ROHRIG, *Milford, Conn.*

### Limits of Democracy

You know, Donald Trump and the Republican Party love to dictate to the American people about how, when and where they can vote, who to vote for and how their votes should be counted, and by whom, but now, conversely, they are crying "foul play" and feel threatened by a 34-year-old pop singer, Taylor Swift, because she "might" have the audacity to influence voters, who "might" vote against them ...

This just in!

Ex-President Trump has just issued an ex-presidential executive order overturning the results of the 2024 Super Bowl, declaring that the San Francisco 49ers are the true champions and winners of the Vince Lombardi Trophy.

Trump justified his decision on the fact that the NFL was in existence when he was president, so therefore, he still has presidential powers over them because, back in 2018, he was informed by Vladimir Putin that the Democrats were already forming a coup to groom Taylor Swift and Travis Kelce into Democrats and then have them groom the rest of the American people to only vote for Democrats in future elections.

In addition, according to Trump, the Democrats also groomed the Kansas City head coach, Andy Reid, into the coup by giving him a free five-year supply of "Nuggies" and free home and car insurance for life, paid for by Patrick Mahomes.

Trump's psychiatrist was unavailable for comment.  
MIKE EKLUND, *LaPorte, Ind.*



lions in unpaid debt due to Environmental Protect Agency violations, including compensation for frontline miners made permanently ill by unsafe exposure. That tab is yet to be paid anywhere near in full.

While the list of pollution infractions is weighted directly toward coal, Justice and associates hold fossil-fuel related businesses far beyond West Virginia. Among them is one of Alabama's oldest factories, located in Birmingham. The coke-producing plant is located in a predominantly Black neighborhood, where nauseous gasses were released over a period of years, causing widespread respiratory distress. A local health agency successfully sued Bluestone Coke (a Justice family-owned facility). The settlement was for \$925,000, a far cry below the \$60 million sought by the various plaintiffs.

And the Jim Justice lawsuit line doesn't stop there. Thousands of other workers, vendors, attorneys, farmers, banks, cities, counties, states and federal agencies are in the mix as more Justice-owned entities are found to be engaged in illegal practices.

Justice's fallback position as to why he can't pay his debts in full involves a deal struck in 2009 between Justice's Bluestone Resources and Mechel OAO, a Russian mining conglomerate. When coal values fell in 2015, Justice and family were coerced into buying back their old company for \$5 million.

Coupled with other poor business decisions (and ever-present pending lawsuits) Forbes cited the Mechel exchanges would return Justice to multi-millionaire from billionaire status — all the cover Justice and associates needed to start playing poor mouth in courtrooms across the country.

How Big Jim Justice is on this side of jail bars is a puzzle. How he's still at the helm of his 94 businesses is a wonder. How he's a lock for the US Senate is a straight-up miracle.

Don Rollins is a retired Unitarian Universalist minister in Jackson, Ohio.  
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# The Weeds Fight Back. What's Next?



After nearly 30 years of spraying Roundup on soybeans, corn, canola, cotton and other crops, the weeds have become resistant to the pesticide.

As spring dawns, we are reminded that some farmers will soon be unleashing ungodly amounts of chemicals — weed killers and pesticides — into the environment. Glyphosate, sold as Roundup, is sprayed repeatedly through the season on glyphosate-resistant crops. When that doesn't work, there are new resistant crops and their companion sprays. Dicamba and 2,4D are two of the most popular, manufactured by BASF, Bayer and Syngenta. These deadly sprays are wreaking havoc with the environment.

The escalation started when genetically altered "Roundup-Ready" crops were introduced back in 1996. We have to be clear on the difference between ordinary hybrids and genetically-altered seeds, also called GMO or GE seeds. Hybrids are crosses between two standard varieties, such as two corn varieties with slightly different qualities. Genetically altered crops come from seeds that scientists have actually changed by adding a gene or taking one away. The change means that the plants have a different nature than their parents.

I was at the introductory meeting

about GMO seeds that can survive spraying by glyphosate. Soybeans. The meeting was hosted by the university extension service with a speaker provided by the seed company. Here, farmers asked the right questions. "What are you going to do about weeds that get resistant?" asked one smart elder. "We're working on that," answered the Mizzou extension agent.

Mostly, the extension agents stayed silent and let the chemical sales woman rattle on. The industry also offered big discounts on seeds and sprays those first few years so farmers got in line.

After about 30 years of spraying Roundup on soybeans, corn, canola, cotton and other crops, the weeds, indeed, became resistant. On the website for Pioneer seeds, there's a map showing all the resistant weeds in your state. Altogether, 41 species are resistant around the world with 18 resistant in North America.

And here's where the good news comes in. People are fighting back. According to the AP, costs to industry defending the side effects of glyphosate have gotten unsustainable to the corporate owners.

Glyphosate users suffering from non-Hodgkin lymphoma are winning their court cases: ABC reported, "Corporate parent Bayer had set aside more than \$10 billion in 2020 to settle about 125,000 cases ... it won a string of nine individual lawsuits that started going to trial in 2021. But the tide changed last year when juries began handing down nine- and 10-figure awards ..." Thousands of cases are awaiting trial. Cities in at least 15 states have banned glyphosate completely or in certain circumstances.

So, if someone with, say, 3,000 acres, needs to get rid of weeds, what will they use? How about a stronger chemical? Like Dicamba. But, finally, it's losing its fan base.

In early February, the US District Court of Arizona ruled that dicamba was "unlawfully approved" by the EPA. EPA violated federal law by not providing opportunities for the public to weigh in before agency approval. The action was brought by National Family Farm Coalition, Pesticide Action Network, Center for Food Safety and the Center for Biological Diversity.

Dicamba is most volatile in mid-summer heat. If you live near fields where these chemicals have been sprayed, you've seen the damage. Trees on the borders of the fields have died, their leaves falling when the chemical vapors travel off-target. Neighboring crops that were not genetically altered have died, costing millions for responsible non-chemical farmers. Bees, deprived of blossoms, can't store any honey. Pollinators are disappearing.

"Time and time again, the evidence has shown that dicamba cannot be used without causing massive and unprecedented

harm to farms as well as endangering plants and pollinators ... EPA's and Monsanto's claims of dicamba's safety were irresponsible and unlawful," said George Kimbrell, Center for Food Safety's legal director.

What's next? Up until 1996, it was common in the midwest for crews to "walk the beans" and pull weeds. "Walking the beans" sent groups of six to eight high school and college kids, each with a leader that knew their weeds, walking through the fields in teams and pulling weeds as the weeds grew tall. The crews started before dawn, quit when it got hot, collected their money and took off for the swimming pool to do what teenagers do.

These days, expecting people to walk beans is like suggesting that we cut off our electricity and live like the Amish. Today, to maximize yields, crops are planted too close together for walking between the rows. Unless there's a national move to change big agriculture, chemical use on fields will continue.

Now the bad news: A few days after the court ruled against Dicamba, they amended the ruling so that folks who have purchased the chemical already can use it and retailers can sell the stocks they ordered before the ruling. This is a faulty decision. Dicamba is too volatile to be trusted.

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

**TRUMP UNDERPERFORMANCE IN SOUTH CAROLINA IS ANTI-MAGA TRIUMPH.** When Republican presidential candidate Nikki Haley won 43% of the vote in New Hampshire's GOP primary Jan. 23, it seemed like a probable blip in a nominating process that was destined to be dominated by front-runner Donald Trump. The Granite State's highly educated electorate, with its healthy libertarian streak, was custom built to give Haley a hopeful but short-lived boost—a spirited protest vote—before Trump continued his glide path to the Republican nomination.

But Haley's surprise 40% showing in deeply conservative South Carolina Feb. 24 was something altogether different, signifying a substantial strain of resistance to Trump and a rejection of MAGA politics, Kerry Eleveld noted at Daily Kos (2/26). Sure, Haley is the former governor of South Carolina, but pre-election polls had predicted a bloodbath, with Trump trouncing her by some 30 percentage points.

During her buoyant election-night speech, Haley told a room full of jubilant supporters that while they didn't win the Palmetto State, her share of the electorate also was not "some tiny group."

"Today, in South Carolina, we're getting around 40% of the vote," Haley said, adding, "I'm an accountant. I know 40% is not 50%. But I also know 40% is not some tiny group. There are huge numbers of voters in our Republican primaries who are saying they want an alternative."

In other words, her anti-Trump 40% isn't a blip. It's a trend. Election analyst Ronald Brownstein echoed the point in *The Atlantic*, writing, "[F]or all the evidence of Trump's strength within the party, the South Carolina results again showed that a meaningful floor of GOP voters remains uneasy with returning him to leadership."

Brownstein then quoted a female Republican voter from the Isle of Palms, part of the greater Charleston region, saying of Trump, "I like his policies, but I'd like to cut his thumbs off and tape his mouth shut."

Haley's unexpected resiliency in both the primaries and the financial race has little or nothing to do with her policies or her popularity—it is quite simply a distillation of anti-Trumpism.

For instance, voters signaled no negative reaction whatsoever after Haley totally flubbed an answer about in vitro fertilization following an Alabama ruling declaring that frozen embryos are children under state law. Support for IVF is extremely high, sometimes polling north of 80%, despite extremist anti-abortion Republicans seeking to ban the procedure.

Shortly after one of Alabama's largest hospitals said it was pausing IVF treatments, Haley appeared to signal her agreement with the court ruling. "Embryos, to me, are babies," she told NBC News. But in a subsequent interview, the candidate quickly tried to moderate that statement, telling CNN, "I didn't say that I agreed with the Alabama ruling."

But voters weren't walking through Charleston—a Haley stronghold—registering concern about her IVF statements. They were talking about cutting off Trump's thumbs and curbing his verbal diarrhea with a little duct tape.

On election night, the vibe of Haley's room full of losing supporters felt triumphant. And the night arguably was triumphant—not for Haley but for the anti-MAGA resistance

and for the country as a whole. Haley will not win the GOP nomination, because the party has been subsumed by Trump extremism. But Trump's continued underperformance against Haley is a reflection of the fact that Trump and his MAGA base are still far too extreme for the country, including some 40% of Republican primary voters.

In exit polling, Haley performed best among late-breakers, independents, anyone who didn't identify as a White evangelical Christian, college graduates, high-income earners, people of color, and women.

- Decided within the last month: 67%
- Independents: 62%
- People who aren't White evangelical Christians: 55%
- College graduates: 54%
- Family income \$100,000 or more: 49%
- Nonwhite voters: 46%
- Women: 43%

The data provides President Joe Biden with a wide berth of persuadable voters to target for the general election. As former Obama White House communications director Dan Pfeiffer wrote in his "Message Box" Substack, "Based on the exit polls, Trump's campaign team should be popping some Xanax with the champagne over his win in South Carolina."

**TRUMP'S WEEKEND AT CPAC WAS TOUR DE FORCE OF BIGOTRY AND INCOMPETENCE.** The Conservative Political Action Conference and its associated activities (Feb. 21-25) provided a showcase for Donald Trump as he was given the chance to deliver multiple speeches, mix with Nazis, and share a bear hug with Argentine Trump imitator Javier Milei, Mark Sumner noted at Daily Kos (2/26).

Over the course of the weekend, Trump went big on big-

otry as he spoke at the Black Conservative Federation Gala, using some of the most stereotypically racist language imaginable. That included saying that Black people liked him because he had been indicted multiple times. "My mug shot, we've all seen the mug shot," said Trump. "And you know who embraced it more than anybody else: the Black population."

Trump got his chance to deliver his main-event speech at CPAC on Saturday, and that speech wasn't just riddled with odd statements, it was also overrun with lies. Trump lied about Russia. He lied about Iran. He lied about the border wall, and China, and electric cars. He even lied about Al Capone, the Chicago gangster. He also referred to his wife as "Mercedes."

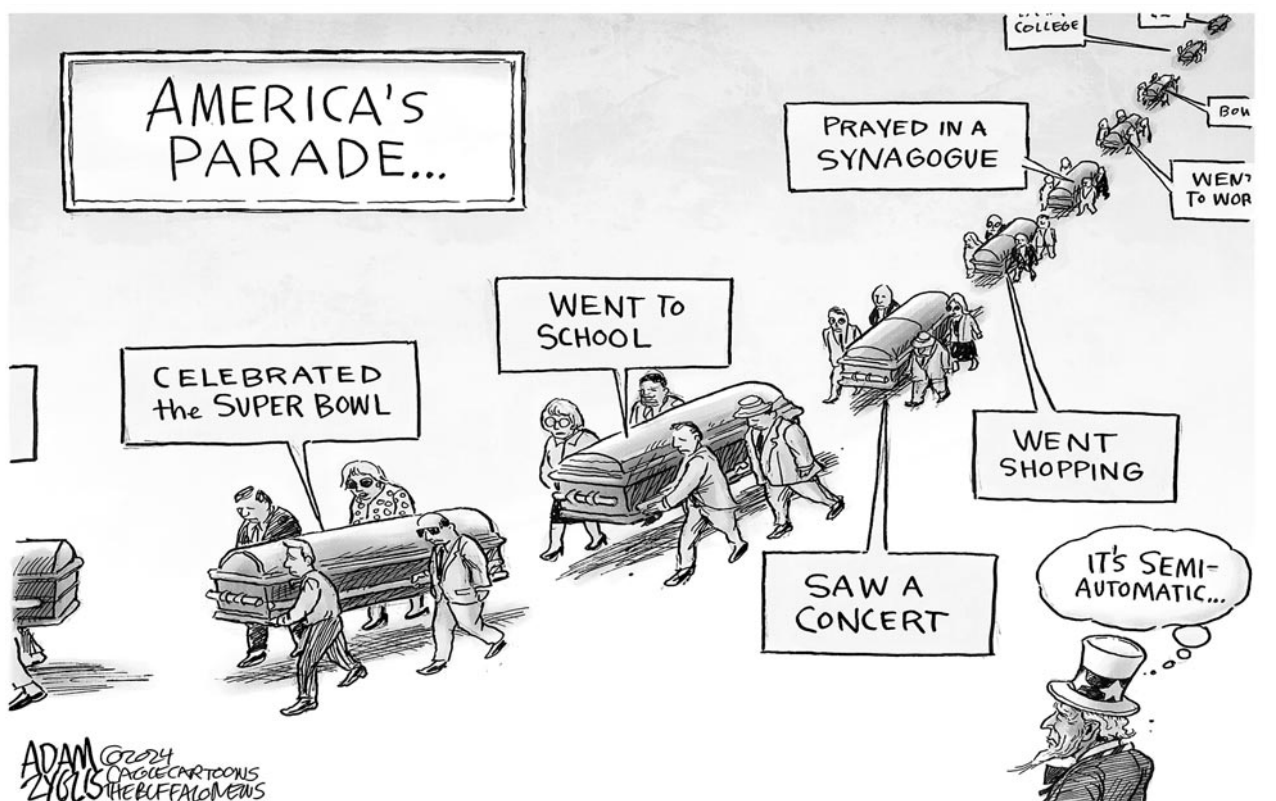
But the speech wasn't just disturbing because of its lies and distortions. This was a genuinely bizarre event. This was not only a speech utterly divorced from reality but also one that pushed a vision that's darker, bleaker, and more apocalyptic than anything Trump voiced four years ago.

This was either the ramblings of a madman or the last desperate push of a timeshare salesman who can tell that his marks are about to leave. Or both.

Much of Trump's speech was devoted to describing a vision of America that might have been lifted from the opening moments of a "Terminator" movie—the part that comes after the bombs fell. If Joe Biden is reelected, said Trump, everything is going to "collapse." Medicare? Collapse. Social Security? Collapse. Education? Collapse. He predicted that the United States would be "starved of energy" and plagued by "constant blackouts," while the terrorist group Hamas rampages through American streets.

And while this postapocalyptic vision might be short a few rampaging machines, Trump told his audience that "40 to 50 million" undocumented migrants "stampeding" across

*Continued on page 22*



## FROM HARROP



Americans have always owned guns for hunting, sport or self defense. But today's gun mania has turned deadly firearms into toys or fashion accessories.

## Parents Who Arm Troubled Kids Finally Face Justice

Her blank face in court spoke volumes. Jennifer Crumbley saw no problem handing her severely depressed 15-year-old a semiautomatic handgun as a Christmas present. Ethan soon after turned the gun on the student body of Oxford High, killing four.

What makes this case both chilling

and sickening is that Ethan had telegraphed his rapid unravelling, and his mother ignored it. He told her there was a demon in the house. He sent her desperate text messages that she did not address: Jennifer was reportedly off tending to her horses and a secretive six-month affair.

The school called in both parents to discuss a violent drawing Ethan had made in math class. It showed a bleeding person and a gun and the words "blood everywhere" and "the thoughts won't stop" and "help me" on a math sheet.

The parents failed to tell the school he had a gun. And they refused to take him home. They had jobs, you know.

When the school told the parents that Ethan was found searching online for ammunition, Jennifer sent her boy a supportive text. It read: "LOL (laughing out loud), I'm not mad at you. You have to learn not to get caught."

Jennifer failed to impress the jury with praise of her parenting skills and her sweet descriptions of family Thanksgiving dinners. She blamed Ethan's father for not properly storing the weapon, but that also didn't get her off the hook.

Jennifer was convicted on four counts of involuntary manslaughter and faces up to 15 years in prison. Her husband will soon

be tried in Oakland County, Michigan.

What is going on? Americans have always owned guns for hunting, sport or self-defense. But today's politicized gun mania has turned deadly firearms into toys for children or fashion accessories.

There was that famous case of the 6-year-old who shot his elementary school teacher in Newport News, Virginia. His mother was sentenced to two years in prison for child neglect. How on Earth did a first grader get access to a loaded gun? It was lying around the house.

The gun obsession played a part in the horrific 2012 elementary school shooting in Newtown, Connecticut, that left 27 innocents dead. The killer's divorced mother, Nancy Lanza, would go to bars at night bragging to the guys about her guns. Despite son Adam's history of serious mental illness, she left the firearms strewn around their house. Today a jury probably would have locked her up and thrown away the key — had Adam not murdered her first.

Other lonely women have been known to seek company by making common cause with the male-dominated gun fixation. In Oregon, Laurel Harper participated in gun forums, alternating her topics between descriptions of her son's mental illness and her gun collection.

She probably expected pats on the head when she told the fellas, "I keep two full mags in my Glock case. And the ARs and AKs (semiautomatics) all have loaded mags." Wildly clueless, she criticized "lame states" that put limits on loaded firearms in the home.

Her son Christopher Harper-Mercer had been involuntarily hospitalized for psychiatric treatment. He brought six guns to Umpqua Community College in Roseburg and slaughtered 10 people. After the massacre, Laurel told detectives that Christopher was "mad at the world."

Are parents who keep unsecured loaded weapons in homes shared with disturbed or very young children themselves mentally off? The argument can be made. But if police removed arms from adults without criminal records, the gun lobby would go crazy.

Legal experts see the Crumbley case as the first to directly hold parents culpable for giving a child who turns guns on others access to weapons. But where did these parents come from?

Froma Harrop is a columnist with *Creators Syndicate*, formerly with the *Providence (R.I.) Journal*. Follow her on Twitter @fromaharrop. Email fharrop@gmail.com.

## Vilsack's Lament

By ART CULLEN

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack complained in mid-February of getting batted about, left and right, from one day to the next. It can be lonely at the top, so you rope-a-dope your way along trying to stay afloat.

He referred to a protester at the Ag Outlook Forum who thinks USDA is a corporate sell-out, and to banging his head against the wall with knuckleheads on the House Agriculture Committee who can't muster a farm bill on time.

The Ag Census reports that Iowa farm sizes grew along with net income through 2022. Dairy and livestock sectors continued to consolidate. Just a few players dominate the industry. Young farmers can't find a foothold. Soil losses are frightening. Pork exports are expected to eclipse poultry in 10 years as Asian demand grows exponentially. We can't handle the manure we already have — just take a sniff outside and don't dare dip in the river.

Vilsack's lament comes somewhat from his own making.

The former Iowa governor believes that "climate-smart" agriculture built around re-

silience and sustainability will lead to diversity in production. He also understands that money greases political wheels. When Joe Biden took office, Vilsack lined up all the big players in agribusiness for his "climate-smart" initiative — Cargill, Tyson, ADM, everybody who's anybody. They issued joint statements with the support of the House and Senate agriculture committee leaders.

It hasn't worked.

The House halted the farm bill over food stamps. Funding is frozen. At the committee hearing in mid-February, Vilsack was under fire for fear that climate action will heist property rights. The message from the corporatists to the Capitol to get smart on climate got a wink and a no-reply. Nor has the USDA "climate-smart" money directed by Vilsack so far — some \$20 billion — made an appreciable difference in Iowa surface water or air quality. Young farmers are not getting a boot on the ladder to success. The integrators get theirs, while folks in Storm Lake get ballooning water bills as our wells are sucked dry.

Vilsack thought he could bring the Republicans along. They would rather fight than eat. They can't decide on the border, on Ukraine, not even on a farm bill that the Farmers Union and Cargill could settle for.

Perhaps a pivot is in order.

The farm bill architecture got us into this

fix. Give the Freedom Caucus what it wants: Rip it up and see where the pieces land.

Tell Big Ag to stuff it. Say to hell with subsidizing huge corporations with money that is supposed to get grass strips planted along the Raccoon River. Quit indirectly subsidizing pork exports to China at the expense of Iowa's soil base. Tell them they don't need our money to build a CO2 pipeline. Use executive authority to enroll every eligible applicant into the Conservation Stewardship Program and the Conservation Reserve Program — both popular and suppressed. Tie crop insurance to stewardship.

The ag census chronicles the failure of the existing farm bill architecture. The House hearing illustrates the failure of the Vilsack corporate-based political strategy to prop up its sagging frame.

With Speaker Johnson at the rostrum, how can we see a way clear to a farm bill before the November election? It is nigh on impossible.

Wouldn't it be novel if Vilsack went full-bore for Iowa? For clean water and air, for independent livestock production, for open and transparent markets, for healthy and diverse rural communities where you can make a decent living. Iowa does not have that now. Not, at least, from a Sac or Pochontas county perspective.

The reason to send all those Iowa boys to Washington is so they can deliver some of that bacon home to where it is fattened and sliced. What about Storm Lake's failing wells brought on by agri-industrial demand? Who pays for that? What about our lost soil — where is the accounting? The big boys may be flush, but what about the rest of us? Why should our cheap corn be used to undermine the very foundation of Iowa — its soil, water and people?

Biden could win Iowa with a campaign like that. Vilsack once did.

Production agriculture is hanging its friend Vilsack out to dry politically. Agribusiness claims to support resiliency and security, but it funds the Ag Committee that fails to produce a farm bill. It lets the knuckleheads box Vilsack around. He will never miss a meal if he tells all of them to sit and spin on this in defense of Iowa's values. That's what we need. Vilsack is capable of it if he could summon the courage of his stated vision.

Art Cullen is editor and publisher of the *Storm Lake Times Pilot* in northwest Iowa ([stormlake.com](http://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](mailto:times@stormlake.com).

## From Ink to Electrons, the Retirement of Print Journalism

By ALAN GUEBERT

Recently, a retired friend asked if I planned to retire anytime soon. It was the right question. While I have considered retirement, I explained, I have no real plans—soon or otherwise—to do so.

But, I added, "The choice may not be up to me because I'm in a profession that might retire on me."

It's no joke. In the last year alone, two newspapers that had long published this weekly effort closed and two others quit printing it—after nearly 25 years—due to bone-deep budget cuts.

That's just the state of today's newspapers. According to research at Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism, 360 US newspapers closed from the start of the COVID-19 pandemic through mid-2022.

If that shutdown rate continued through this January, roughly another 150 have closed since. Which means nearly 3,000 newspapers, one-fourth of all US newspapers, have closed since 2005.

That clobbering has made print journalists nearly as rare as coal miners. According to the Pew Research Center, the number of people employed by US newspapers dropped from 71,000 in 2008 to 31,000 in 2020. That freefall was just slightly better than coal mining that, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, lost 46,000 jobs since 2012.

We inky wretches aren't the only word shakers quaking; digital and print magazine editors are keeping their heads low in their office cubicles, too.

For example, wrote Ezra Klein in the Jan. 21 *New York Times*, in the last few months "Sports Illustrated has just laid

off most of its staff," and web news giants BuzzFeed and Jezebel closed while HuffPo, Vice, and FiveThirtyEight pared back staff and reach.

And all continue to lose readers, advertising and revenue. The only thing all forms of journalism seems good at nowadays is bleeding money. Ideas to stem the flow are many, varied and cheap; actual solutions are rare, hard, and costly.

A decade ago the best one appeared to be white knight billionaires wanting to own trophy pieces of American journalism. Amazon founder Jeff Bezos (*Washington Post*), biotech investor Dr. Patrick Soon-Shiong (*Los Angeles Times*), and software mogul Marc Benioff (*Time*) spent a collective \$940 million to acquire their shiny jewels.

By mid-January 2024, though, those Midases were taking a pasting, too. According to the *Times*, the three had poured hundreds of millions more into their inky ratholes before putting their checkbooks back into their pockets.

Even newspaper royalty isn't immune: On Feb. 1 Rupert Murdoch's *Wall Street Journal* laid off 20 journalists in its Washington, D.C. bureau.

"Wealth doesn't insulate an owner from the serious challenges plaguing many media companies," one long-time observer told the *Times*, "and it turns out being a billionaire isn't a predictor for solving those problems."

The problem is particularly acute in rural America, noted Northwestern's Nov. 16, 2023 "The State of Local News" Report.

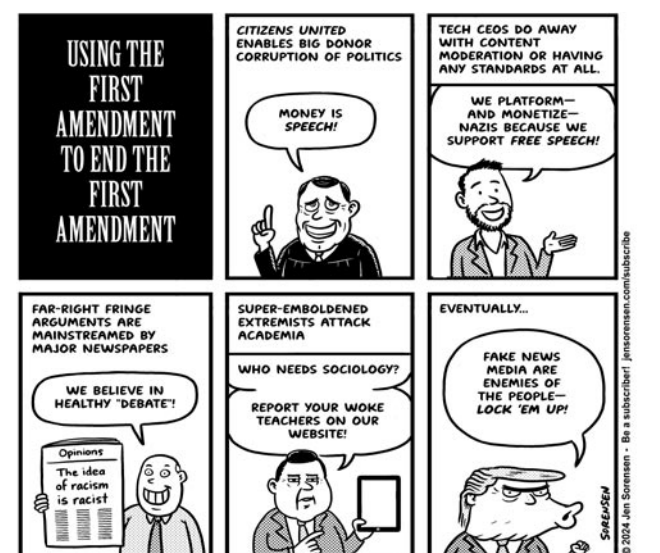
"Residents in more than half of U.S. counties have no, or very limited, access to a reliable local news source—either print, digital or broadcast," it explained. Moreover, "There are 204 counties without any local news outlet and 1,562 counties served with only one remaining local news source, invariably a weekly newspaper."

And new digital alternatives—regardless of professionalism or earnestness—aren't a universal solution because "many digital start-ups have trouble gaining enough subscribers and funding to achieve long-term sustainability," the report adds.

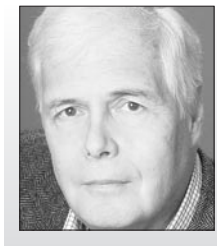
That doesn't mean newspapers can't make the move to digital; many have and more are headed that way. A year ago, the report noted, "42 of the largest 100 newspapers (delivered) a print edition six or fewer times a week" and 11 of those "largest dailies publish in printed form only one or two times a week."

That future-less ink, more electrons, and fewer journalists—appears as irreversible as my age.

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](http://farmandfoodfile.com)



## GENE LYONS



For sheer fake sanctimony, special counsel Robert Hur resembled Kenneth Starr. Bringing Biden's dead son into Hur's report was an outrage.

## There's Nothing 'Normal' About 2024

Does anybody really believe the United States is going to have a “normal” presidential election in 2024, with Joe Biden and Donald Trump as the nominees and a peaceful resolution? Or will chaos and disorder take the nation to the brink, as MAGA supporters appear to wish?

Among several possibilities I can imagine, “normal” seems the least likely.

If Biden had paid attention to me — absurd, I know, but bear with me for the sake of argument — the Democrats wouldn't be in this mess. It's possible to agree with the president that special counsel Robert Hur's editorializing about his mental acuity amounted to an unfounded partisan smear without thinking that Biden's in the clear politically.

Will Democrats never quit falling for these fakers? Why must all “independent” investigations be conducted by GOP apparatchiks? For sheer fake sanctimony, Hur resembled that psalm-singing hypocrite Kenneth Starr. Bringing the president's dead son into it was, as Biden said, an outrage. Also, I think, a craven lie.

Nothing in his 330-page report supports Hur's characterization. That said, the most appalling thing about the president's ill-advised press conference following the report's release was the conduct of the White House press corps, who screamed at Biden like a troop of baboons.

I noticed that CNN, when it rebroadcast the exchange, muted the sound. As my old friend James Fallows noted almost 30 years ago in his book “Breaking the News,” the White House press corps often acts “with a discourtesy and rancor that represent the public's views much less than they reflect the modern journalist's belief that being independent boils down to acting hostile.”

But the Feb. 8 performance was over the top. You won't see sports journalists treating NFL players the way the White House baboons treated Biden, because, well, they wouldn't dare.

That said, everybody knew what the president meant when he identified the president of Egypt as the leader of Mexico. The whole exchange took place in the context of an otherwise important (and overdue) warning to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that the United States is losing patience with Israeli brutality toward Palestinian civilians in Gaza.

Biden, a lifelong stutterer, had simply transposed two words. He knew what he meant, and so did everybody else. So what?

Politically speaking, however, the timing could hardly have been worse. The baboons were screaming because they sensed weakness, and everybody in the troop wants to be in on the kill. The political reality is that upwards of 62% of voters told a recent NBC News poll that it's a “major concern” that Biden might not have the “mental and physical health” for a second term as president. He has aged visibly during his term.

That's the political reality the president appears reluctant to confront even now. I'm guessing he'll have to sometime between now and the Democratic National Convention in August. As things now stand, he's gone from being the only name-brand Democrat who could defeat Trump to maybe the only one who can't. Always a political realist, I suspect Biden will come to see that.

Meanwhile, only 34% expressed similar concerns about Trump, an obese 77-year-old, who wears orange pancake makeup and adult diapers, but who does appear comparatively vigorous on stage regardless of what stimulants he inhales or what poisonous nonsense he emits.

Such as this treasonous nonsense in early February:

“One of the presidents of a big country stood up and said, ‘Well, sir, if we don't pay and we're attacked by Russia, will you protect us?’” Trump said at a rally at Coastal Carolina University. “I said, ‘You didn't pay. You're delinquent.’ He said, ‘Yes, let's say that hap-

pened.’ No, I would not protect you. In fact, I would encourage them to do whatever the hell they want.”

Never mind his cowering before Russian dictator Vladimir Putin, nor his envisioning NATO — maybe the most successful military alliance in world history — as a protection racket.

Trump's “Sir” stories are always brazen lies. Does ANYBODY believe this conversation actually took place? If so, it would be easy to document. But nobody will so much as try, because the reporters having such a big time picking on Biden's verbal miscues are too intimidated. Or because they think nobody believes him.

Nobody but the most far-gone MAGA idolators, that is.

However, barring a bizarre and constitutionally absurd intervention by the US Supreme Court in the coming days, Trump and his right-wing media allies' ability to control the national political conversation will come to an abrupt end on the first day of his trial for inciting the Jan. 6, 2021, insurrection.

His conviction, highly likely in view of the voluminous evidence against him, would be the end of Donald John Trump politically. Then comes the Mar-a-Lago classified documents case, where the documentary evidence is even stronger.

So no, nothing's apt to be “normal” about the 2024 election.

*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. Email eugenejlyons2@yahoo.com.*

## Poor and Low-Income Voters are a Sleeping Giant

**Politicians pay next to no attention to the concerns of low-income Americans. Advocates want to change that — and maybe the next election, too.**

By SARAH ANDERSON

Amidst all the nail-biting uncertainty over the 2024 election, one thing's for sure: turnout will be key. This past February, the Poor People's Campaign announced plans to mobilize a powerful yet often overlooked voting bloc: the 85 million eligible voters who are poor or low-income.

The campaign crunched the numbers and determined that if this bloc voted at the same rate as higher-income voters, they could sway elections in every state. But most voting drives — and candidates — still ignore this segment of our society.

“The conventional wisdom — which isn't very wise — is that the poor don't care about voting,” said Poor People's Campaign Policy Director Shailly Gupta Barnes at a Feb. 5 press conference. “But that's just not true.”

What's the biggest factor discouraging low-wage people from exercising this basic right?

“Political campaigns do not talk to them or speak to their issues,” explained campaign co-chair Bishop William J. Barber II. “In our election cycles sometimes we have 15, 20 debates for president. In 2020, not one of those — not 15 minutes — was given to raising questions about how the policies of that particular party or politician would impact poor and low-income people.”

The Poor People's Campaign is organizing to push the concerns of poor and low-income people into the center of the 2024 political debate. Their goal is to mobilize 15 million “infrequent” poor and low-income voters.

Will politicians listen?

At the press conference, pollster Celinda Lake ticked off one battleground state after another where even a small increase in participation could determine the outcome. She pointed out that in Arizona, 40% of voters are low-wage — and in 2020 the margin of victory was just 0.03%. “You'd have to be a moron to not get this,” Lake said.

What are some of the most pressing issues on the Poor People's Campaign agenda?

The campaign and the Institute for Policy Studies just co-published fact sheets for the nation and all 50 states on the interlocking problems that hit the poor hardest: poverty and inequality, systemic racism, ecological devastation, and militarism. Several speakers spoke about these problems from their own personal experiences.

“I'm tired of companies and billionaires buying politicians who are pushing people deeper into poverty and debt,” said Matthew Rosing of Lancaster, Pennsylvania. “I've put up with the thankless toll of minimum wage retail jobs and back-breaking construction jobs in a state that has 19 billionaires. And because of our flat tax, they pay the same state income

tax rate as I do.”

Linda Burns, a former Amazon warehouse assembly line worker, has struggled for basic labor rights and decent health care benefits. Burns was a supporter of the valiant union drive at the Bessemer, Alabama facility that Amazon eventually crushed through harsh intimidation tactics.

Burns says she was fired for her union activity, which led to the loss of her health benefits right before a needed surgery related to a workplace injury. Today she works 16 hours a day as a caregiver.

“I've worked too hard to have nothing,” said Burns. “We have to stand up for our rights.”

Veronica Burton spoke about the economic gulf in her community of Beloit, Wisconsin. A woman who lives “around the corner” from her is a billionaire while Burton is struggling to pay bills in the face of multiple rent increases and the low wages she earns at an understaffed child care center.

On top of dealing with her own problems, Burton often finds herself trying to help parents of the children under her care. “We've had mothers unenroll their children because they can't afford their asthma medicine,” she said.

These and other organizers in more than 30 states are ready to put on their door-knocking shoes in the lead-up to this year's election and beyond. “We are not an insurrection,” Bishop Barber said. “But you better believe we are a resurrection — a resurrection of justice and love and righteousness.”

*Sarah Anderson directs the Global Economy Project and edits the Inequality.org website at the Institute for Policy Studies. This op-ed was adapted from Inequality.org and distributed for syndication by OtherWords.org.*

## Agent Orange's Inspiration: “Be like Vlad”

By JOHN YOUNG

With the death of Alexei Navalny, we are reminded once again how Vladimir Putin meets Donald Trump's definition of “smart.”

Indeed, a fellow “genius.” So much in common.

Back when Trump took the Miss Universe pageant to Moscow in 2013, he wrote Putin a gushing letter inviting him to attend and wondered via tweet if Putin would “become my best friend?”

Best friend? Well, so many dictators, so little time.

Unable to make the pageant, Putin sent Trump a gift: an ornate lacquered box containing something.

The key to his heart? We could only speculate — until intelligence experts verified the gift Putin provided: not a trinket but a service: the full force of Russia's Internet Re-

search Agency — 1,000 employees strong — to help Trump win the presidency.

Read about it in “LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media,” by P.W. Singer and Emerson Booking.

Now, toward a return to office and a “Get out of prison” card, Trump is making sure Putin knows that best-friend feeling is intact.

Our non-president, from his Taco Bueno-style Florida haunt, is blocking aid to Ukraine through spineless marionettes he controls in the House of Representatives — just as he blocks a bipartisan effort to shore up border security because it's an “issue” he wants to use in his own presidential campaign.

Worse, he's threatening NATO countries with dissolution of the treaty, implying that if he became president again, he'd let Russia do as it wishes in an invading way.

That threat is based on the bogus claim that the allies aren't paying their “dues.” As if he were an expert in paying what he owes.

Dues? As the British say: bull crackers. (The Swedes? The Fins? Someone. Back me up, here.)

The agreement behind the 75-year alliance is that members keep defense spending at 2% of gross domestic product.

A few countries come up short of that, but NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said that European nations will hit the 2% target collectively this year.

The “dues” canard is a message for low-information voters, and of course for Trump's man Vlad.

Observe Trump's behavior and what he promises to do should he regain power, and know why Putin plucks at his heart strings. These are vultures of a feather.

Trump threatens to use the weight of the federal government to punish enemies — just like Putin. To do so, he says he'll purge anyone for whom the Big Lie sticks in the throat.

Trump believes that the Jan. 6 riot was a beautiful thing, that people who killed a security officer and pooped in the halls of the U.S. Capitol were patriots.

Trump will watch the upcoming Russian election with an eye for how Putin achieves the 98% support he expects.

One way Trump and fellow Republicans have sought to achieve this is to make voting increasingly difficult. It looks like the last season of HBO's “Curb Your Enthusiasm” will revolve around the crime of handing a bottle of water to a Georgia voter. Truly oppressive — I mean, impressive, GOP.

Meanwhile we await the Supreme Court's ruling on whether Trump is immune from criminal prosecution. He says it's about all presidents to come, but it's all about him, naturally.

I'm starting to wonder if we should root on a stunning “fully immune” ruling from the court.

In that case, Joe Biden could have Trump arrested for being a critic of his government, just as best-friend Putin did with Navalny.

Trump could sit in the northernmost cell in America, something just outside the Arctic Wildlife Refuge, and rail against the scary notion that any leader would crack down on dissent in such a brutal way.

Then one day, after a brisk, 36-below walk in the exercise yard, Inmate Orange could down a Diet Coke injected with a splash of state-sponsored anti-freeze, feel “not well,” and expire.

Biden then could cancel the next election and jail anyone who complains. You know: Be like Putin.

*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

They eliminate the livestock confinement coordinator. They zero out funding for the Leopold Center for Sustainable Ag at Iowa State University. While poll after poll shows that water quality is near the top of Iowans' worries.

They try to deny immigrant students higher education. They warn private colleges that if they don't straighten out their woke politics the Iowa Tuition Grant will be in danger.

That's a small sampling. Too much to keep track of, frankly. Makes a fella's head hurt.

The Democrats are in disarray. They could caucus in the Capitol broom closet. Former Sen. Tom Harkin is retired to D.C., and former Gov. Tom Vilsack moved there. If the Democratic literati showed up on Ruraltown Mainstreet, you could probably draw a baker's dozen if you serve free pork burgers and let in the guy in the beard who's packing heat.

Something funny happened along the way to democracy's implosion.

Small-town library supporters didn't like that move to strip them of budget or book authority, and neither do the patrons who like books by both neanderthal fascists and screaming lefties without a sense of humor.

Special-ed moms are tenacious. Talk about shutting out the Area Education Agencies with their speech pathologists and hearing specialists and psychologists and you invite a war for life. The mere mention by Gov. Kim Reynolds set off parents, school board members, staff and agency host communities like Pocahontas, pop. 1,867, a Republican hotbed.

Folks get nervous about gay bashing,

especially the ones who just realized their nephew is gay. It may not be their central political issue, but nobody thinks Byron Stuart, the owner of the World Famous Byron's Bar in Pomeroy, is a threat to world order. He just keeps the music playing and we appreciate that. Having spent the better part of two days with mostly burly truck dudes, I noticed none of them were talking down "queers." Not once. When asked, they generally reply that they haven't quite wrapped their heads around all that, but it is none of anybody's business. They would rather attention be spent on making Hwy. 175 a safe, smooth Iowa road, which it is not.

So in November, the book banners and queer bashers got their comeuppance in municipal and school elections. The Moms for Liberty got their butts kicked statewide.

Republicans started to disagree about things, like gutting the AEAs or banning former Iowan Tennessee Williams's steamy plays. Rep. Megan Jones, a Sioux Rapids Republican and mother of a whole passelful of kids, voted against shaming gay children. There comes a point ...

Gov. Kim Reynolds took up with the Moms for Liberty and Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, who would be a nice guy if he weren't such a jerk. It rubbed off on her. She endorsed DeSantis over the great golden bear, and Donald Trump declared both of them were finished. DeSantis is, for now. Reynolds isn't looking so good with a Trump target square between her eyes. She lost while hosting the caucuses, bad form. Losers get less love even from the ardent. Auditor Rob Sand perked up and might run for governor in 2026. Rumors swirl that Reynolds might not give it another go.

The Senate Republicans don't know when to quit. They rewrote the collective bargaining law seven years ago to limit negotiations, and to force union elections

every time a contract comes up. They did not anticipate that those hundreds of elections would actually affirm that 98% of members support their local union boss. So this year they doubled down. Senators Adrian Dickey of Packwood and Jason Schultz of Schleswig want to force public employers to provide a list of employees to the state every time a contract comes up for negotiation. If the city or school district refuses to submit the list, the union must sue to force the issue or else the union automatically gets zapped out of existence. Case's union alone, Local 238 in Cedar Rapids, would have to sue up to 100 municipalities on a revolving basis to just stay whole.

"We don't sit around and wait to be killed," Case told the TV cameras on the steps of the Capitol. "When we push back, we get results from a fight."

"Between now and November, we are going to escalate."

It will be more than honking horns. The Teamsters are raising funds for strikes and fines. If legislators are determined to stay on course, Case will advise snowplow drivers who are not paid for being on call (which is illegal), to not answer the phone at 3 a.m.

"Tell them to call Sen. Dickey to come plow your street."

Or don't answer the unpaid call when the sewer backs up or the water system shuts down.

"We will quit working for free."

All options are on the table, Case insisted to the press.

"We're not taking it anymore," Case said.

More labor rallies are set to pressure legislators.

"Some say we shouldn't poke the bear," Case said. "We don't trust them.

We're not going to wait to see what the House and Senate are going to do. They're liars, and we're not going to let them lie to us again."

Dickey said it was much ado about nothing, just technical changes to the law written seven years ago. He also said the Teamsters were against freedom. A big bloc of the International Brotherhood leans right. Dickey needlessly is alienating working-class people who vote Republican.

You just haven't heard union leaders talk this way in Iowa, a so-called Right To Work state. Their tails have been tucked since Ronald Reagan abandoned his old union pals. Then the Teamsters got a big contract with UPS, and the United Auto Workers won their strike against the Big Three. Public approval for labor is at its highest point since JFK ran Camelot.

Case believes the time is right for rock and roll.

"I think it's a turning point for Iowa," Case said. "People don't like extreme politics. It's going to have extreme reactions. Iowans are fighting back."

Case is casing for candidates for school boards and county boards and of course the legislature. He doesn't care if they're red, blue or purple, so long as they stand against the absurdity and malice of it all. He wants to put mayhem on his adversaries. They ain't seen nothin' yet, he promises. It's not often that a labor story leads the prime-time news in Des Moines, but there was the 18-wheeler rolling and honking in full color on the screen. That's a start.

Art Cullen is publisher and editor of the *Storm Lake Times Pilot* in northwest Iowa ([stormlake.com](http://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*.

## In California, Faceoff Between Major Insurer and Health System Shows Hazards of Consolidation

By ANNIE SCIACCA, KFF Health News

For weeks, more than half a million Anthem Blue Cross enrollees who receive health care from the University of California were held in suspense. It wasn't clear whether they would have to find new doctors or switch plans as the health system and one of its largest insurance partners struggled to reach agreement on a new contract.

UC Health accused Anthem of not negotiating in good faith, while Anthem leaders retorted that UC Health had demanded too much and rebuffed the insurer's request for administrative efficiencies. In fact, roughly 8 million Anthem members in California were at risk of losing in-network access to UC Health's vast network of prestigious hospitals and medical facilities, which could have left them with much higher out-of-pocket expenses. While not all patients were made aware of the situation, Anthem notified some enrollees they would be reassigned to new primary care doctors if no deal were reached.

But even as the parties announced an 11th-hour agreement on Feb. 5, industry analysts say the conflict has become part of a trend in which patients are increasingly caught in the crossfire of contract disputes. Amid negotiations over rising labor and equipment costs, it's often patients who are ultimately saddled with higher bills as the health industry continues to consolidate.

"This type of contract dispute is a routine feature of the health care system," said Kristof Stremikis, director of market analysis and insight at the California Health Care Foundation. "At the same time, from a patient's perspective, it's an unfortunate feature of our health care system because it creates uncertainty and anxiety." (California Healthline is an editorially independent service of the California Health Care Foundation.)

Stremikis noted that as mergers occur in the health industry, patients are left with fewer choices. Any time there are disputes, disruptions are felt more widely. And such fights rarely result in lower costs for consumers long-term across California.

A KFF analysis found widespread evidence that consolidation of health providers leads to higher health care prices for private insurance. The same brief from 2020 found some evidence suggesting that large, consolidated insurance companies are able to obtain lower prices from providers, but that has not necessarily led to lower premiums for patients. And a 2022 report from the California Department of Health Care Access and Information found that health care costs have grown "at an unsustainable rate," and noted that between 2010 and 2018 "health insurance premiums for job-based coverage increased more than twice the rate of growth for wages." State regulators also found that health plans spent nearly \$1.3 billion more on prescription drugs in 2022 than in 2021.

In trying to slow growth, California in 2022 set up an Office of Health Care Affordability, which has proposed a 3% spending growth target for the industry for 2025-2029. But enforcement will start in 2028 at the earliest, using spending data from 2026.

Cathy Jordan, 60, a social worker in Yuba City, California, has been a patient at UC Davis Health for two decades. Jordan was diagnosed at the end of 2021 with aggressive small cell carcinoma, a rare form of cancer. She has undergone surgery, chemotherapy, radiation, and other treatments since then, yet her cancer has returned twice.

"I don't have the luxury of time — my cancer comes back fast," Jordan said.

She is among the group of Anthem-insured patients at UC Health who were at risk of losing access to in-network care there, and when she got a notice from Anthem, she grew alarmed, she said.

Jordan's oncologist, Rebecca Brooks, said in an interview prior to the agreement being reached that it would be "incredibly disruptive" for cancer patients to have to switch providers in the middle of their treatments.

"It's a detriment to their care," said Brooks, director of the gynecologic oncology division at UC Davis Health. "It's going

to disrupt treatment and cause worse outcomes."

Jordan said she appreciates that UC Davis Health has a National Cancer Institute comprehensive cancer center designation; the only other cancer center of that caliber in Northern California not part of UC Health is at Stanford University, several hours away in Santa Clara County.

Jordan was worried that she and other UC Health patients would have to compete for treatment elsewhere. She was also uncomfortable with the idea of adjusting to a new setting and routine while undergoing intensive medical treatment.

"Someone needs to say, 'We need to think about these patients.' Someone needs to step up and say, 'What's going to be best for our patients?'" Jordan said. "This is my life."

Stremikis said such concerns are ever more urgent as the health care industry consolidates. UC San Francisco recently announced it would acquire two struggling hospitals in San Francisco, and it is joining Adventist Health in making a new effort to purchase a bankrupt community hospital in Madera. And UC Irvine recently agreed to buy four hospitals in Southern California.

"There is consolidation vertically up and down the supply chain and horizontally," he explained. "So when there are disputes between these large entities, it has a larger and larger impact because there are fewer choices for patients."

While contract disputes between health care providers and insurers are nothing new, there is some evidence that they are increasing, at least in public view. FTI

Consulting published data last year that found a steady increase in media coverage of rate negotiations between providers and insurers from 2022 to 2023. In addition to the fight with Anthem, UC Health narrowly avoided a break with Aetna last year by reaching an agreement in April. And regional hospital systems, including Sonoma Valley Hospital and Salinas Valley Health, have been at odds with Anthem within the last few months.

UC and Anthem have now agreed to extend the current contract to April 1 while terms of the new agreement are being finalized. UC Health spokesperson Heather Harper said the rate increases were below the inflation rate.

Anthem spokesperson Michael Bowman said the new contract would allow Anthem members to access care at UC Health for years to come.

"This underscores our mutual commitment to providing Anthem's consumers and employers with access to high quality, affordable care at UC Health," Bowman said in an email.

Annie Sciacca wrote this for KFF Health News, which publishes *California Healthline*, an editorially independent service of the California Health Care Foundation. This story also ran in *The Sacramento Bee*.

KFF Health News is a national newsroom that produces in-depth journalism about health issues and is one of the core operating programs at KFF — the independent source for health policy research, polling, and journalism. Learn more at [kff.org/about-us](http://kff.org/about-us).





# Putin's Bootlicker Condoned Political Murder. He Wants to Bring Kremlin Values to the White House.

By DICK POLMAN

To the shock of absolutely nobody, and to the delight of MAGA wingnuts who worship Vladimir Putin, the Republic's presidential candidate broke his 72-hour silence about the murder of Russian dissident Alexei Navalny by puking this babble on social media:

"The sudden death of Alexei Navalny has made me more and more aware of what is happening in our Country. It is a slow, steady progression, with CROOKED, Radical Left Politicians, Prosecutors, and Judges leading us down a path to destruction. Open Borders, Rigged Elections, and Grossly Unfair Courtroom Decisions are DESTROYING AMERICA. WE ARE A NATION IN DECLINE, A FAILING NA-

TION! MAGA2024."

I'm sure it reads better in the original Russian.

The first six words, in particular, read as if they were personally dictated by the sneaker salesman's murderous puppeteer. Putin's government said that Navalny succumbed from "sudden death syndrome," and here we have Donald Trump parroting "sudden death."

Not a single word of condemnation, of course. Trump is Putin's bitch; that's been obvious since at least 2016, and his fealty now threatens NATO and the international order. Trump dares not defend our American values, much less question a political murder. There once was a time when Republicans stood steadfast against Russian abuse of human rights, but that abiding party principle has gone the way of the videocassette.

Worst of all, however, Trump's whiny Navalny message is All About Himself. Did we expect anything else? It takes a lot of toxic moxie to equate one's legal woes with a heroic dissident's fate, to somehow suggest that he too is a victim, to use Navalny's death in a gulag as an excuse to rail against "Unfair Courtroom Decisions" in our courts of law, to essentially claim that he is Amer-

## Behind The Special Counsel Smear Of Biden

By JOE CONASON

Plainly visible behind the melodramatic release of a special counsel report on President Joe Biden's retention of classified documents — and its unprofessional partisan personal attack on him — are several basic facts that ought to be understood by every American.

First is the character of Robert Hur, the special counsel, a Trump Republican who abused Attorney General Merrick Garland's good-faith appointment of him. Hur larded his report exonerating the president with irrelevant remarks that were obviously designed to inflict political damage. By doing so, Hur clearly violated Justice Department protocols and has earned investigations of his own misconduct by the department's Office of Professional Responsibility and inspector general.

It is worth noting that Hur's ridiculously verbose, overwrought document is marred by its slovenly composition. To cite one glaring instance among many, he claims to have found "evidence that President Biden willfully retained and disclosed classified documents," and then admits more than 200 pages later that "there is in fact a

shortage of evidence on these points." (Did the special counsel, only 51 years old, suffer his own embarrassing memory lapse?)

Second is the failure of mainstream media to duly emphasize the memory blips and routinely incoherent blabber of Biden's principal opponent Donald Trump. When the former president wrongly identified Hungarian President Viktor Orban in a recent speech as the president of Turkey, his error received only brief mention on the major cable networks. His repeated mistaking of his primary opponent Nikki Haley for Nancy Pelosi in another speech got more coverage, but only because Haley kept mentioning it to mock Trump.

Not so long ago, in the trial that found Trump liable for sexual assault, he gazed at a photograph of plaintiff E. Jean Carroll and told the court that it was a picture of Marla Maples, one of his former wives. Anyone who has looked at Trump's testimony in any number of cases, notably the lawsuits over his phony Trump University, will find dozens of instances when he claimed, under oath, not to remember events, documents and people he knew.

Third and most important is that any comparison of the performance of Biden versus Trump reflects very poorly on the latter — and quite positively on the current president. From a prolonged economic slump that was largely owed to Trump's mismanagement of the COVID pandemic, Biden has restored the US economy. Al-

though the country has suffered a spike of inflation that is now abating, it was far lower than in other developed nations and emanated from global supply problems, not his policies.

Economic growth and full employment have persisted strongly, crushing the dire and almost universal predictions of recession — and the financial markets, which Trump predicted would crash, instead have reached record levels. (Now the Republican politicians, who usually measure their life achievement by stock prices, tell us that doesn't matter.) Across the country, Biden's achievements in office are improving American lives and communities, with higher wages, lower drug costs, and the enormous infrastructure program that Trump promised and failed to deliver.

Biden's extensive record looks even better when contrasted with the latest embarrassing antics of Trump and his congressional Republican lackeys. Anyone worried by the arrival of thousands of undocumented immigrants ought to have welcomed the tough — indeed draconian — border control legislation agreed by Senate Republicans and Democrats in a deal that would have included defense funding for Ukraine, Taiwan and Israel, and humanitarian relief for Palestinian civilians in Gaza. That bill, fashioned at the insistence of Republicans, required four months of negotiation, overseen by one of the Senate's most conservative members, James Lankford of

Oklahoma. At a time when Republicans constantly bemoan the threat supposedly embodied by an influx of migrants, Trump suddenly ordered them all to abandon that legislative effort — and vote down the same powers to close the border and mobilize more resources that he had demanded as president. It was an astonishingly irresponsible act that humiliated every Republican on Capitol Hill, from Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell and Speaker Mike Johnson down to the most obscure backbencher. Thanks to Trump, all of them, except the indignant Lankford, look like craven underlings who put politics above their own definition of national security.

Of course that is how Trump behaves in every circumstance. Constantly shouting and posting incomprehensible, loony outbursts makes him appear insane. And whatever "gaffes" Joe Biden may utter, whatever names he may forget, he still knows far more than Trump ever will — and he remains steady, reliable and devoted to the national interest.

Of course that is how Trump behaves in every circumstance. Constantly shouting and posting incomprehensible, loony outbursts makes him appear insane. And whatever "gaffes" Joe Biden may utter, whatever names he may forget, he still knows far more than Trump ever will — and he remains steady, reliable and devoted to the national interest.

*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.*

## Old Enough to Know Better

By JOHN CULLEN

I will be 74 years old in three months, so I have more than a passing interest in this debate about senior citizen presidents.

I'm well aware of the limitations that age puts on a person, whether you are young or old. The framers of our Constitution thought this through. They didn't put an upper limit on the age a person could be as president, but they did mandate a minimum age — 35 years old in the case of a presidential or vice presidential candidate; Senators must be at least 30, and Representatives must be 25. Our founders knew that young people don't have the wisdom and breadth of experience necessary to run a nation. They wanted seasoned people to lead our country.

Warren Buffet isn't too old to run one of the biggest financial operations in the world — Berkshire Hathaway. The Oracle of Omaha is the 10th richest person in the world with a fortune of \$122 billion. And he's 93 years old.

Obviously, not all 93-year-olds would be able to run a big company. And not all 80-year-olds could lead a nation. But then,

not all 50-year-olds could run a company or a nation. It all depends on the individual.

President Biden was criticized for not remembering the date his son Beau died. I think I still have all my marbles, but I can't remember the dates my father and mother died. But I do remember their deaths as clearly today as when they passed decades ago. Those moments are forever in my memory.

You don't have to be old to forget a person's name or a date. Twelve-year-olds can't remember to come home for dinner on time. Speaker of the House Mike Johnson is only 51 and he can't organize a two-car parade in Congress.

And that's what age gives you — experience that is burned into your memory, so you can avoid mistakes made by some young hotshot years earlier. As Albert Einstein said, "The only source of knowledge is experience."

Certainly, some people don't age as gracefully as others and they may be unable to make good decisions. Joe Biden isn't there. He has enough on the ball to lead us out of a pandemic, reverse inflation, create millions of new jobs while reducing unemployment to record levels, and increase our energy independence.

Most cultures revere their elders and seek their advice and guidance. Remember Obi-Wan Kenobi, mentor to Luke Skywalker in "Star Wars"?

I don't know who the president of Egypt is, but neither does Donald Trump or 99.9% of the rest of Americans. Most people couldn't find Egypt on a map.

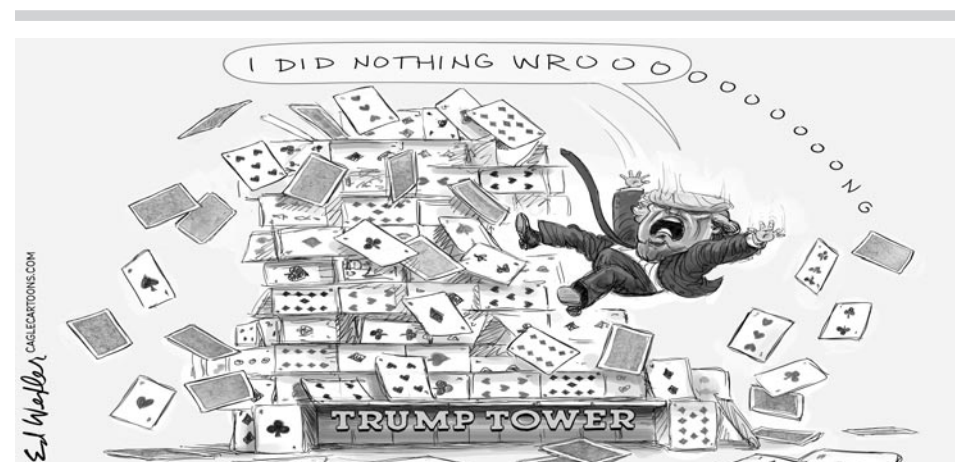
But I do know the difference between right and wrong. I know you pay your bills. You stay faithful to your spouse and you don't encourage Russian dictators to invade other nations.

Iowans don't have much room to complain about too-old leaders. We just re-elected 90-year-old Chuck Grassley — 10 years older than Biden — to another six-year term in the United States Senate. And in last month's caucuses, Iowa Republicans by an overwhelming margin chose a guy about the same age as Joe Biden over a half dozen

much younger candidates. A week later, New Hampshire Republicans did the same thing. Meanwhile, New Hampshire Democrats bypassed two younger challengers in their primary to give Uncle Joe 97% of the vote — as a write-in. Biden wasn't even on the ballot!

Pundits may not like old politicians, but voters seem to dig the old fossils. We'd love to see another JFK or Barack Obama bubble to the top, but in this election, that doesn't seem to be the case. We'll dance with who bring us.

*John Cullen is President of the Storm Lake (Iowa) Times Pilot and Publisher of The Progressive Populist.*



# Solidarity Saved Him

By DAVID MCCALL

Christopher Betterley arrived at the Altamont Veterans Facility in Buffalo, N.Y., a few years ago needing a home, a haircut and a fresh start after treatment for alcohol use.

He saw a sign tacked to the shelter's dining room wall advertising jobs at the nearby Sumitomo tire plant, so he cleaned himself up, went for an interview and quickly impressed both management and leaders of United Steelworkers (USW) Local 135L.

But while the new job opened doors for Betterley, it was really union solidarity that saved him. He learned the trade from long-time union tire builders, leaned on the USW family that rallied around him, and pieced his life back together.

As Betterley discovered, unions lift up all workers. They fight for fair treatment and look out for the most vulnerable. They provide a path forward.

"When they took a chance on me, it really was them giving me a second shot," explained Betterley, who deployed to Afghanistan during his six-year year stint in the New York Army National Guard.

"I'm not shy about any of this. It's what happened," continued Betterley, who's proud of his military service but acknowledged that the experience contributed to the

tough times he encountered later on.

"Things weren't very great in my life prior to me starting to work with the Steelworkers," he said. "I was hungry to get back on my feet and turn things around for myself. Working with the Steelworkers union gave me an opportunity to be able to do that."

Betterley, a New York native, never worked in a manufacturing environment or belonged to a union before. But Local 135L members showed him the ropes.

They explained the power of collective action and outlined the union contract, which makes the workers at Sumitomo some of the best compensated tire makers in the world.

Union colleagues also ensured that Betterley received steel-toed boots and other personal protective equipment to keep him safe on the job. They helped him secure overtime hours and access the additional skills that paved the way to even higher wages.

They shared Betterley's joy when he moved out of the shelter several months after starting at Sumitomo.

"I was able to go from homeless vet to getting my own one-bedroom apartment," Betterley recalled. "I bought a car to get back and forth to work. I saved up."

And he was just getting started.

Betterley continued banking his pay and eventually bought a house in Buffalo's northern suburbs, relying on the advice of co-workers who pointed out that he'd get less lake-effect snow there than in southern

communities.

He also advanced to a highly skilled position requiring him to work in various parts of the plant and volunteered to serve as a union steward for his co-workers. He says the work and camaraderie give him "a sense of purpose, drive and direction," and he enters the plant thinking, "We're going to get some great stuff done."

"I'm a big guy, and it really seems to fit me," he said. "I like working with my hands. I like using my body. I couldn't picture myself working in a place where I'd be happier."

"It has that kind of familial feel to it," added Betterley. "We all know we're in this together. We know we have a job to do. It definitely feels like being part of a community."

Betterley's journey is remarkable. But unions extend the same empowerment and solidarity to all workers.

Unions provide a bulwark against discrimination, sexual harassment and favoritism, ensuring workers from every background feel welcome and valued.

Their fight for a level playing field helps to eradicate gender- and racial pay gaps as well as wage disparities holding down workers with disabilities. For example, unions not only boost wages for veterans and other workers with disabilities by as much as 30% but give them a voice they'd otherwise lack on the job.

"Everyone is equal under our collective bargaining agreement," observed Local 135L President Tom O'Shei, noting that his members share the same opportunities for

skill-building and advancement in the plant.

But union power transcends the plant gate. Union members use their skills and solidarity to build stronger communities.

"Being a good union member not only means looking out for one another on the plant floor. It also means being a good member of the community. We're fortunate enough to have good jobs. Not everybody has that," explained O'Shei, whose local won a Jefferson Award for community service projects.

Betterley is among those eager to share what he has with others.

He joined the local's Veterans of Steel chapter, which provides a support network for workers with military service. He helped to raise funds for the VALOR food pantry, serving veterans in Tonawanda. And he threw himself into a clothing and linen drive for the Altamont Veterans Facility.

A co-worker unfamiliar with Betterley's story marveled at his passion for Altamont and asked about it. "It's because I used to live there," Betterley replied.

He's determined to become more active in the union and provide the same helping hand to co-workers that Local 135L members extended to him.

He realized how important it was not only to have others support him but to believe in him at the time he needed it most.

"It seems like they had a bunch of faith in me—so I did, too," Betterley said.

David McCall is International President of United Steelworkers. See the blog at [USW.org](http://USW.org).

# Did Wall Street Just End the Class War?

*Private equity giants want you to think they can make life better for workers. Not so fast.*

By LES LEOPOLD

All workers can become capitalists, all workers can become rich!

That's the future of the economy according to the infamous Wall Street buyout firm, KKR, (formerly Kohlberg Kravis Roberts & Co.)

Despite centuries of class struggle, KKR says that the iron laws of capitalism don't have to pit workers against bosses. They claim to have built a new system in which workers become rich while also making even more profit for KKR. No more class struggle. Today it's win-win for everyone!

It all sounds so nice, but it's a far cry from the rough and tumble hostile takeovers that made KKR famous. (See "Barbarians at the Gate.") Here's how KKR's win-win new approach works.

KKR is a private equity firm, which means it raises money from investors, borrows a bunch more, and then buys up companies and sticks the money it has borrowed onto those companies' books. For the next few years, KKR's team works its managerial magic and then sells each company for a healthy profit.

In July 2015, for instance, KKR purchased CHI Overhead Doors, a maker of home and commercial garage doors, from Friedman, Fleischer, and Lowe, another private equity firm, for \$685 million. Half the purchase price, about \$342 million, came from KKR investors, while the other half was from loans that were assumed by CHI. Then, in 2022, KKR sold CHI for a whopping \$3 billion, giving KKR a 10-to-1 return on its equity investment. That was one of the highest returns on any investment in KKR's portfolio of investments since the 1980s.

KKR says that these profits were in large part a result of a new kind of capitalism. They gave the workers a piece of the action. Upon purchasing CHI, KKR promised each of the 800 CHI workers that they would share in the profits when the company was sold. KKR also put up a million dollars to make the workplace safer and more accommodating, including adding air conditioning and an on-site health clinic.

The health and safety improvements reportedly led to a "50 percent decline in both the rate and severity of injuries." Who doesn't like that?

And productivity jumped further when the company put into place a worker-involvement system borrowed from Toyota. Combined with KKR's know-how, "CHI began to see broad operational gains – in everything from procurement and scrap reduction to labor productivity and networking capital optimization," reports *Buyouts Insider*.

The bottom line: Revenue jumped by 120%!

## What Did the Workers Get When KKR Sold the Business?

On average, approximately \$75,000 each. A few of the high-seniority, better-paid truck drivers scored an amazing \$800,000! And KKR claims it didn't cost them a dime because the 6% or so of sale profits they shared with the workers was more than made up for by higher productivity because of increased worker input and effort.

Wall Street can work for workers. End of story.

Not quite.

- How much of the 120% jump in revenue was really due to KKR genius and worker effort? Or did KKR and the workers get lucky due to broader market conditions?

- How would the worker incentive system have played out if, for market reasons and the increased debt load, CHI had to file for bankruptcy? (Research shows that approximately 20% of leveraged buyouts go bankrupt within 10 years.)

- What if KKR decided that in order to enhance its bottom line, it needed to conduct a mass layoff? Would the workers who were let go also share in the eventual profits after the sale, assuming there were any?

- Perhaps most starkly, the workers' 6% of profits amounted to about \$144 million based on their work and sacrifice, while KKR walked away with more than \$2.2 billion based on their financial and management skills. KKR gets more than \$15 for every dollar shared with the workers, who everyone acknowledges worked harder (as well as smarter).

Still, CHI is a great story for these particular workers at that particular company, but the truth is that most private equity firms are job destroyers. Researchers writing for the Becker Friedman Institute for Economics at the University of Chicago have found that, on average, employment

shrinks by 13% when a private equity firm buys a public firm. As *Forbes* notes:

"All too often when private equity professionals tout their cost cutting strategies, they do not mention that cost cutting means firing people and taking away their livelihoods."

How would the KKR end-of-class struggle plan work at Toys 'R' Us?

Well, in that case, KKR drove the company into the ground. In 2005, KKR bought the toy seller for \$6 billion, \$5 billion of which was debt placed on the company. By 2013, it was a shell of itself, having gone through repeated layoffs and faulty business plans. Then, after taking substantial fees for many years, KKR picked over the carcass. Aliya Sabharwal, writing in the *Los Angeles Times* last August tells us:

"KKR and its partners sold off Toys 'R' Us real estate, pocketed the money and forced the retailer to lease back its buildings. Along the way, KKR and the other firms paid themselves \$250 million in 'management fees' and big bonuses to hand-picked executives — right before Toys 'R' Us entered bankruptcy."

Oh, and along the way, 33,000 jobs were lost.

To be fair, it's possible KKR has now gotten better at management since it's swashbuckling days. Or maybe they have recently become more religious about how to treat workers fairly. It's also possible that the end-of-class struggle approach at CHI was a lucky one-off situation that is now being used to buff up KKR's historically cut-throat image. How can we know?

## Putting the End of Class War to the Test

But we don't have to speculate. The test is simple. If the new KKR system is really so adept at boosting profits and providing enormous payouts for the

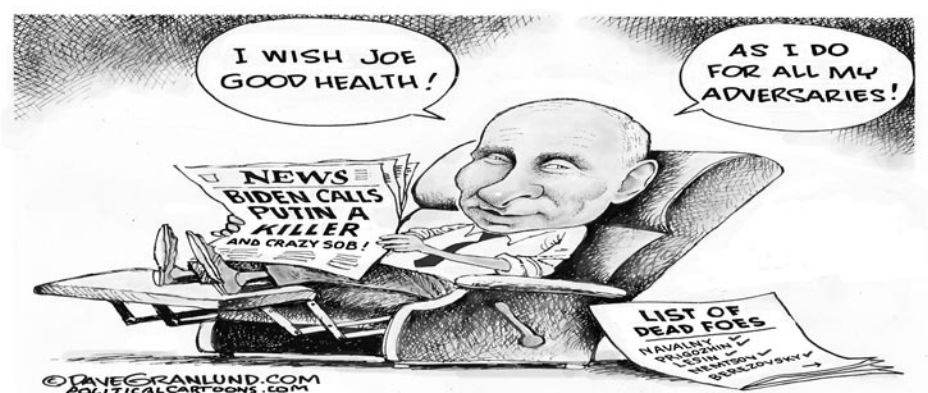
rank-and-file worker upon the sale of the company, how about asking private equity firms to guarantee up front that there will be no mass layoffs?

The research we've done for my book, "Wall Street's War on Workers," shows that since 1996 there have been at least 30 million jobs lost in mass layoffs, defined as 50 or more laid-off workers at one time for 30 days or more. Count the effect on their families and local communities and we're looking at more than half of all working people who have suffered through mass layoffs. That's often loss of income, health care, and financial security. Often this affects manufacturing jobs, but in 2023, more than 230,000 workers lost their jobs in high-tech companies — those very big tech firms that have been making tons of money. Since the start of 2024 another 34,250 workers in high tech firms have joined them.

Working people are hungry for job stability. If KKR is so good at buying up companies and making them more profitable, let them prove it by guaranteeing the jobs of all the workers in those bought-out firms, as well as giving workers a slice of the profit when those companies are sold. We can talk later about how big a piece of the pie is fair.

Then and only then might they have an argument for a new kind of humane capitalism. Meanwhile, laid-off workers continue to be ground up by endless job destruction in service to Wall Street's insatiable greed.

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." Read more of his work at [substack.com/@lesleopold1](http://substack.com/@lesleopold1) or follow @les\_leopold. This appeared at *Common Dreams*.



## MARY SANCHEZ



**'I didn't think it could happen here'—I'm not naive enough to proclaim that. Nor am I jaded enough to believe nothing will change ...**

### Why My Beloved Kansas City Suffered a Mass Shooting

The words about the tragedy tumbled from the mouth of Kansas City's mayor, grim-faced, who stood before a scrum of reporters outside of police headquarters.

Not quite four hours had passed since the shooting that abruptly ended my city's gloriously joyful Super Bowl victory parade for the Kansas City Chiefs.

It was a parade that I attended.

As a fan, I loved lifting a friend's three-year-old son up so he could see the players, the confetti, and the Midwestern community pride on full display.

As a reporter, patience tempered by grief now leads, as I verify snippets of new information, along with so many of my colleagues.

Mayor Quinton Lucas stands beside

the chief of police, regularly issuing updates on the victims, and on the two juvenile perpetrators who were quickly detained.

In each press conference, Lucas uses the term "mass shooting."

To some ears, the phrase should be reserved for all of those eerily similar incidents in cities around North America: shootings involving a heavily armed person who typically enters a school, mall, or church with the intention of slaughtering as many people as possible. The shooter often dies by suicide after he commits his murder spree.

Later, the media learns that a shooter had mental health issues or acted with racially motivated hatred such as anti-semitism.

No agreed upon definition for "mass shooting" exists. But the nonprofit Gun Violence Archive uses it when four or more people are shot, not including the perpetrator. Under this definition, the Kansas City case more than qualifies as a mass shooting.

One woman was shot and died at Union Station where the parade and rally concluded. She didn't make it to the hospital, even though it was only blocks away.

The victim, Lisa Lopez-Galvan, disc jockeyed for a recent family reunion of a close friend. I've known her brother for decades. He leads the Guadalupe Centers, the more than 100-year-old social service agency and educational system serving my Mexican-American community.

Besides Lopez-Galvan, there are 22 other victims. Nine of them are children, the youngest is eight years old.

"I didn't think it could happen here" — I'm not naive enough to proclaim that.

Nor am I jaded enough to believe that

nothing will change, or to ridicule the heartfelt "thoughts and prayers" being offered. Sometimes, that's all people can give.

Missouri's Republican Gov. Mike Parson is already referring to the perps as "a bunch of criminals, thugs." The remark is part code, a dodge to escape addressing the state's incredibly lax gun laws, which he and his fellow conservatives have championed. They intend to protect Second Amendment "freedoms."

Parson attended the Chiefs victory rally. A colleague asked me if the experience might encourage him to rethink his stance on guns. Was he influenced by the violence he experienced at the parade's conclusion?

I shot back: "He's a former sheriff. He understands violence," meaning that this isn't his first rodeo or first interaction with gunfire.

But Parson is firmly in the camp of those who believe that the one who pulls the trigger solely deserves not only blame, but all of the scrutiny.

I align with Parson in being livid at the senseless violence of the shooters, their complete lack of regard to others. But it's negligent to omit a very basic investigative query: What led up to the shooting?

Others were quick to say that gun laws must change. But we don't really know what laws might have prevented this tragedy, not yet at least.

Instead, dissect it. Take apart everything about the shooting itself.

From the moment it happened and perhaps even weeks and years before the shooting, we should ask how the two juveniles in custody came into possession of the firearms as well as the ammunition. By late in the week, they had been charged with gun-related crimes and resisting arrest. And

police said more charges are expected.

It's possible that initially the guns (which have been taken as evidence by police) might have been legally purchased.

Perhaps they were sold online through brokers who are not required to run background checks on buyers. Perhaps the shooters altered the guns so they could fire rapidly, an increasingly common practice.

Did an adult, a friend or relative of the juveniles callously give them the weapons or irresponsibly leave them readily available for them to take?

"A dispute" sparked the shooting, according to the police chief.

It's often said that too many young people have access to guns, but not the skills or empathy to solve issues with words. That's not normal, nor is it an outcome of a safe environment, and yes solid parenting.

Answers to the elusive "what can be done to stop future incidents" question can be found.

The answers might make people squirm or run verbal circles around any sense of responsibility.

#KansasCity continues to trend on social media for all the wrong reasons. Far fewer will care as the days go by.

And that's fine by me. Because the truth is that a mass shooting was just as likely for Kansas City as any other North American city.

Honest answers about the "why" of this and other shootings is where the real work begins.

Mary Sanchez is a syndicated columnist for Tribune Content Agency, formerly with the **Kansas City Star**.

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### Dealing With the Bad Stewards

**Bailing out a critical Massachusetts hospital chain should come with some consequences for the financial operators who put them in that position.**

BY ROBERT KUTTNER

The entire Massachusetts congressional delegation has sent a letter to the management of Steward Health Care, demanding that they account for the several hundred million dollars taken out of the hospital chain's operating budget to line the pockets of its former private equity owners. Steward operates nine hospitals in Massachusetts and 30 nationally, making it the country's largest for-profit hospital chain, and the hospitals are now at risk of closing.

Insiders took out so much cash and burdened Steward with so much debt that the hospitals are routinely failing to pay vendors for basic supplies, putting patients and staff at risk. The whole chain is teetering on the edge of insolvency. *The American Prospect* has been covering this in a series of articles going back several months.

There are now two urgent, interconnected issues: how to keep these hospitals open, and how to hold the executives who looted the hospitals accountable, so that some of the money they took can be re-

turned to hospital operations. Neither will be easy.

As I've written, the looting of Steward by Cerberus Capital came in two stages. First, in 2010, Cerberus bought the six hospitals of the Catholic Caritas Christi chain, converted it to a for-profit, and rebranded the group as Steward. Under the terms of the takeover, Cerberus promised to invest in the hospitals. The debt for the costs of the acquisition was put on the books of the hospitals.

Then in 2015, the hospitals' physical real estate was sold by Cerberus to a closely affiliated company based in Alabama called Medical Properties Trust for \$1.25 billion. That allowed Cerberus to take out \$800 million in cash. The sale-leaseback deal burdened the hospitals with more debt plus rental payments.

It did not take an accounting genius to realize that these burdens left the hospitals with too little money for operations. Their collapse was only a matter of time.

As it happens, Massachusetts is in a crisis of a shortage of hospital beds, a topic I've also covered for *The American Prospect*. The reason is a shortage of nursing home and rehab beds, which cause patients ready for discharge to back up in acute care hospitals.

Last year, Steward treated some 200,000 patients. The closure of their hospitals would exacerbate the crisis. It would also cause thousands of medical professionals to lose their jobs.

Somebody has to bail out the failing hospitals, but who?

Massachusetts Gov. Maura Healey has

flatly said that the state won't do it. There have been rumors of talks with Massachusetts's largest and richest hospital group, Mass General Brigham, but the last thing MGB executives want is to acquire failing hospitals that are hemorrhaging losses because of the malfeasance of prior owners.

The best outcome would be a temporary bailout by a combination of state and federal funds, to be repaid by a clawback of looted money following criminal prosecution of Cerberus and MPT. The Massachusetts congressional delegation, led by Sens. Elizabeth Warren and Ed Markey, has influence with the Biden administration. So does Rep. Richie Neal, the ranking Democrat on the House Ways and Means Committee. Any bailout would need to be combined with investigation and prosecution, and therefore coordinated with state and federal prosecutors or financial regulators.

MPT is a publicly traded company. Under the securities laws, it is required to make full disclosures to shareholders about risks. In the past year, as the crisis of Steward hospitals became public knowledge, the price of MPT stock has fallen from about \$13 a share to under \$4. The Securities and Exchange Commission could prosecute MPT for failing to fully apprise shareholders of the risks in its convoluted scheme. MPT management must have known that at some point Steward hospitals could not pay their bills.

MPT's required 10-K filing with the SEC includes several pages on risks, including the risks that tenants might not be able to meet lease obligations. But it provides no detail on

the actual financial condition of Steward.

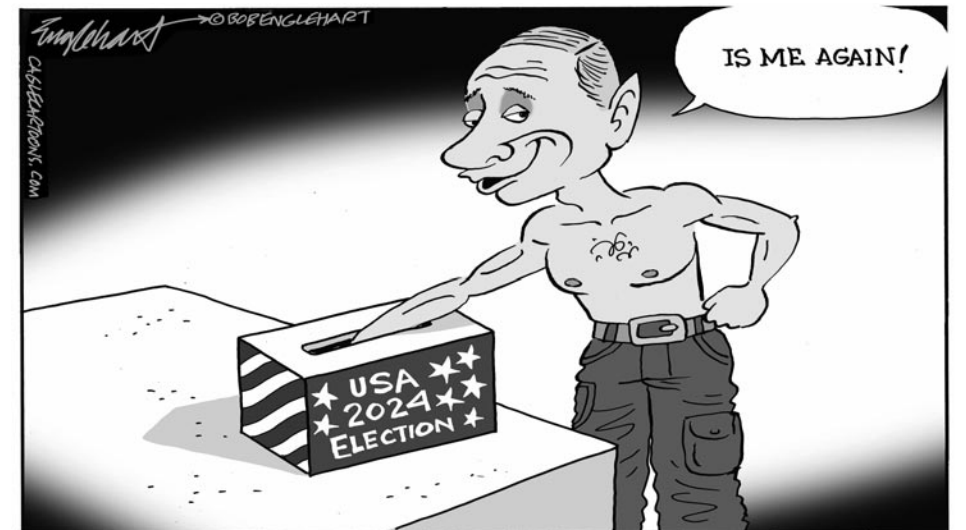
More broadly, it's inconceivable that Cerberus and MPT, as well as crony CEO Ralph de la Torre, did not grasp the simple arithmetic: All the debt and rent obligations piled onto the books of the hospitals left them with too little money to function. That in turn could leave them vulnerable to criminal prosecution for fraud, by either the Justice Department or the Massachusetts attorney general or both.

A settlement of criminal charges could also relieve the hospitals of their obligations to pay rent on the grounds that the sale-leaseback deal was corrupt. Cerberus, in a settlement of criminal charges, might also be made to disgorge some of the money it took out of the hospitals.

I have discussed these possibilities with experts who know securities law better than I do. They agree that these remedies would break new ground and are something of a long shot, but not out of the question and worth a try.

Cerberus and MPT need to be made the poster children for why private equity should be barred from the entire health care sector. Money needs to be found to keep these hospitals open and with resources adequate to their community mission. The best source of that money would be restitution by the looters.

Robert Kuttner is co-editor of *The American Prospect* ([prospect.org](http://prospect.org)) and professor at Brandeis University's Heller School. Like him on [facebook.com/RobertKuttner](https://www.facebook.com/RobertKuttner) and/or follow him at [twitter.com/rkuttner](https://twitter.com/rkuttner).



# Why the Corporate Tax Bracket Should Go Back to 52%

*It's time to again tax the rich, be they individuals or giant corporations, to restore the American middle class and return our nation to the vitality that, before the Reagan Revolution, was normal...*

By THOM HARTMANN

Most Americans have a radically incomplete understanding of how taxes work. As a result, changes to the tax code made by Republicans in the years since the Reagan Revolution have done real damage both to the American economy, working class people, and to the vibrancy and viability of our towns and communities.

Just like the debates around raising personal income tax rates are demagogued by rich people and their shells, there's a world of misinformation around the issue of raising corporate income taxes.

Most of these myths promoted by the morbidly rich exploit the fact that only a tiny fraction of Americans have ever run a business or taken a business course in college, and so most Americans don't have a clue how corporate income taxes work.

They think that if you tax corporations, those corporations will both pay and then pass that tax along as higher prices. That's only rarely true because there are so many good things that corporations can do that will reduce or eliminate their taxes altogether.

They also think that taxing corporate profits somehow cripples or weakens them.

In fact, it does the opposite: it strengthens and expands companies because of the positive behaviors that the threat of taxation provokes.

For example, back in the early 1970s (before Reagan), the late Terry O'Connor and I owned a small herbal tea, potpourri, and smoking mixture company that was doing very well. We had about a dozen employees, were buying herbs by the ton mostly from Eastern Europe, and selling our packaged herbal products nationwide. We were making good money for a couple of guys in their early 20s.

At the time, the top income tax rate for a corporation was 48% (down from 52.8% in 1969) on profits over \$25,000, and as we approached year's end we were showing what would be a profit well in excess of that.

My dad, who did the bookkeeping for the small tool-and-die shop where he'd worked since 1957, was our business mentor (and taught Terry, Louise, and me double-entry bookkeeping) so we sat down with him and asked him what to do.

Our first idea was to simply distribute the profit to ourselves as a paycheck.

My dad put the kibosh on that idea, because we were both already making enough that the top part of our income was being taxed at 60%, which meant almost two-thirds of every additional dollar we took would simply go to the federal government. (We were paying ourselves about three times what our workers were making, and they were paid at Lansing union scale along with full health insurance.)

"Leave that money in the company," Dad advised us. "You'll get your payday when you sell it and only have to pay long-term capital gains taxes."

At first we thought that was bad advice. "But if we keep the money in the company, it'll have to pay 48% taxes on the profits!" we objected. "Why just give it to Uncle Sam?!"

I remember my dad smiling at that. "That's why there are tax deductions," he told us, as I recall. "They're designed to incentivize particular behaviors that are

good for the country and good for your business as well."

The particular tax deductions he suggested we use were to give our employees a raise, invest in advertising and marketing to increase our sales, and to develop a new product line. Advertising, salaries and benefits, R&D, and new product development were all fully tax-deductible (and still are).

We took his advice and grew the company from a dozen employees to around 18, made a pile of money selling the new ginseng product we developed with those profits to Larry Flynt, and eventually cashed out when we sold the company to several of our employees in 1978.

This example highlights how there are really two reasons for both personal and corporate taxes, and they're both based on similar rationales.

The first reason — the one everybody understands — is to raise money to pay for government services that benefit us all. Taxes, as FDR often said, are "the price of admission to a civil society."

The second, though, is really the most important: taxes are used to incentivize behaviors that are good for the nation and discourage behaviors that are destructive to the nation.

This is where Reaganomics has not only screwed average American working people but screwed American business — particularly small and medium-sized businesses — as well.

While America is still a wellspring of innovation, we could be doing so very much better. For example, just the mostly tech companies listed in the S&P 500 bought back \$882 billion of their own shares in 2021 and over \$1 trillion in 2022. And that's nearly two trillion dollars spilling out of just one or two market sectors!

Two trillion dollars is four times the cost to eliminate all poverty in the United States.

So, you'd think that if America's biggest companies were spending roughly a trillion dollars every year they were doing something important with it.

You'd think that maybe they were doing it because the government had provided them with some incentive, either direct payments or tax advantages, to do it.

Sadly, you'd be wrong: that's very much not the case.

Not one penny of that nearly \$2 trillion in 2021 and 2022 went to developing new products, promoting existing products, paying employees better, building new facilities, or supporting the communities in which they operate.

Instead, virtually all of that money went straight into the pockets of shareholders, senior executives, and CEOs who are compensated with stock and stock options.

Before Reagan, this was a felony crime called "stock manipulation"; CEOs who executed share buybacks just to artificially inflate stock prices could go to prison.

FDR criminalized share buybacks in the early 1930s because they're simply a form of stock price manipulation and were one of the main reasons for the stock market crash of 1929 that kicked off the Republican Great Depression.

Which super-illustrates the point that there's nothing magical, normal, or "natural" about national economies. They're not the result of immutable laws, any more than the NFL's rules for football are.

The rules of marketplaces are created by governments, and governments decide who will benefit from those rules. And in the 1980s, Reaganomics shifted the priority of the rules of business from helping workers, communities, and the overall American economy to purely supporting the morbidly rich CEOs and trustfund babies who funded Reagan's election.

Today's post-Reagan Revolution personal and corporate tax situation is very intentional, including its outcomes of massive inequality, mind-boggling riches in a few hands, and widespread poverty across the land.

It follows a plan that was first laid out by President Reagan, later executed by Speaker Newt Gingrich, and then continued

*Continued on page 14*

# It's Not Just Love That's on the Ballot

*Basic dignity is threatened as LGBTQ+ freedoms are increasingly endangered.*

By KATRINA VANDEN HEUVEL

This past Valentine's Day, it wasn't just love that was on the ballot. It was basic dignity.

For nearly a decade now, same-sex couples in America have been able to celebrate this holiday with full legal recognition of their marriages. Thanks to Obergefell v. Hodges, all spouses are created equal—no matter where they live, or who they love.

But LGBTQ+ freedoms are increasingly in danger. Last year, a record 510 anti-LGBTQ bills were introduced into state legislatures. Anti-trans fervor from the far right has coincided with a spike in transphobic and homophobic hate crimes against people like Laura Ann Carleton, a shopkeeper in California who was shot and killed for displaying a Pride flag outside her store.

If there were ever a moment when queer rights were a "settled issue" in America, it's long gone.

This rising tide of hatred comes at an inflection point. In 2024, LGBTQ+ rights are at stake up and down the ballot—in amendments that could reshape state Constitutions, legislative elections that could determine the outcome of those 510 bills, and a presidential election that could cement the Supreme Court as an extreme reactionary body for generations.

After striking down the constitutional right to abortion in 2022, Justice Clarence Thomas said the court "should reconsider" other rights, like same-sex marriage. (With all due respect, the most important thing Thomas "should reconsider" is his retire-

ment timeline.)

In response, Congress passed the Respect for Marriage Act, which requires states to recognize same-sex marriages performed in other states. It does not, however, require them to issue new marriage licenses to same-sex couples. That means, if the court overturns Obergefell, states could once again ban new gay marriages from taking place. As of 2022, 35 states had inactive statutory or constitutional bans ready to go—which is why some states have taken it upon themselves to preemptively protect same-sex marriage now.

In January, the New York state legislature passed an Equal Rights Amendment, which would enshrine protections for LGBTQ+ individuals in the state Constitution. Voters in California have a similar opportunity: They'll weigh in on an amendment that would officially remove the state's inoperative ban on gay marriage from its Constitution. Voters in both states will be asked to ratify the amendments in November.

Unfortunately, it's not just blue states hard at work. The ACLU is tracking a staggering 402 anti-LGBTQ bills across America. As has become the terrifying new norm in states with right-wing governments, some of these bills attempt to outlaw the mere mention of sexual orientation in schools. Others go further, forcing teachers to out students to their parents for using pronouns that don't correspond with their biological sex. Whether they become law or not, these bills have a regressive effect on queer life in America: anti-LGBTQ+ hate speech on social media more than quintupled after Florida passed its "Don't Say Gay" bill. No one benefits when the legitimacy of their existence is put up for debate.

As dangerous as these bills are, there is perhaps no body with more influence on the future of LGBTQ freedom than the Supreme Court. And Donald Trump's appointees have already begun to chip away at gay rights. Last year, in a 6-3 decision—you can guess which six and which three—the court ruled that a Christian web designer could refuse to design a wedding

website for a gay couple. (Never mind that the couple in question was completely made up.)

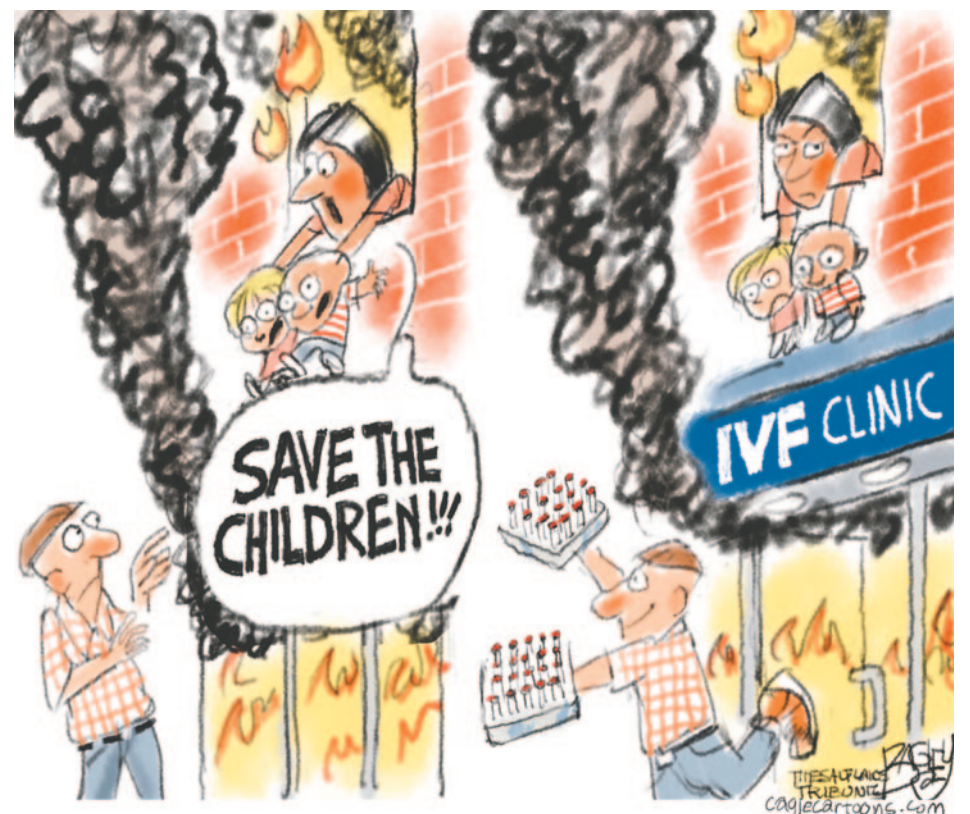
If Trump is given a second term, and the chance to appoint a couple of fresh-faced Federalist Society justices, we could descend even further into this dystopia. The court could hear a case challenging a conversion therapy ban. Trump could continue appointing homophobic judges to lower courts around the country. Obergefell and other basic human rights will be on the chopping block.

On the other hand, if President Biden is reelected with a Democratic House and Senate, he could go beyond the Respect for Marriage Act and codify Obergefell into federal law. If, through some unmentionable act of God, he is given the chance to appoint more justices, he could prevent the Supreme Court from drifting even further to the right.

And he could continue to communicate, with the full power of the presidential bully pulpit, that in the United States of America, LGBTQ+ people are respected, supported, and loved.

In a characteristically eloquent dissent for the that web design case—the kind that makes you really wish she could be writing more majority opinions—Justice Sonia Sotomayor underscores where the real power to pursue justice and equality lies in America: "I fear that the symbolic damage of the Court's opinion is done. But that does not mean that we are powerless in the face of the decision. The meaning of our Constitution is found not in any law volume, but in the spirit of the people who live under it."

*Katrina vanden Heuvel is editor and publisher of The Nation. This appeared at TheNation.com. Follow @KatrinaNation*



# Cash Bail System Violates Due Process

*Police associations, prosecutors, and politicians want a bail system that allows them to punish their political enemies, poor people, and people of color without trial*

By SONALI KOLHATKAR

Most Americans have not considered “cash bail” as critical to equality and freedom. The term is an esoteric one but is increasingly central to the ongoing battle over racial capitalism, policing, and mass incarceration, especially in an election year as critical as 2024.

Here’s what cash bail means: When arrested by police on suspicion of committing a crime, everyone in the United States has the right to due process and to defend themselves in court. But in a cash bail system, when judges set bail amounts, those who cannot pay the full amount remain jailed indefinitely—a clear violation of their due process rights—while the rich pay their way out of jail.

Now, Republicans in cities and states around the nation are rolling back efforts to reform cash bail systems, and Georgia’s GOP-dominated legislature is the latest to do so. The state Senate and House recently passed a bill expanding cash bail for 30 new crimes, some of which appear to be aimed at protesters, such as unlawful assembly. Further, it criminalizes charitable bail funds that have bailed people out when they cannot afford to do so, restricting such funds, and even individuals, to bailing out no more than three people per year or facing charges themselves.

In Georgia, this is especially significant because of a mass movement that has arisen to oppose Atlanta’s “Cop City,” a massive

police training project that is symbolic of everything wrong with our systems of policing, courts, and incarceration.

Marlon Kautz, who runs the Atlanta Solidarity Fund called the system of cash bail “a loophole” in the criminal justice system, allowing courts to indefinitely jail people without charges if they cannot pay exorbitant bail amounts. Kautz, whose organization is a bail fund of the sort that Georgia is targeting, pointed out that the GOP-led bills to criminalize bail funds and expand cash bail “exposes that the loophole is not an accident; it’s the intended purpose of the bail system.”

Kautz added, “Police, prosecutors, and politicians want a bail system that allows them to punish their political enemies, poor people, and people of color without trial.” He’s right. A police officer could theoretically arrest anyone they wanted, and if a judge requires cash bail that is beyond their financial capacity, the person would remain detained indefinitely while awaiting charges and a trial. In fact, Kautz was one of three people affiliated with the Atlanta Solidarity Fund to be arrested on what appear to be clearly politicized charges of fraud and money laundering in June 2023.

Given how racist American policing is, the system of cash bail is intended to ensure that people of color who are disproportionately arrested are also disproportionately detained in jails without due process. A 2022 report by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights examined the impact of cash bail and found that between 1970 and 2015, the number of people jailed before trial increased by a whopping 433%, and there are currently about 500,000 such people stuck in jails across the nation who have not been tried or convicted of any crimes.

The report also found “stark disparities with regards to race” in who is impacted. Unsurprisingly, Black and Brown men were the group most subjected to higher bail amounts.

There is a growing movement to address such a systemically racist trend. In 2023, the state of Illinois became the first in the nation to entirely abolish cash bail. The state legislature initially passed its cash bail ban in 2021, but its implementation was

held up by lawsuits from county prosecutors and sheriffs. Now, having survived legal challenges, the cash bail era in Illinois is officially over.

Other states, such as New Mexico, New Jersey, and Kentucky, have almost entirely ended cash bail requirements in recent years. In California, Los Angeles County has also similarly eliminated cash bail for all crimes except the most serious ones. The trend has been a positive one in a nation that has one of the most racist and punitive criminal justice systems in the world.

And then came the Republicans’ regressive pushback. Reversing progress on bail reform is a new flashpoint in the GOP’s culture wars intended to scare voters into choosing them at the ballot. The Associated Press captured this in a single sentence near the end of an article about Georgia’s cash bail restrictions, saying that “it could be a sign that Republicans intend to bash their Democratic opponents as soft on crime as they did in 2022.”

That same AP story paraphrased Republican state representative Houston Gaines, of Athens, Georgia, as saying “people let out of jail without bail are less likely to show up for court than those who have paid to get out of jail.” But the AP added, “National studies contradict that claim.” When in doubt, the GOP can be relied upon to lie its way into justifying harmful policies, and Gaines was adamant in falsely claiming that cash bail reforms in other states have been “an unmitigated disaster.”

His Republican colleagues in states such as Indiana, Missouri, and Wisconsin have introduced numerous bills expanding the use of cash bail. Expanding the racist criminal justice system is a cynical GOP election-era ploy, one that isn’t even terribly original.

Recall George H. W. Bush’s 1988 presidential election campaign ads centering on a Black man named Willie Horton who, a year before the election, was furloughed while being incarcerated and escaped. He went on to rape a woman and stab her fiancé, offering Bush the perfect poster child for Democratic failures on crime. The Willie Horton ads are considered a quintessentially racist dog whistle that were in-

tended to generate fear of Blackness among white voters. They helped Bush defeat his opponent.

Sharlyn Grace, an official at the Cook County Public Defender’s office in Illinois said, “It is exceedingly rare for someone who’s released pretrial to be arrested and accused of a new offense that involves violence against another person,” and that “[f]ears about public safety are in many ways greatly overblown and misplaced.” But all that the tough-on-crime crowd needs in order to make the case of rampant crime is that single exception to the general trend.

Republicans in Wisconsin found their modern-day Willie Horton in a Black man named Darrell Brooks Jr. who drove a car into a 2021 parade in Waukesha, killing six people. Brooks had been arrested just prior to the fatal crash for domestic violence and released on a relatively low bail amount of \$1,000. The Wisconsin GOP featured Brooks in 2022 campaign ads showing how they are “tough on crime” compared to Democrats. It wasn’t enough that Brooks was eventually sentenced to more than six consecutive life sentences, although he says he didn’t intend to drive his car into the parade. His example has served as the ideal foil for election-year fears of people of color and Republican efforts to expand cash bail and win political power.

Election years are a scary time for people of color in the U.S. They are marked by race-based voter suppression efforts, a rise in racist political rhetoric, and even a surge in racist hate crimes. The expansion of cash bail laws is yet another attack on Black and Brown communities—one that must be exposed and confronted.

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## ROBERT REICH



*Real leadership is the opposite of thuggery. The world’s greatest leaders help their societies deal with their hardest problems, with moral authority.*

## The Difference Between Leaders and Thugs

Days before Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny died in prison, Tucker Carlson gushed over Vladimir Putin, saying, “Leadership requires killing people.”

Well, I’m sorry, Tucker. You’re wrong. Real leadership is the opposite of thuggery. The world’s greatest leaders help their societies deal with their hardest problems. They have moral authority. Alexei Navalny was more of a leader than Putin will ever be.

The same distinction holds for American presidents, an appropriate subject for Presidents Day.

So far, we’ve had 46 of them. A few were thugs. Andrew Johnson (#17) blocked rights for freed slaves and undermined Reconstruction. Warren G. Harding (#29) took bribes. Richard M. Nixon (#37) arranged illegal break-ins and covered them up. Trump (#45) used his office for personal gain and encouraged an insurrection against the US government.

A few of our presidents were great leaders. George Washington (#1), Abra-

ham Lincoln (#16), and Franklin D. Roosevelt (#32) all focused America on its most important challenges. They strengthened the capacities of the nation for self-government and elevated the common good.

Zoom out from American presidents and we can see that the world is today better off because of the leadership of people such as Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948), Nelson Mandela (1918-2013), Winston Churchill (1874-1965), Martin Luther King Jr. (1929-1968), Volodymyr Zelenskyy (1978-), and Alexei Navalny (1976-2024).

All, too, summoned their societies to cope with their largest problems.

Not all of them were heads of state — which shows that true leadership does not depend on formal authority. It depends on moral authority.

The so-called “strongmen” of the current era — such as Putin, Donald Trump, and Benjamin Netanyahu — are not leaders. They can manipulate public opinion and sustain their bases of power, but they have no moral authority.

All have repeatedly put their personal interests over the interests of their respective nations. All have appointed people to key positions based on loyalty rather than qualification. All have taken credit for every success while never taking responsibility for failure.

All have a chronic aversion to telling or hearing the truth.

All three have fought against democratic norms and institutions. They have undermined whatever capacities their citizens have for self-government.

They have thereby diminished the resilience of their citizens and weakened their societies. As a result, they have made their nations more vulnerable — to external enemies, to economic upheavals, and to natural perils, including climate change and pandemics.

None of them can abide political opposition. One has apparently murdered his key opponent. Another has threatened

vengeance on his opponents if he regains power. Another has stoked division and turmoil to weaken his opponents. All have spread outrageous conspiracy theories about those who speak out against them or challenge their power.

These autocratic thugs are not leaders. They hold authority through brute strength. They retain power by dividing the public, spreading baseless lies, and accusing opponents of being traitors. All have thereby weakened their society’s capacities to protect themselves from real threats.

## THIS MODERN WORLD

by TOM TOMORROW

## JESSE JACKSON



Trump and MAGA Republicans aren't concerned about what Biden is unable to do. They are enraged by what Biden has done and will do.

### Biden v. Trump, the Reality is Clear

Amid the press frenzy about Joe Biden's age and mental acuity, it is worth remembering one thing. Trump and the MAGA Republicans aren't concerned about what Biden is unable to do. They are enraged about what Biden has done and will do. It isn't that he can't do the job. It's that he does a job that they disagree with.

The shamelessly partisan shots at Biden taken by the special prosecutor, a Trump appointee, who was charged with investigating Biden's handling of documents, has generated the media carnival. Joe Biden — like Donald Trump — is old. Like Trump, he shows signs of it. But the

question isn't one of "competence." It is one of values and direction.

Before Trump, the oldest president elected to office was Ronald Reagan. Reagan was diagnosed with Alzheimer's five years after he left office. While in office, he exhibited mannerisms — from stumbling over words, to falling asleep in public, to a weak memory, to checking out in the middle of conversations — that made many speculate about how early the dementia had set in. *The New Republic* featured a cover story asking, "Is Reagan senile."

There are no questions his aides worried about Reagan's decline and worked to protect him. Reagan held fewer press conferences than any other president since 1929 and fewer and fewer as the years went by. The journalist Lou Cannon who covered Reagan for years wrote: "The sad, shared secret of the Reagan White House was that no one in the presidential entourage had confidence in the judgment or the capacities of the president." His aides, according to Jane Meyer, even discussed whether they should invoke the 25th Amendment to replace him in office.

Whatever the case of his mental acuity, the Reagan White House operated. The administration carried on. The problem with Reagan wasn't his mental acuity — it was his values and his agenda. He cut taxes on the rich, rolled back protections on clean water, air and food, sought to weaken unions, opposed raising the minimum wage and doubled the military budget in peacetime even as he slashed basic security support for the

most vulnerable.

The problem wasn't that he couldn't get things done. The problem was the things he wanted done made the country more unequal, more divided, and far meaner.

Similarly, Donald Trump's erratic and chaotic years in office led many of his aides to speculate about his mental capacity. Michael Wolff's book "Fire and Fury" included statements by former White House strategist Steve Bannon and other aides that exposed the president as a semi-literate, deeply angry man with a nanosecond attention span who was mentally in decline.

Trump's White House was particularly dysfunctional. His policies were erratic and often unpredictable. His rages at his own aides were quite public. His monumental failure in dealing with the pandemic led to hundreds of thousands of unnecessary deaths.

In the end, however, it wasn't Trump's mental fitness that was the problem. He cut taxes largely on the rich at a time of extreme inequality, rolled back environmental regulation, denied the reality of climate change, pumped up the military while denigrating our allies, and sought to divide America on the basis of race, national origin and religion. And he set out to place partisans in the Courts who ended up gutting the Voting Rights Act and depriving women of the right to choose. The substance of Trump's agenda was far more destructive than the decline of his mental powers.

The assault on Biden's age and capacity is a classic Trump ploy. He habitually ac-

cuses others of doing what he is guilty of. If he's vulnerable because of his erratic mental state, then he ramps up the charges against Biden, to blunt the criticism.

The reality is clear, however. The choice isn't about capacity; it is about values and direction. Biden supports women's right to choose; Trump does not. Biden supports working people, empowering unions, and lifting the minimum wage. Trump does not. Biden has launched historic initiatives to address the existential threat of climate change. Trump would eradicate them.

Biden seeks to strengthen voting rights and civil rights. Trump seeks to discredit elections, find ways to curb the right to vote and roll back civil rights. Biden seeks to make the wealthy pay their fair share of taxes. Trump wants to cut the IRS's ability to audit the taxes of the wealthy. This list can go on.

Both Trump and Biden are old. Both show signs of aging. One seems well balanced; the other unhinged. But the real choice isn't about their mental state. It is about their values and their agenda. And if they become the nominees of their parties, voters must decide which direction they want to pursue. On that the choice is utterly clear.

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### Hartmann...

*Continued from page 12*

by the Republicans who followed them in both the White House and as Speakers of the House of Representatives. And, of course, Mitch McConnell in the Senate.

None of it is accidental, and none of it follows some sort of ancient natural law — other than that the demands of greed are almost always in conflict with the needs of the mass of the people, and have been throughout history.

In an effort to get corporate share buybacks under control, the Inflation Reduction Act finally put a tax of a 1% on them. We really need to reverse Reagan's actions and re-criminalize buybacks — or tax them at 50% or more — so if companies want to jack up dividends and share prices they will have to do it the old-fashioned way: by having actual successes in the marketplace, like before 1983.

(There's an in-depth explainer about how share buybacks work and the damage they do to both our economy and working people that I published here a year ago last December.)

Which brings us to the reason why we should go back to the 52% top corporate income tax bracket that was in place until the Reagan Revolution.

There was hardly a company in America that paid that 50% tax, but that doesn't mean it was ineffective. Just like my dad advised Terry and me, companies across America avoided paying income taxes by using their surplus cash to pay their employees better, offer expanded benefits, build new products and facilities, improve their marketing, and help out the communities in which they do business.

These things that derive from a high corporate tax rate all benefit the company, the workers, and the communities where they operate. They make America stronger.

Expanding innovation and product

lines makes the companies and the economy more vibrant. They build and strengthen the middle class. They even help the entire nation via the federal and state governments, because companies must show some profits (as they become more successful) to distribute dividends to shareholders and those profits are taxed, producing government revenues.

All those activities mentioned above are tax-deductible. Which shows how important it is to have a high corporate income tax rate because, with the current absurdly low tax rates, companies have little incentive to do anything other than buy back their shares and make their already morbidly rich CEOs and major investors even richer.

Former Labor Secretary Robert Reich recently published in his excellent Substack newsletter a graphic from the St. Louis Fed showing how corporate profits have exploded over the past few decades.

While Reagan set the stage, today's predatory levels of corporate profits exploded because of the hundreds of holes George W. Bush and congressional Republicans drilled in our corporate tax code with their two massive corporate tax cuts: the Economic Growth and Tax Relief Reconciliation Act (EGTRRA) in 2001 and the Jobs and Growth Tax Relief Reconciliation Act (JGTRRA) in 2003.

Trump doubled down in 2017 and 2020 with two new mammoth corporate tax cuts of his own, and you can see the result in a graph via the online version.

When you look at the graph, think of the increase in corporate profits — money after taxes that's left to distribute to stockholders and executives — as a theft from the corporations themselves.

Those profits mean that the companies generating them have prioritized shoveling money to their owners instead of growing their businesses or improving their products. It's a sign of how unhealthy American busi-

ness has become, and explains why they fight so hard to prevent unionization (which, during Dwight Eisenhower's administration, grew because employee pay and benefits are tax deductible).

Reich noted that this explosion in corporate profits was largely the result of their monopoly power, echoing my book "The Hidden History of Monopolies: How Big Business Destroyed the American Dream" (foreword by Ralph Nader), which we're serializing right now on the Hartmann Report.

But had it not been for changes in tax policies that let those profits accumulate and be distributed to the morbidly rich who own most of America's stock, that money instead would have gone into developing new products, paying workers better, and building new facilities.

As the Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy noted in a recent report, the damage from the Reagan, Bush, and Trump corporate tax cuts is extraordinary:

"At least 55 of the largest corporations in America paid no federal corporate income taxes in their most recent fiscal year despite enjoying substantial pretax profits in the United States. This continues a decades-long trend of corporate tax avoidance by the biggest US corporations..."

"The tax-avoiding companies represent various industries and collectively enjoyed almost \$40.5 billion in US pretax income in 2020, according to their annual financial reports. The statutory federal tax rate for corporate profits is 21%. The 55 corporations would have paid a collective total of \$8.5 billion for the year had they paid that rate on their 2020 income. Instead, they received \$3.5 billion in tax rebates."

The examples they gave are stark: "Food conglomerate Archer Daniels Midland enjoyed \$438 million of US pretax income last year and received a federal tax rebate of \$164 million.

"The delivery giant FedEx zeroed out its federal income tax on \$1.2 billion of US

pretax income in 2020 and received a rebate of \$230 million.

"The shoe manufacturer Nike didn't pay a dime of federal income tax on almost \$2.9 billion of US pretax income last year, instead enjoying a \$109 million tax rebate.

"The cable TV provider Dish Network paid no federal income taxes on \$2.5 billion of US income in 2020.

"The software company Salesforce avoided all federal income taxes on \$2.6 billion of US income."

And that's just the tip of the iceberg. It's time to punch a hole in the neoliberal lie that high tax rates hurt countries and companies. The only group that "suffers" from high taxes are companies that refuse to innovate, and morbidly rich CEOs who want to keep bleeding their companies dry.

Taxes, after all, are an incentive for corporations to do the right thing, but in 2018 the Trump administration dropped the top corporate tax rate from 38% all the way down to 21%. That Republican tax legislation destroyed much of that incentive for good behavior.

If we want the vigorous, dynamic economy we had during the period from 1932 to the 1990s, we must restore the top 52% corporate tax bracket that Republican President Dwight Eisenhower championed and oversaw throughout his and JFK's presidencies (and that stayed well above 40% until Reagan went after them in 1988).

It's time to again tax the rich, be they individuals or giant corporations, to restore the American middle class and return our nation to the vitality that, before the Reagan Revolution, was normal.

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## Scrooge Returns: No Food for Children during the Summer

It took roughly eight weeks for the glow of The Christmas Carol to fade, at least for 14 Republican governors. The season of light gave us Scrooge, whose self-absorbed meanness made audiences gasp. What an awful man! To let children suffer from “Hunger” and “Ignorance,” the scourges of the poor! When the three ghosts forced Scrooge to change course, from miserliness to philanthropy, audiences cheered. Scrooge saved not just his soul, but fed some of London’s hungry children. Miserly Scrooge morphed into Benevolent Scrooge! Hooray!

Now, weeks later, those Republican governors have segued back to Miserly Scrooge. Scrooge’s business was “business,” theirs is the business of state. Forget the children unlucky enough to live under their purview. They can go hungry. The “budget” trumps (I used the word advisedly) both compassion and decency.

The 14 states are: Alabama, Alaska, Florida, Georgia, Iowa, Idaho, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, South Carolina, South Dakota, Texas, Vermont and Wyoming. (*Washington Post*, Jan. 10). Initially, Nebraska Governor Jim Pillen joined the bunch, declaiming federal welfare; but on Feb.

12, after a public outcry (including a petition signed by more than 6,000 voters) Gov. Pillen had a change of heart — Scrooge would understand.

The battle — Benevolence versus Miserliness — came to a head with the reauthorization of the children’s food program, which gives food to children not only during the school year, but during the summer. For the states, the battle centered on food for the summer. Fourteen Republican governors could have said “yes.” Most other governors, including some Republicans, agreed to the program, approved as part of a bi-partisan budget agreement in 2022. But the nay-sayers held firm, rejecting this newly federally funded program to feed children during the summer. Roughly eight million children will meet Miserly Scrooge this June.

The program is expected to serve 21 million children. In terms of the total US budget, the \$2.5 billion in relief is minor. Children eligible for free or reduced lunch will receive \$120 per child to defray the costs of summer lunch. Typically, public recreations programs distribute lunches during the summer: not gourmet fare, usually a sandwich, milk, fruit, a cookie. The stipend is not lavish, would not pay for much more.

Many children, though, do not participate in organized summer activities; in fact, for many children there are no convenient activities. Those children remain at home, sometimes overseeing siblings. And while the program comes with a price tag, Uncle Sam picks up that tab. States do not pay.

Nevertheless, governors, including some in the poorest states, have said “no,” citing a slew of reasons that evoke Scrooge. Children are obese anyway. The program offers money to children at home, who do not attend summer programs. Their parents can feed them. The program is in-

efficient. Our state does not have hungry children. This is yet another form of welfare. The excuses spew forth, a callous justification for denying food subsidies to poor children during the summer. (When those children are in school, they eat subsidized lunches.)

Yes, many children, especially poor children, are overweight. The solution, though, is not to deny them food, but to give them nutritious food. Yes, the subsidy will augment the family’s food budget — hardly wasteful given the pervasive poverty of many families. As for government efficiency, this program does not promise to be more egregiously inefficient than a lot of state programs; indeed, the program gives a tangible benefit: food. Finally, yes, the program is another form of welfare, but the families need welfare to escape penury.

Of course, Miserly Scrooge did not become miserly just with this program. Ten states have not expanded Medicaid — Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kansas, Mississippi, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Wisconsin, and Wyoming. Seven of them (Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, South Carolina, Texas and Wyoming) also nixed the summer lunches. Their governors were never truly benevolent.

Politicians in this season of endless campaigning are praising the innovation, the imagination, the thrift of states that use taxpayers’ money prudently. This season a slew of Republican governors (including those from South Carolina and Florida) have shown how miserly and mean they can be. Maybe the electorate can give them the kind of intervention that the ghosts gave Scrooge — awakening them to the abject misery around them, encouraging their hearts to overcome their miserliness.

*Joan Retsinas is a sociologist who writes about health care in Providence, R.I. Email joan.retsinas@gmail.com.*

## Supreme Court Takes On Ballot Access

By SAM URETSKY

CNN said it pretty well — about Supreme Court Justice Elena Kagan’s apparent opinion of Colorado’s refusal to allow ex-president Trump to appear on the primary ballot for the presidency: “She expressed concern about the extraordinary nature of such a decision, stating, ‘I think that the question that you have to confront is why a single state should decide who gets to be President of the United States.’ She further asked, ‘Why should a single state have the ability to make this determination not only for their own citizens but also for the nation,’”

Huh?!

They already do.

The Court was considering the decision of the Colorado Supreme Court to refuse Trump a place on the ballot because of his violation of the 14th amendment to the Constitution: “No person shall be a Senator or Representative in Congress, or elector of President and Vice-President, or hold any office, civil or military, under the United States, or under any State, who, having previously taken an oath, as a member of Congress, or as an officer of the United States, or as a member of any State legislature, or as an executive or judicial officer of any

State, to support the Constitution of the United States, shall have engaged in insurrection or rebellion against the same, or given aid or comfort to the enemies thereof.”

Consider that the Justices discussed whether the presidency is an “office” and is the President an “officer” and why the oath of the President differs from the oath taken: does “upholding the Constitution” mean the same thing as “Supporting and defending the Constitution”?

Unfortunately, the United States does not have a Semanticist Supreme to tell Congress what it just said. Also, the Oxford English Dictionary claims to have 500,000 words, while the Dictionary of American Regional English has only 60,000, and the vocabulary of an American college graduate runs to about 16-20,000 words. (For the record, personal subscription to the OED costs \$100/year while a subscription to DARE is \$49/year.)

But the point is, the states already decide who can be on the ballot. The nominees of the Democratic and Republican parties get an automatic slot, but first they have to be nominated. The Green Party (probable nominee Jill Stein), on its web site, says “A key goal for the Green Party each election cycle is for state green parties to gain or retain ballot access, which ensures a line on the ballot for Green candidates for upcoming elections. Having an ongoing ballot line means easier ballot access, allowing state parties to focus their efforts on out-

reach instead of having to petition for higher numbers of signatures and meet other onerous requirements that smaller parties without ballot access are required to fulfill.”

The Green Party is on the ballot of 19 states, and counting — but “Over the past several elections our candidates and national party have spent hundreds of thousands of dollars to get our candidates on the ballot. Every state has ballot access requirements political parties must meet. Numerous states mandate candidates meet a threshold to maintain that ballot line.”

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.’s campaign for the Democratic nomination didn’t last long — he dropped out and is trying to win election as an independent candidate. He managed get on the ballot in Utah, so far. (6 electoral votes). A SuperPAC, American-Values2024, has a fund to get Kennedy on the ballot in about 10 states, and bought advertising on the Super Bowl, which ran to \$7,000,000 for 30 seconds. Since it’s a SuperPAC it can’t coordinate with Kennedy’s campaign. While Kennedy is flooding the Internet with email, ballot access isn’t easy. *The Hill* reported that he is considering switching to the Libertarian Party, and also that Trump has offered RFK Jr the VP nomination.

Marianne Williamson dropped out of the Democratic primary race and Dean Phillips laid off most of his campaign staff after both candidates finished far behind Joe Biden in the South Carolina Democratic pri-

mary. Cornel West also is looking for a party that will give him a place on the ballot.

But, in answer to Justice Kagan, states can, and do set requirements for getting on the ballot as an independent, including petitions and funding. The result is that an independent candidate may be on the ballot in some states, and not meet the standards for others. Now, what is Justice Kagan concerned about?

For the record, Gavin Newsom, Governor of California, is gaining attention for an unannounced presidential run, the *Wall Street Journal* opined. “Despite denials, the California governor is acting like a candidate.” Gail Collins of the *New York Times* wrote, “I guess we just keep yelping: Mr. President, many of us think you’ve been doing a terrific job and don’t want you to go down in history as anything but a fine executive who saved the nation from Trump. Please, please don’t mess it up with another run. ...” If President Biden yields to the polls and withdraws, Gov. Newsom is prepared to save the party by accepting the nomination at the national convention, which comes complete with ballot access in 50 states and the District of Columbia.

So, Justice Kagan, what are you afraid of? The system can’t be more confusing than it already is — but it would be better without Donald Trump. The Colorado Supreme Court got it right.

*Sam Uretsky is a writer and pharmacist living in Louisville, Ky.*

## The Rent Is Still Too High

*Housing prices are spiraling alongside homelessness. To solve this crisis, we need to recognize housing as a human right.*

By FARRAH HASSEN

“How we gonna pay last year’s rent?” the chorus implores in the song “Rent” from Jonathan Larson’s 1996 musical of the same name.

It’s the same refrain for many Americans today. A new Harvard study found that half of US renter households now spend more than 30% of their income on rent and utilities. And rent increases continue to outpace their income gains.

With other studies confirming that homelessness grows alongside housing costs, this means many more people are vulnerable. Last year, homelessness hit an all-time national high of 653,100 people.

In the wealthiest country on the planet, this is unacceptable.

The pandemic revealed the full extent of the US housing crisis, with roughly 580,000 people in 2020 living unhoused during “stay at home” orders. But it also proved that federal intervention could ease the crisis. Eviction moratoria and unemployment relief helped keep more people housed, fed, and secure.

But these initiatives ended too quickly. With homelessness spiking alongside hunger and child poverty, we need to bring those programs back — and more. We need to prioritize making housing affordable, accessible, and habitable for everyone.

Over the past decade, according to the Harvard study, the majority of growth in renter households has come from Millennials and Gen Zers who continue to be priced out of homeownership while also paying more for a declining supply of affordable units.

Meanwhile, construction in the high-end “luxury” rental market, which drives up rents for everyone else, remains in an upward trend. And private equity firms like Blackstone, the largest landlord in the U.S., have been expanding their real estate portfolios. These trends have fueled increased housing costs and evictions across communities.

The Harvard study revealed that our nation’s aging rental stock also needs crucial in-

vestment. Nearly half of renters with disabilities live in homes that are minimally or not at all accessible. Further, around four million renter households live in units with structural problems and lack basic services like electricity, water, or heat.

The lack of decent, affordable housing is a policy choice that can be overcome if our federal, state, and local governments prioritize taking much-needed action. Increasing the supply of affordable housing and expanding rental subsidies for lower income renters will help address this housing crisis. But they will not fully resolve it.

Ultimately, it is long past time for our country to change its approach to housing. We need to recognize housing as a human right fundamental to every person’s life, health, and security — instead of as a luxury commodity limited to those who can afford it.

International law already recognizes housing as a human right. Countries are legally obligated to respect, protect, and fulfill this right by enacting relevant policies and budgets to progressively realize adequate housing for all.

What might that look like? Possibilities include rent controls, housing assistance programs, reining in corporate landlords, and

creating community land trusts and housing cooperatives to build permanently affordable rental units and homes.

These affordability measures must be combined with legal protections against forced evictions and housing discrimination, along with regulations to ensure that housing is physically habitable and connected to essential services.

The housing justice movement keeps growing, thanks to the sustained advocacy of community groups across the country.

In California, Connecticut, and elsewhere, they are pushing for legislation that would recognize the right to housing at the state level. Colorado lawmakers are considering legislation that would offer tenants “just-cause” eviction protections. In Congress, the “Housing is a Human Right Act” introduced last year would provide over \$300 billion for housing infrastructure and combating homelessness.

The song “Rent” concludes, “Cause everything is rent.” But it shouldn’t have to be.

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## WAYNE O'LEARY

### The Empire Reenergized

One of the recurrent themes of American history is that periods of domestic political reform are regularly followed like clockwork by periods of foreign preoccupation leading to war. In the process, reform movements at home invariably come to an end. We're apparently in the midst of such a policy turnaround at this very moment.

Recall the course of the 20th century. The Progressive era of the early 1900s was terminated by World War I. The New Deal of the 1930s was subsumed by World War II. Lyndon Johnson's Great Society disappeared in the jungles of Vietnam. And what's left of Joe Biden's new-age progressivism appears destined to become a victim of Middle East entanglements and hubristic military adventures. Middle Class Joe of the 2020 campaign morphed into Union Joe for the 2022 festivities, and now (with apologies to Sen. Joseph McCarthy), he's reemerging as Tail-Gunner Joe just in time for 2024.

This country's imperial impulse can't be held in abeyance for long; its pull on the national psyche and its attraction to US presidents, in particular, is too strong. Today's belief in "American exceptionalism," the successor to yesteryear's "manifest destiny," is our ticket of admission to intervene in the world and set it to rights. Joe Biden's proclamation of a "rules-based order" enforced by the indispensable nation should surprise no

one; he's always been a foreign-policy wonk, whose interest in international affairs far exceeds his domestic focus. The left-leaning internal agenda he pursued in 2021-22 was largely forced on him by the Democratic Party's progressive wing.

In addition, like previous chief executives, Biden's finding it's far easier to assert freedom of action abroad than at home, where an activist president often has to deal with a recalcitrant Congress unsympathetic to his aims. And he's got a restive military-industrial complex eager to try out its latest toys urging him on and playing to his policy instincts. So, the US is presently looking to exercise its influence over Taiwan, the Ukraine and, of course, the Mideast. In the process, it's engaging in indirect confrontations with China, Russia and Iran. Other hot spots (say, the Korean peninsula) are likely to flare up as well.

At the moment, the hottest of the hot spots is Israel, where our "partner," Benjamin Netanyahu, continues on his quest to rid Palestine of Palestinian influence (and, preferably, people) "from the river to the sea." That phrase, used in this country to rally support for an independent Palestinian state, is said to imply anti-Semitic hatred of Jews and an end to the State of Israel. In fact, both sides use it as a *cri de coeur*; Netanyahu himself has employed the expression in speeches on behalf of a Greater Israel, applying it to the Palestinian West Bank, which hard-right Israelis claim as their own patrimony under the biblical name Judea and Samaria.

The truth is that extremists on both sides of the current conflict want exclusive ownership of disputed Israeli-Palestinian territory. Arab extremists, represented by Hamas, wish to abolish the State of Israel; Jewish extremists, represented by Netanyahu and his right-wing coalition, would prefer

that Palestinians pack up and leave, migrating to Jordan, Egypt, or whatever neighboring Arab state will have them. Population transfer has been a dream of Israeli conservatives since before 1948, and by backing Netanyahu to the hilt, the Biden administration (despite empty talk about a two-state solution) does nothing to discourage it.

Only intense US pressure, which Biden refuses to apply, will budge Netanyahu from his intransigent position. But instead of adding conditions to American aid to Israel (on armaments, for instance), the administration persists in providing 2,000-pound, bunker-busting bombs with a half-mile kill radius, which Israelis are using to flatten Gaza and decimate its population.

To date, upwards of 29,000 Gazans, the vast majority civilians and most of them women and children, have been sacrificed in the course of Israel "defending itself." Like it or not, their blood is on American hands. Those casualties are in stark contrast to the estimated 1,200 Israeli victims of the Oct. 7 attacks; it's a ratio of over 24 to one, which seems to suggest the respective values placed on Palestinian and Israeli lives by those resisting a ceasefire — including Joe Biden.

The wonder is that America's president continues to see reasonableness and a willingness to negotiate in his Israeli counterpart, who wants what he calls "total victory." For years, stories have circulated about Netanyahu's contempt for American policymakers, Democrats like Barack Obama and John Kerry in particular. His belief that he can manipulate them to a fare-thee-well is the stuff of legend. Still, they coddle him.

Israel has become the tail that wags the American dog; its right wing visualizes a regional American-Israeli partnership aimed at jointly eliminating the Iranian threat to the Jewish state. In the short run, though, it will

settle for an American-backed Gaza bombing campaign to somehow force Hamas to release Israeli hostages, a tactic unlikely to produce the desired effect.

Meanwhile, the related loss of American personnel in the sudden confrontation between US forces and Iranian proxies, namely Yemeni guerillas active in the Persian Gulf, raises more questions about the Biden administration's turn toward the Middle East as its policy priority. The losses were suffered in the bombing of an American base in Jordan, one of over 80 countries worldwide with significant US military installations.

Why, you might ask, do we have bases in Jordan? The answer is, first, to keep tabs on Iran, Israel's archenemy in the region; and, second, to be ready to defend Israel (despite its nuclear capacity) in case of attack. We have thereby mortgaged American lives and treasure on whatever our client state Israel initiates or stumbles into policywise.

So, prepare for an increasingly foreign policy-dominated campaign in 2024, at least on the part of the Democrats. Immigration is on the back burner; so is climate change. Even abortion is presently taking a back seat to war.

For now, all that matters is the fixation on Israel, which has displaced Ukraine as the prime object of Joe Biden's overseas attentions. Whether for good or ill, the imperial president is prepared to risk the success of his entire administration on that basis. These days, the sun never sets on the American empire, especially that portion of it shining on the Near East.

*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.*

### Having a Child Shouldn't Cause Financial Catastrophe

*In the wealthiest country on Earth, welcoming a child should be a joy for families — not a financial trauma.*

By LINDSAY K. SAUNDERS

I had a baby in 2021 and quickly learned how parenting and child care expenses add up.

My husband and I had saved up for months to afford my unpaid maternity leave — I kept working even after my water broke because we needed every penny. It was a dream come true to have a career that I was proud of and finally be welcoming a child into our lives.

But I had no idea how hard it would re-

ally be.

While I was on unpaid maternity leave that cost us our health benefits, my husband was let go from his job. Already reliant on WIC — the federal food aid program for women, infants, and children — we were forced to go to food pantries, apply for Medicaid, and referred to a diaper bank. We were in survival mode: exhausted, stressed out, and worried.

Despite a litany of postpartum complications that continue to plague me more than two years later, I ended up only taking seven weeks of leave before I returned to work out of desperation.

I wondered: Why doesn't the US have a paid parental leave policy?

Instead, my first and only experience with motherhood was marred by stress and trauma. Again and again, I had to choose between my health and a paycheck, which can feel like a punishment. I'd proudly served my country on a one-year assignment overseas working on foreign aid, and it didn't matter.

We found child care at a loving, quality child care center, but the tuition kept increasing. Now the monthly cost is almost twice our mortgage. In fact, child care costs exceed college tuition where we live in North Carolina, as well as in at least 27 other states.

My stomach gets in a knot every six months when I know the tuition will increase again.

I wondered: Why don't we invest more in early care and education?

Meanwhile, the crises causing outsized harm to families throughout the pandemic compounded: a diaper shortage, a formula shortage, inflation, and wages that wouldn't keep up. So many people are struggling to get back on their feet and desperately need balance and some peace of mind. The stress took its toll, and my husband and I separated in spring 2023.

I wondered: If only we'd had more support, would we have made it?

I have an advanced degree and work as a communications director at a nonprofit while also freelancing. After paying for necessities, we have nothing left, so I get food and supplies from neighbors and friends. I work so hard as a single mom to try to achieve the dreams I have for myself and my baby boy — the dreams that all mothers have. I don't want my child to deal with the stress and constant refrain of "we don't have the money for that," like I did growing up.

Families desperately need, want, and deserve better. Welcoming a child should never be the reason a family plunges into poverty, especially in one of the wealthiest

countries in the world. We shouldn't be sacrificing health, quality early learning, or stability in exchange for a roof over our heads and food. Instead, we should be building strong foundations and generational wealth for our kids.

We need federally mandated paid parental and medical leave. We need additional dedicated funding for programs like WIC that support over 6 million families.

And we need to continue expanding the Child Tax Credit. In North Carolina alone, the monthly Child Tax Credits received in 2021 helped the families of 140,000 children lift themselves out of poverty. Nationally, the credit cut child poverty by over 40% before Congress let the pandemic expansion expire at the end of 2021.

Congress must put our tax dollars and policies toward strong support for families. Let's ensure no parent experiences welcoming a child as a financial catastrophe and make this country a place where families prosper.

*Lindsay K. Saunders is a North Carolina mother and dedicated advocate for RESULTS Educational Fund, a national anti-poverty organization. This op-ed was distributed by OtherWords.org.*

### Labor Leaders Condemn GOP Fiscal Commission as Anti-Worker 'Power Grab'

By JAKE JOHNSON

A coalition of US labor leaders spoke out forcefully Feb. 15 against the Republican-led push for a "fiscal commission," denouncing the proposal as an attack on Social Security, Medicare, and other programs that tens of millions of current and retired workers depend on to meet basic needs.

Liz Shuler, president of the AFL-CIO, said in a statement that a fiscal commission is a "terrible idea that would push older Americans into poverty, take away people's healthcare, and end up costing the government more."

"The labor movement stands united in our belief that slashing crucial programs like Medicare and Social Security—which mil-

lions of hardworking individuals rely on and have contributed to—will make people poorer, sicker, hungrier and even lose their homes; it also would put the pay and benefits for federal workers on the chopping block," Shuler added. "This commission is a power grab that is trying to bypass the regular democratic process by hiding behind closed doors and fast-tracking a plan that escapes public scrutiny and accountability, and rips away the security older people rely on and have paid for."

Other union leaders, including American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) president Everett Kelley, joined Rep. John Larson (D-Conn.) at a Washington, D.C. press conference calling attention to and criticizing the proposed commission, which the Republican-controlled House Budget Committee approved with the support of three Democrats in January.

"Our members know, and they know quite well, what a fiscal commission means, because we have lived through that," said Kelley, pointing to the Bowles-Simpson commission that recommended Social Security

benefit cuts in 2010 during the Obama administration.

"The new commission plans mean federal pay freezes," Kelley said. "What do y'all think about that? A commission means retirement cuts. What do you think about that? A commission means sequestration. And yes, a commission means devastating cuts to Social Security and Medicare."

The bill that passed out of the House Budget Committee in January would establish a 16-member bipartisan commission with a mandate to craft reforms to the nation's trust fund programs, including Social Security and Medicare.

If approved by the commission, the recommended reforms would be placed on a fast track in the House and Senate, with no amendments allowed.

During debate over the Fiscal Commission Act, Republicans on the House Budget Committee rejected Democratic amendments that would have required the commission to propose changes that would strengthen and secure Social Security and Medicare.

Supporters of the Fiscal Commission Act are hoping to attach the legislation to a must-pass government funding measure that lawmakers are racing to finish by the end of the month.

Larson, a leading advocate of expanding Social Security by requiring the rich to pay more into the program, said during the press conference that "nothing is more undemocratic" than a fast-tracked vote on policy recommendations crafted behind closed doors by a panel of 16 people.

"We need hearings out in the open on specific proposals so the public can see what's going on and everybody can add to that," said Larson. "We are a body of 435 people. The Senate is a body of 100 people. How about we do something unusual in Congress: we actually vote, actually vote on Social Security and Medicare."

"We know where the American people are," he added. "We don't need a commis-

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



# Biden, Tired of Being Called ‘Genocide Joe,’ Finally Blinks

## He’ll Push UN Resolution for Temporary Gaza Ceasefire

By JUAN COLE

ANN ARBOR – Julian Borger at *The Guardian* says he has seen a draft US proposal for a United Nations Security Council calling for a “temporary ceasefire” in Gaza and cautioning against any offensive on the southern Gaza region of Rafah, where 1.4 million refugees from the rest of Gaza have joined the existing hundreds of thousands of residents.

The Security Council “What’s in Blue” site says that the US text calls for a “temporary ceasefire in Gaza as soon as practicable, based on the formula of all hostages being released.”

According to Borger, the draft goes on to state that the Security Council “determines that under current circumstances a major ground offensive into Rafah would result in further harm to civilians and their further displacement including potentially into neighboring countries, which would have serious implications for regional peace and security, and therefore underscores that such a major ground offensive should not proceed under current circumstances.”

Algeria’s resolution in favor of an immediate ceasefire was debated Feb. 20, but was vetoed by the United States. Algeria developed its resolution on the basis of the Jan. 26 ruling by the International Court of Justice issuing a preliminary injunction against Israel on the grounds that it is plausibly committing genocide against the Palestinians of Gaza.

The US insists that any resolution condemn the Oct. 7 terrorist attack by Hamas on Israel, which other Security Council members have been unwilling to include, since they do not wish to couple it with the issue of Israel’s disproportionate response in Gaza. Algeria’s text lacks such a

reference, though it does call for the release of the dozens of Israeli hostages held by Hamas.

It appears that after it vetoes the Algerian resolution, the US will table its own call, which is more favorable to the Israeli war effort. It asks not for an immediate permanent ceasefire but only a temporary cessation of hostilities as soon as Israel finds it “practicable.”

It is, however, widely believed that any “temporary” ceasefire would likely be the de facto end of this Gaza campaign. Israel will find it difficult to start the war back up thereafter, especially in the March-April Ramadan fasting period when there are special sensibilities among Muslims worldwide.

The US had declined to call for a ceasefire, even a temporary one, for the past couple of months since the last pause ended. The Biden administration cautioned against Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu’s plan for an invasion of Rafah, but did not seem inclined to do more than frown about it.

So the new resolution, however hedged about and favorable to Israel it may be, is nevertheless a huge about-face for Mr. Biden. It puts him on a collision course with Mr. Netanyahu, who says he insists on the invasion of Rafah.

Why is Biden at long last taking even a feeble practical stand at the UN?

Let me broach some informed guesses in response to this question.

First, Biden is getting enormous pressure from Egypt and other Muslim states to forestall a Rafah campaign that would force the Palestinians of Gaza into the Sinai Peninsula. The *Wall Street Journal* and other right wing US newspapers may think that there is nothing you couldn’t bribe the Egyptians into accepting. Receiving 2.2 million Palestinian refugees into a Sinai Peninsula which is already a severe security problem, however, is not acceptable to Abdelfattah al-Sisi and the rest of the officer corps. No amount of foreign aid or debt forgiveness could cover the enormous costs such a development would incur for Egypt.

The US draft resolution refers obliquely to the Egypt dilemma, which suggests that Biden is trying to mollify Cairo. And it isn’t only Egypt. Biden’s team, including Antony Blinken, are auditioning for the role of Jared Kushner 2.0 by trying to add Saudi Arabia to the Abraham Accords. My suspicion is that Mohamed Bin Salman has told

Blinken hell will freeze over first, if Israel goes through with a Rafah massacre. The Saudis may hate Hamas, but they hate unrest among their own citizens more, and the Saudi populace is boiling with anger.

Second, Biden is probably tired of having all his campaign rallies disrupted by people shouting “How many kids did you kill today?” Biden’s win in 2020 depended heavily on the youth and African-American vote, and both groups are deeply unsettled by Biden’s complaisance toward Netanyahu’s butchery. The president cannot afford to lose Black voters, many of whom identify with the Palestinians. This war is disastrous for Biden’s reelection campaign and it is incredible that his team cannot see that.

Third, and this is just speculation on my part, the Ukrainians are losing the war with Russia because they don’t have enough artillery shells. President Volodymyr Zelensky more or less admitted it at the Munich Security Conference. It could well be that the Israelis are proving such artillery shell hogs that the Pentagon is beginning to have to stiff Zelensky to keep the Israelis supplied. A Rafah campaign would put enormous pressure on the ammunition supply train, which is already stretched to the breaking point, from all accounts.

Fourth, Biden has asked Netanyahu to protect civilian noncombatants in Gaza, and has been rebuffed by Tel Aviv. Netanyahu and his ultra-Right Kahanaist government say they will do as they please regardless of Biden’s wishes. Leaking this draft resolution to the newspapers and then pushing it at the Security Council is a way for Biden to pressure Netanyahu and his cabinet to wind down the war without a further massive bloodbath in Rafah. Exerting pressure through the UN gets Biden off the hot seat with pro-Israel voters, since if the resolution passes it will be multi-lateral. It is therefore preferable in an election year to standing up to Netanyahu by, for example, cutting off ammunition, which Biden could do.

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# The Attorney General’s Jam

By GENE NICHOL

President Biden is reportedly much annoyed with his Attorney General, Merrick Garland, for not “doing enough to rein in” special counsel Robert Hur and his meandering report. The 388-page tome cleared Biden of charges but, oddly, questioned the president’s mental acuity and referred to him as “an elderly man with a poor memory” — who could not recall when he finished his vice-presidential term or when his beloved son died. Ouch. Biden angrily told assembled reporters when the document was released: “I know what the hell I’m doing.” That’s never a great look.

The White House apparently clashed with the Department of Justice before publication. Biden lawyers, Ed Siskel and Bob Bauer, wrote to Garland on Feb. 7 complaining that the assertions about the presi-

dent’s capacities “openly, obviously, and blatantly violated department of justice policy and practice.” Garland of course refused to act. You can almost imagine him explaining to the belligerent lawyers: You are asking me to intervene, to do something — but I don’t do things, not doing things is my jam.

Maureen Dowd has argued it was a huge mistake for Garland to make a Trump appointee, like Hur, the special counsel for Biden. “Garland is a man so in love with his own virtue,” Dowd writes, “that he bends over backwards to show it off . . . I am so fair that I am going to be unfair.” It should come as no surprise that when Garland steps down, whether soon or late, he’ll likely leave the smallest imprint, for good or ill, of any modern American attorney general. Few will remember he was ever there. Spending all one’s effort to try and keep anyone from getting mad at you is no formula for success in 2024. Or ever.

But Garland’s existential reticence has, on occasion, produced benefits. Stepping back from the fray over a year ago, Garland appointed Jack Smith as special counsel to oversee the stumbling Department of Jus-

tice investigations of Donald Trump. Garland’s DOJ had seemed adamant to vigorously prosecute every street thug who stormed the Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, without turning its gaze toward the villain who summoned them. But Bennie Thompson and Liz Cheney’s remarkable congressional committee’s work rendered the Justice Department’s blind eye an unsustainable embarrassment. And as the depressed accelerator since Smith’s appointment has shown, he’s a serious fellow and a real lawyer.

There’s irony in this. Usually, we think of appointing special counsel in order to avoid the executive branch being too forgiving when investigating its friends and members. With Garland, the Justice Department’s overarching goal has been not to offend its enemies. So, in Trump’s case, he surely wishes Garland had stayed in the saddle. Then Trump could have been more readily assured that the horse wouldn’t go anywhere.

In mid-February, Smith again prodded the United States Supreme Court to put an end to Trump’s dishonest, but literally all-

encompassing, delay campaign. Smith explained, with his typical candor, that “a president’s alleged criminal scheme to overturn an election should be the last place to recognize a novel form of absolute immunity from federal criminal law.” Echoing the D.C. Court of Appeals’ earlier unanimous decision, Smith added that Trump’s claim to “unbounded authority to commit crimes would neutralize (our) most fundamental check on executive power . . . and (constitute) an unprecedented assault on our structure of government.”

If our hyper-partisan Supreme Court wants to throw in with America’s aspiring tyrant, Smith is going to make them show their stripes, even quickly. Good for him. Garland wouldn’t want to hurt their feelings.

*Gene Nichol is Boyd Tinsley Distinguished Professor of Law at the University of North Carolina School of Law and in 2015 started the North Carolina Poverty Research Fund after the UNC Board of Governors closed the state-funded Poverty Center for publishing articles critical of the governor and General Assembly.*

# Women and the Future of Politics

By ELWOOD WATSON

It should probably come as little surprise that a majority of American millennial and Generation Z women identify as liberal.

A Gallup Poll released earlier in February indicated the ideological gap between men and women across various generations has increased over the past few years, and that young women today are much more liberal than young men.

Some of their findings:

– Women aged 18 to 29 are now 15 percentage points more likely to identify as liberal than men of the same age group.

– Young men are slightly more likely to identify as conservative (29%) than liberal (25%), with moderate (44%) as the largest share — numbers that have been consistent over the past quarter of a century.

– More young women identify as lib-

eral (40%) than moderate (37%).

– Women aged 18 to 29 are 13 percentage points more likely to identify as “pro-choice” than men, according to a Harvard poll released last year.

Such results don’t surprise me. For a plethora of reasons, the past few years have been emotionally fraught for women across all ages. In just over the past few years we’ve seen the rise of the #MeToo movement, the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, and the implementation of draconian anti-abortion laws in Republican-controlled states across the country. These have all had a alarmingly detrimental and chilling effect on many women.

Abortion and reproductive rights are not the sole issues that account for such effects. Many more women than men are enrolled in postsecondary education. The number of women attending college far outpaces that of men. This is a trend that has been occurring for decades. Meanwhile, the number of men enrolled in higher education institutions has consistently decreased. Currently, the ratio of women to men in college enrollment stands at roughly 60 to 40, and the gap is widening. Americans with college degrees tend to gravitate more to-

ward left-wing politics compared to Americans without such degrees.

Until a few decades ago, sexual politics was primarily discussed underground or in restricted circles with like-minded individuals. Today, with more tolerance among Americans, and with the rise of liberalism among younger millennials and Gen Z, there has been a notable increase in young people openly and publicly identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer. In a recent survey, 56% of young women reported they were exclusively attracted to men, whereas 75% of young men said they were exclusively attracted to women. Prior and current research suggests LGBTQ Americans of all ages tend toward liberalism.

Unlike some of their aunts, grandmothers, and older female relatives, younger American women do not have to rely on a man’s income for their livelihood. Many young women make as much, if not more, than their male cohorts, so the need to have a husband or male provider for their economic security is less of a reality. Several longer-term trends have influenced young women’s liberalization as well. For example, the share of women aged 18 to

29 who are married has fallen by half in 20 years, from 31% in 2000 to 15% in 2021, according to the National Opinion Research Center. In a nation with a 50% divorce rate, it makes sense that people would consider marriage with some trepidation.

American women, from little girls to teenagers to adults, have always had to confront multiple dilemmas in their lives. Like with many non-White groups (although women of color are members of both categories), for one or two steps forward, American women have encountered a step or two backward. However, given the increasing opportunities for women in politics, corporate America, higher education, and other arenas that were largely off-limits decades earlier, the future for the current generation looks much more positive.

*Elwood Watson is a professor of history, Black studies, and gender and sexuality studies at East Tennessee State University. His columns are distributed by Cagle Cartoons newspaper syndicate. He is also an author and public speaker.*

# Lincoln's Life Lesson on Saving Democracy

By JAMIE STIEHM

A towering man faced the townspeople in the morning rain and chill. His parting words from a train made the throng of one thousand weep. He was near tears. The journey ahead would be long, hard and bloody.

The date: Feb. 11, 1861. The town: Springfield, Illinois. The man: President-elect Abraham Lincoln. The next day: his 52nd birthday. He, his wife, Mary, and their sons were Washington-bound.

I gave a birthday party for Lincoln on Presidents Day weekend. I asked a lawyer named John from Wisconsin to enact Lincoln's simple "Farewell Address." It breaks your heart every time.

This year, the echo chamber between now and then is especially clear to hear: *Lincoln saved American democracy. Can we the*

*people do the same?*

The nation was in peril as Lincoln spoke. Unheralded events fell squarely on his shoulders. The Supreme Court had delivered a terrible decision on race that enraged the Northern half of the nation. Several Southern states declared open rebellion from the Union.

Like a Greek epic where the hero foresees his tragic fate, Lincoln's destiny — and leadership as civil war broke out — are all in the affectionate farewell. That gray day marked a new chapter for the railroad lawyer, the first president born outside the original 13 American states.

True, it's not the Gettysburg Address, nor the powerful second inaugural. But it's my favorite. Lincoln spoke in the moment, gathering his thoughts as he bade goodbye to people he knew and loved.

With no text, Lincoln captured his elegiac emotions so exactly that it gives you the best glimmer into his soul.

First: "To this place, and the kindness of these people, I owe every thing. Here I have lived a quarter of a century, and have passed from a young to an old man."

Gratitude and humility shine in the lines.

In a small town on the prairie, there are no secrets. Everyone knows you, and you know everyone.

The town saw a beloved, brilliant young man with no schooling study law, memorize

a Shakespeare play and do so well he lived in a handsome house on Eighth and Jackson. Everyone enjoyed seeing him wrestling and playing outdoors with his sons.

"Here my children have been born, and one is buried," Lincoln continued, opening up like a book. The Lincolns' son Eddie died at age 3.

Lincoln's spare, haunting words are always straight to the point, never flowery. Thomas Jefferson, elegant and formal in writing, seldom showed such a direct personal voice.

Lincoln used Jefferson's "all men are created equal" to build his vision. But he had no illusions about the Virginia gentleman genius enslaver.

Lincoln was the first president to speak and write prose that really resonates with us. It's not too much to say he invented modern American English. His words are democratic, small "d," for all.

With a piercing bell-like drawl from "the West," Lincoln made himself heard before crowds. The aristocratic Jefferson mumbled softly in public, even as president.

Now the saddest part. Lincoln felt the final setting of the scene:

"I now leave, not knowing when, or whether ever, I may return, with a task before me greater than that which rested upon Washington."

And then the war came. Lincoln didn't start fights — but he never lost one.

It's little noted how much the 16th president changed in office over four years. The Civil War toll had to mean more than keeping Southern states in the Union, Lincoln resolved in the American revolution he sparked.

The war over slavery had to bring "a new birth of freedom," as he put it in Gettysburg.

When Lincoln won the war and freed millions of enslaved people, he defended and enlarged democracy.

On a cruel April Friday in 1865, Lincoln was murdered in a conspiracy. The blessing is that the Civil War had just ended. Boston, New York and Philadelphia were jubilant.

Lincoln enjoyed the victory celebration in Washington. The capital city was illuminated one grand evening. Black and White people rejoiced in the streets.

Soon after, they kept an all-night vigil when the president was shot, the last casualty of the Civil War.

Lincoln did go home again — on a funeral train.

*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.*

## The Summer of Our Discontent/ Party One

By BARRY FRIEDMAN

(Monday, Aug. 1, 2024. National Observatory, Washington, D.C.) Douglas Emhoff heard the phone before his wife did.

"Honey. ... Honey!"

"What?"

Emhoff watched his wife turn toward the phone. He could feel her tense up. Something was up. He stroked her back. She wasn't saying anything.

Then: "OK."

"What?" Emhoff asked as she turned toward him.

"He's gone."

"Who?"

She looked at him.

He held her.

Joseph R. Biden, the 46th president of the United States, had died of stress cardiomyopathy after a brief stay at Walter Reed Medical Center. Kamala Harris, the first Black woman to be vice president of the United States, was now the first Black woman to be president of the United States. She was driven to and sworn in at the Oval Office. She thought it was important for the nation to see her as president in the Oval Office.

She gave a speech. Dave Cavell, her speechwriter, texted it to her as the motorcade snaked through Washington. He would meet her there. She sat — presidents sit when addressing the nation, she reminded herself — and after telling the nation President Biden was gone, she added, "Americans come together at times like this."

America had never had times like this.

Later that day, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell called Biden "my friend, an honorable man"; Lindsey Graham cried; House Speaker Mike Johnson said he hoped God would have mercy on Biden's soul.

What about Donald Trump? Joe Biden was now dead six hours. Nothing. Finally an announcement from Mar-a-Lago.

"I offer my condolences to his family. I doubt he would have done the same had I died first. It makes only sense I should be president now."

"Jesus!" Harris said to herself, watching him.

She'd need a vice president. She needed a White man. She called Josh Shapiro of Pennsylvania. It might help, too, because she'd need the state — no, she didn't want to think like that. He was a Jew. It could be a problem.

He accepted.

It was.

Georgia Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene tweeted, "A Black and a Jew? Where will their loyalties be? We need real Americans."

Texas Sen. Ted Cruz said about Greene, "That's not the language I would have used to describe them. Besides, what about the language they use against us?"

DNC chairman Jaime Harrison quickly sent out a statement that Harris was going to be the nominee in 2024, reminding Democrats that after Alben Barkley, who served under Truman, every Democratic VP became or was nominated to become the next president. Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg called Harris to say he would not oppose her; so did New Jersey Sen. Cory Booker, so did Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer. The only one major Democratic official not calling was her longtime friend/nemesis California Gov. Gavin Newsom. Harrison decided it would be Harris and he shut down the debate. Former Presidents Obama and Clinton gave Harris their support. Harrison asked Hillary Clinton to not issue a statement — she didn't. Meanwhile, Harris' approval rating among Americans, according to Five Thirty Eight, was 37.5% favorable, 53.5% unfavorable. She was "enthusiastically" supported by only 30% of Democrats, according to CBS.

(Aug. 22, 2024. United Center, Chicago. Democratic National Convention)

It was in the hands of the superdelegates. Newsom, who left the convention on Tuesday to head back to California's raging wildfires, issued a statement: "We must defeat Donald Trump. Nothing is more important. I support the party's nominee."

It was lost on nobody that he hadn't mentioned Harris' name.

Retiring Sen. Joe Manchin (D-West Virginia) told delegates, "America is here [his hand moved right] and we Democrats are here [his hand moved left]. They aren't the problem. We are."

He was booed.

He wasn't wrong.

During her acceptance speech, Harris said, "I want to be a president for the Black activist, the indigenous shop owner, the Jewish scholar, the fourth-generation Kentucky farmer," before thanking her mother, Shyamala Gopalan; Doug; and her children, Cole and Ella.

Onstage, she and Shapiro locked hands and held them high. The balloons didn't drop. They were stuck. Harris playfully jumped up trying to untether them from the net. The band played Pharrell Williams' "Happy."

CBS cut away to Harrison on his cellphone, screaming and pointing to the balloons.

The next day, in the *Washington Post*, George Will wrote, "Last night, the president touched all the bases in her speech to Amer-

ica, forgetting that a good portion of the country doesn't want all the bases to be touched." On *Real Time With Bill Maher*, Cornel West told Maher, "Why did she say 'Black activist'? Why were Jews the professors? Why is the president, my Black sister, sounding like every White racist who thinks all we good Black folk do is play sports with troubled kids."

Harris knew she'd made a mistake, but why did he have to call her "my Black sister"?

After the convention, a campaign swing took her to Newark, New Jersey; Skokie, Illinois; and Santa Cruz, California.

"Why am I going to California?" she asked Sheila Nix, her chief of staff, her third one.

Nix told her it was for the wildfires. What she didn't tell the president was she was beating Trump by only 11 in an internal poll.

Trump, in Erie, Pennsylvania, mocked Harris' mother. "Shymala?" he said to the crowd of 3,700 at the Bayfront Convention Center. "What kind of name is that? Where are they from?"

## SATIRE/Rosie Sorenson All Tuckered Out

Never in the history of television have we been forced to endure so many cringey moments (except for Katie Couric's interview with Sarah Palin) than the hours Tucker spent with Vlad.

Seventy-year-old Vlad's Botoxed forehead put Tucker's eyebrow pucker to shame during Vlad's endless lecture on Russian history. Tucker's mien resembled less that of a 54-year-old man than an 87-year-old who had just eaten his morning bowl of prunes and was now suffering the consequences, but unable to leave the stage.

Ah, Tucker, poor Tucker. What made him think he could keep up with, let alone

The crowd responded, "A sh\*thole country."

"Don't say that," Trump said with a smile. "They'll think we're racists instead of proud Americans."

The following Monday, a *Wall Street Journal*/NBC poll had Trump beating Harris by seven nationally, ahead in Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin, and tied in Minnesota and New Jersey.

(To be continued.)

*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" was scheduled to be released this spring. 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.*

outdo, that crafty old KGB bugger whose encyclopedic knowledge of Tucker's life was on full display: "You study history, yes?" "Too bad CIA rejected you because they preferred not to hire young men who are gabby and insubordinate."

When Tucker cosplayed a State Department official by asking Putin to release Wall Street journalist, Evan Gershkovich, he was very lucky not to have been hauled off to the Gulag.

After the interview, Vlad was asked by one of his guards why he didn't ship that whipper snapper off to jail.

"Незачем. Он обожает меня. Очень полезный идиот. ("No need. He adores me. Is very useful idiot.")

*Rosie Sorenson is a humor writer in the San Francisco Bay Area. Her column is satire and, like Fox "News," cannot be believed as fact. You can contact Rosie at: RosieSorenson29@yahoo.com*

## Free Tax Filing: A Crucial Step Toward Unrigging Our Economy

*This spring, filers in 12 states will get to use a question and answer-based software to file their taxes online, at no cost, through the IRS's new Direct File tool.*

By SUSAN HARLEY

Each year many Americans pay a steep cost when doing their taxes. It's not just the money people shell out to use software to file taxes online, but also the time spent and the stress that comes with worrying an honest mistake will be held against

them.

Luckily, change is in the air this spring. Eligible filers in a dozen states will finally have a true public option this tax season: a new free, online, mobile-friendly software from the IRS called Direct File.

Over the next several weeks the Direct

*Continued on page 19*

## Biden & Blinken – Rule of Illegal Power Over Rule of Law

Among the puzzling questions that the media chooses to ignore is asking high government officials why they are exercising the illegal use of power that violates the rule of law, which they are required to obey.

In February, the Veterans for Peace (VFP) made it very easy for reporters to pose questions by sending an open letter (See [veteransforpeace.org](http://veteransforpeace.org)) to the Inspector General of the US State Department and Antony Blinken, Secretary of State, invoking several US statutes that require the “termination of provision of military weapons and munitions to Israel.”

Josh Paul, a former senior official in the State Department’s office charged with reviewing weapon transfers to foreign countries, said: “The Secretary and all relevant officials under his purview should take this letter from Veterans for Peace with the utmost seriousness. It is a stark reminder of the importance of abiding by the laws and policies that relate to arms transfers.”

What laws are being violated by the State Department daily as it approves ships and cargo planes full of weapons of mass destruction to be used in Israel’s war crimes and genocide against hundreds of thou-

sands of Gaza’s civilians, mostly children and women?

These are the laws highlighted in the VFP letter:

- The Foreign Assistance Act, which forbids the provision of assistance to a government which “engages in a consistent pattern of gross violations of internationally recognized human rights.”

- Arms Export Control Act, which says countries that receive US military aid can only use weapons for legitimate self-defense and internal security. Israel’s genocidal campaign in Gaza goes way beyond self-defense and internal security.

- The US War Crimes Act, which forbids grave breaches of the Geneva Conventions, including wilful killing, torture or inhuman treatment, wilfully causing great suffering or serious injury to body or health, and unlawful deportation or transfer, perpetrated by the Israeli Occupying Forces.

- The Leahy Law, which prohibits the U.S. Government from using funds for assistance to units of foreign security forces where there is credible information implicating that unit in the commission of gross violations of human rights.

- The Genocide Convention Imple-

mentary Act, which was enacted to implement U.S. obligations under the Genocide Convention, provides for criminal penalties for individuals who commit or incite others to commit genocide

mentary Act, which was enacted to implement U.S. obligations under the Genocide Convention, provides for criminal penalties for individuals who commit or incite others to commit genocide

Under these laws, the State Department has a “Conventional Arms Transfer Policy” which, the letter notes, “prohibit [U.S. weapons transfers when it’s likely they] will be used by Israel to commit ... genocide, crimes against humanity, grave breaches of the Geneva Conventions of 1949, [including attacks intentionally directed against civilian objects or civilians protected] or other serious violations of international humanitarian or human rights laws.”

The VFP letter continues, “Dozens of authoritative complaints and referrals made by hospital administrators in Gaza, as well as by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Palestine Authority, South Africa, Turkey, Medicins sans Frontieres, UNRWA, UNICEF, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, the Norwegian Refugee Council and the World Food Programme have confirmed that there is an ongoing human rights and humanitarian disaster due to Israel’s cutoff of water and electricity, deliberate destruction of sewage infrastructure and delaying of aid shipments by Israeli forces.”

If you are wondering why these laws are not being enforced – the answer is that individual citizens or groups of citizens do not have any “legal standing” to sue Secretary Blinken, according to the U.S. Supreme Court. Only a Committee of Congress, backed by a Senate or House Resolution,

can take the State Department to federal court. That action to enforce Congressionally passed and enacted laws is not likely to happen in this lawless, Israeli government-indentured Congress which refuses even to demand a ceasefire.

Mike Ferner, VFP National Director, observed “Just as any good soldiers can recognize when they are given an unlawful order, we believe some State Department staff are horrified at the orders they’re given and will decide to uphold the law, find the courage to speak out and demand an end to the carnage.”

There is a related serious matter, pointed out by international law practitioner, Bruce Fein who said “The United States has clearly become a co-belligerent with Israel in its war against Hamas-Gaza Palestinians by systematically supplying the IDF with weapons and intelligence without conditions. Under the Fourth Geneva Convention, nationals of a co-belligerent state are not regarded as protected persons if their state has customary diplomatic relations with an allied nation [in this case, Israel].”

For decades, the State Department has had an independent Office of the Legal Adviser. The present occupant of that post, acting legal adviser Richard C. Visek has been publicly silent. I am sending the Veterans for Peace letter to him and asking him to respond to this letter and to the American people who pay his salary.

*Ralph Nader is a consumer advocate, lawyer and author. See [www.nader.org](http://www.nader.org) or [facebook.com/ralphnader](https://facebook.com/ralphnader).*

## TED RALL

### What If We Had \$4.5 Trillion a Year to Spend on Ordinary People?

The \$1.6 trillion we waste each year on the Pentagon is an irresistible target for leftists looking for funds to appropriate to the human wants and needs that are currently going un- and under-addressed. Let’s redirect those funds to something more worthwhile than slaughtering innocent people around the planet—i.e., anything else. But why stop there?

The US federal budget is full of poor spending choices and waste caused by bureaucratic inefficiency.

One item you might not immediately think of as flexible or fungible is interest on the national debt, which came to \$659 billion in the 2023 fiscal year. That derives from past spending. We don’t have a time machine, so what can be done about that?

Quite a lot, actually. That figure reflects an increase of \$184 billion, or 39%, from the previous year and is nearly double that for fiscal year 2020. The culprit for that

massive spending spike is the Federal Reserve Bank’s optional, unnecessary, totally reversible decision to repeatedly raise interest rates following the COVID-19 lockdown, including on government-issued Treasury bonds and notes that finance the debt, in order to fight a spike in inflation that probably would have eased without any action by monetary regulators. And it’s only going to get worse. The Congressional Budget Office projects that interest on the debt, which currently amounts to 2% of GDP, will rise to 6% by 2030.

In other words, American taxpayers would have saved \$184 billion had the Fed chosen not to increase interest rates. Which, if our society valued labor more than capital, it would not have. Not only is the Fed’s obsessive fear of inflation a paranoid and anachronistic vestige of a 1970s economy that no longer exists and in any event was not nearly as bad for workers as we’ve been told, it repeatedly leads them to risk recession because, in the worst-case scenario from business’ vantage point, layoffs and wage cuts rein in the power of labor, which amounts to about two-thirds of the expenses of a generic US corporation.

The federal government issues about \$250 billion per year to individuals and corporations that objectively do not qualify for the subsidies, including \$1 billion a year to dead people.

Nearly \$2 billion per year goes to maintaining 77,000 empty buildings.

Then there’s the revenue side—or lack thereof. In 2021, the last year for which statistics are officially available, the Internal

Revenue Service failed to collect \$688 billion in unpaid taxes because it didn’t bother to send dunning letters or to conduct audits of wealthy individuals or corporations.

And that’s not even touching the fact that income taxes can, and should be increased on high income, individuals and corporations.

For this exercise, we are omitting other expenses that are arguably wasteful, like most of the budget of the Department of Homeland Security, the \$70 billion a year foreign-aid budget and outlandish headline-grabbing projects like federally-supported studies of how Russian cats walk, and how the fur color of Labrador retrievers affects their internal body temperatures. Taxpayer money should never be wasted. But here we are looking for the biggest reservoir of foolishly-spent money, not the latest Bridge to Nowhere.

Leaving the tax structure as it is, at least \$3.5 trillion per year is currently being wasted, squandered, thrown away for no good reason whatsoever. Meanwhile, Americans live in terror because they are one or two paychecks away from economic ruin, don’t know what they would do if they were diagnosed with a terrible disease and are going into insane amounts of debt in order to send their kids to college.

Now imagine if large corporations and wealthy individuals were made to pay their fair share of taxes. Six out of 10 voters say they resent how low taxes are for the rich and big companies.

Currently, for example, families don’t pay Social Security withholding taxes on in-

come over \$250,000 per year (\$168,600 for single filers). Eliminating the highly regressive cap would bring in an additional \$100 billion per year.

A 2% or 3% wealth tax on people worth more than \$50 million—a tax on assets rather than income, as other developed countries have—would bring in at least \$200 billion annually.

Taxing capital gains at the same rate as income would bring in an additional estimated \$100 billion a year.

Corporate income taxes as a percentage of GDP have steadily fallen since 1950, peaking at 6% during the Korean War, hitting 3% in 1970 and plunging to 1% during the Reagan years, where they are now. Companies are sponging off the greatest consumer market on earth; they should be made to pay if they want to continue to play. If we returned to that 3% rate, when the economy was booming by the way, the Treasury would bring in an additional \$500 billion annually.

All told, we are looking at roughly \$4.5 trillion per year. \$4.5 trillion a year that could be used to alleviate hunger, house the unhoused, treat the sick, build infrastructure, educate the young, and retrain older workers.

Next week: Americans’ biggest worries and how the Left could reallocate those \$4.5 trillion in ways to make us all better off.

*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](http://rall.com)), Twitter @tedrall*

## Harley...

*Continued from previous page*

File pilot will be ramping up in the states where it’s being offered: Arizona, California, Florida, Massachusetts, Nevada, New Hampshire, New York, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Washington, and Wyoming.

Available in both English and Spanish, the new software pilot is starting small and will only be available to people with simple taxes who file with only limited types of incomes, credits, and deductions. While the Direct File tool won’t be available to everyone right away, it’s a crucial step toward unrigging our economy and protecting people’s pocketbooks.

Buoyed by funding the IRS received through the Inflation Reduction Act, the Direct File pilot is another example of the Biden administration’s commitment to tackle junk fees that chip away at people’s eco-

nomics wellbeing and to foster a government that better serves the American people.

Direct File is also a recognition that struggling families shouldn’t have to pay money they can’t afford just to do their civic duty. The tool aims to make it easier for folks to get the refund they’re owed and to address the problem of one in five eligible recipients of the Earned Income Tax Credit not claiming it.

While there has technically been a Free File program at the IRS for decades, it has not lived up to its promise. Only a tiny percentage of eligible filers – about 2 percent – use it. And there was a high-profile data breach where corporate partners in the program shared sensitive tax information with Meta (formerly called Facebook) and Google.

Unsurprisingly, Intuit, the parent company of TurboTax, has not been taking this budding threat to its behemoth earnings lay-

ing down. It’s poured a record amount into its lobbying, almost a million dollars in just the past three months.

But it’s going to take more than lobbying and a Super Bowl ad to revive Intuit’s tarnished image.

Intuit entered into a \$141 million settlement last year to resolve claims that it steered low-income customers to paid products when they were eligible to use free services. And the Federal Trade Commission ruled in January that the company’s advertising about free tax prep was deceptive.

The Direct File tool is expected to be live to the public in those 12 states in early to mid-March. That means that this St. Patrick’s Day, some lucky filers will find a pot of gold under the rainbow – around \$140 or more on average back in their pockets that they didn’t have to give to a greedy corporation just to use software to help them file their taxes online.

Direct File is the first brick in the road to return-free filing that many of our international peers enjoy, where they simply approve their pre-calculated return prepared by the government.

Like a garden, though, Direct File will only flourish with care and attention. Let’s make sure it doesn’t die on the vine! Help spread the word, check your eligibility at [directfile.irs.gov](http://directfile.irs.gov), and visit [act.citizen.org/page/62332/petition/](http://act.citizen.org/page/62332/petition/) to get reminded when it’s go time for Direct File in your state.

*Susan Harley is the managing director for Public Citizen’s Congress Watch division. This op-ed was distributed by OtherWords.org.*

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# You're Not the Boss in Wilderness

By JOHN CLAYTON

When my friends and I encountered the fresh grizzly bear scat, we were deep in Wyoming's Teton Wilderness, 20 miles from a trailhead. I'd seen grizzlies before—from the car. But this experience was on a whole other level. I felt vulnerable, nervous. I also felt fully alive.

That feeling owes much to the Wilderness Act, which became law 60 years ago, in 1964. When President Lyndon B. Johnson created a nationwide system of wild landscapes "untrammelled by man," it gave physical expression to an unusual attitude toward land.

The attitude could be summarized as: In the wildest parts of America, humans come second. What comes first is the land, its water and its wildlife. If the grizzly that left those droppings had confronted us, and I'm glad it never did, we lacked the resources of civilization to protect us.

If I'd fallen off a cliff, there was no cell service to call 911. If a freak snowstorm made us cold, wet and miserable, all we could do was suffer. In wilderness, Mother Nature won't kiss a boo-boo to make it better.

There's something elemental about being on your own, exposed. You've made a choice based on your values about the outdoors. As a result, you feel the power of larger forces—and sometimes, if you're lucky, even the power of yourself.

Before the Act became law, American culture prioritized pulling all the resources we could out of the land by drilling, mining, dam building, logging, over-grazing. We barged through habitat, flattened forests and plowed prairies. We replaced old growth with board-feet of timber, canyons with cubic meters of water, and grasslands with barrels per day of oil. We're still doing that on 95% of public land.

But the Wilderness Act acknowledged that in some places, the land should be left as unexploited as possible. It defined wilderness as being "in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape."

Preserving wildness calls for restraint. It calls for motorized users, e-bikers, mountain bikers, pilots, snowmobilers, technical climbers with hardware and drone flyers to

recreate somewhere else. Yet hiking, hunting, boating, fishing and horseback riding are all allowed in wilderness, as well as grazing if grandfathered in.

The Act's primary author, Howard Zahniser, loved hiking in wild places and he was determined: In eight years of lobbying the Congress for The Wilderness Society, he helped rewrite the bill 65 times. By the time the Act overwhelmingly passed—73–12 in the Senate and 374–1 in the House—Zahniser had died of heart disease at the young age of 58.

The Act is often discussed in terms of the acreage it protects, now comprising 806 wilderness areas and 112 million acres, roughly half of that in Alaska. Yet it's really about nature being the boss.

In wilderness, we recognize that always getting our way can devalue ecosystems. It can harm wildlife, clean water, fresh air and other widely shared resources. It can cause us to scorn Indigenous people's connections to the land when we should be honoring them.

Wilderness is not the only place we embrace not getting our way, just as the US Capitol building is not the only place we embrace democracy, and Civil War battlefields are not the only places we honor fallen soldiers. With wilderness as reminders, we can also consider not being the boss in a city park or backyard, while watching birds or growing

native plants.

Threats to keeping wilderness wild, however, have never subsided. Sixty years have brought us innumerable technologies to help us get our way while recreating in nature. And as we've realized that making nature more accessible might make it more inclusive and its fans more diverse, some of us are tempted to relax recreational restrictions in wilderness.

That would miss the point. "We must remember always that the essential quality of the wilderness is its 'wildness,'" Zahniser said. "We must not only protect the wilderness from commercial exploitation. We must also see that we don't ourselves destroy its wilderness character in our own management programs."

Honoring wilderness ideals is especially important today because it represents the same lesson that we should be learning from climate change: People can't control nature. Thanks to the Wilderness Act, we can celebrate that some places remain free of our habit of changing everything—just because we can.

*John Clayton is a contributor to Writers on the Range, [writersontherange.org](http://writersontherange.org), an independent nonprofit that promotes lively dialog about the West. He lives in Montana and writes the newsletter Natural Stories.*

## Max Is Anything But That

By ROB PATTERSON

I wonder at times why things in entertainment that have proven to be quite worthy and working rather well can't just be largely left alone. But here in the modern world, new means *better*. Too often there seems to be a tendency to change to keep up with the times and buff things up to give them a shiny sense of newness. That doesn't always equate with better.

Such is the case with Max, the rebranding and reconfiguration of HBO. Maybe it's just me, but, just for starters, I don't much care for the name. And it seems fitting to how I feel about the change and the results that Max was taken from what was HBO's much-lesser stepsister channel Cinemax.

HBO was the gold standard in cable channels and then streaming TV. It was the first premium cable channel dive headlong into original programming. It pioneered standup comedy specials that helped launch many comics to greater stardom. HBO's original documentaries were largely excellent and I believe helped raise the bar on that film genre. The channel led the way in cable in bringing boxing to a new and classier level of quality — washing away the proverbial and real cigar smoke and pungent sweat — alongside other fine sports programming. And, again, HBO's documentaries about sports were so interesting that someone like me, who is a very casual viewer of sports, still watched many of them. Last but hardly least, the network tended to offer a fairly good slate of recent movies after their theatrical run.

That's how I felt about HBO for decades. And my esteem is backed up by how, year after year, HBO outshone

every other broadcast, cable or streaming networks at the Emmy Awards. Its current count of 190 Primetime Emmys makes it the most-awarded channel ever in that category. As recently as the 2022 Emmys, HBO led the pack again with 38 Primetime statuettes. Not so in 2023, and I do not expect Max to win anywhere near a sweep in the future when the awards come around again not long after I write this, or likely ever again.

It's sad and irksome to witness an entity recognized by me and its industry for excellence get reshuffled and re-named in the name of progress, yet descend from its peak position as far as quality and appeal. To wit, sometime in mid-2023 I stopped subscribing to Max after clicking onto it too many times and finding little if anything that compelled me to watch it.

Which is ironic indeed, as it was HBO that caused me to hook back up to cable TV in 1999 after I cut it off in the early '90s, when I'd sit in my easy chair and click my remote through the various channels going nope, nope, nope ... Around the same time, Bruce Springsteen released his song "57 Channels (With Nothing On)."

But then my friend Chip, who started watching "The Sopranos" and taping the episodes, loaned the tapes to me. By episode three I was so hooked I wanted to see the next one as soon as I could. So I turned premium cable with HBO back on. And was rewarded by the glories of not only "The Sopranos," but also "The Wire," as well as the channel's bounty of other fine shows and excellent docs — quality programming that lifted HBO above all other networks.

The Max rebrand and reshuffle seems destined to lower what was HBO to the level of all the other channels. They are abandoning the HBO policy of keeping every original production available. And I don't like the new interface. Nonetheless an offer of returning at \$1.99

per month (with ads) for the next half year wooed me back, if only to watch the new Albert Brooks doc (see Picks below). Then I screened the doc "Love Has Won: The Cult of Mother God," and couldn't even finish the account of a minuscule group of rather unlikable fools — small potatoes also tasteless and lacking much if any nutritional value. Not a good sign.

I expect a future business school study of this gaffe. If it ain't broke, no need to fix it. (The "New Coke" lesson). Instead, all HBO needed, if anything, was to be made even better.

### Populist Picks

**TV DOCUMENTARY:** "Albert Brooks: Defending My Life" — Brooks first won me over big time in 1972 with his debut as a director with his short film "The Famous Comedians School" on the PBS series, "The Great American Dream Machine." (Delighted to see my fave bit from it, the Danny Thomas spit take, included in this doc.) And has gone on as an actor, writer and director to create a wonderful body of work that not just pushed the envelope but expended the boundaries of postmodern comedy. He forged a path for Steve Martin and Andy Kaufman and the HBO series "Curb Your Enthusiasm" to follow. Directed by Rob Reiner, Brooks' best buddy since high school, this warm and illuminating film features justly glowing praise from a marquee lineup of fellow comics. Rotten Tomatoes gives it a 96 (out of 100). Hence it's a must-see for anyone who values contemporary comedy.

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## Book It: Reading About Heterodox Economics

By SETH SANDRONSKY

Opinion polls show that Americans want humane policies and politics. To this end, recent two recent books from Monthly Review Press on heterodox economics shed light on injuries of social class and progressive next steps.

Michael D. Yates is the author of "Work Work Work: Labor, Alienation and Class Struggle" (2022). The editorial director of Monthly Review Press, Yates centers working people in the pages of this book.

Everybody works, but, to paraphrase Marx, under conditions alien to humans' needs for meaningful labor. Hence, Yates emphasizes the alienating character of waged work throughout his nine chapters.

Keeping with the analysis of his past books, such as "Naming the System: Inequality and Work in the Global Economy" (MRP 2003), Yates fleshes out the dehumanizing impacts of people's labor as a commodity under capitalism. Working-class women suffer from a double-penalty with

their unpaid labor as caregivers, as "the pandemic has laid bare [their] precarious position," he writes.

Yates also emphasizes the need for labor education as an effective way to strengthen working-class organization. He writes of what he knows as a former academic who has also taught union members and prisoners.

In a chapter titled "Waging Class Struggle," Yates details how blending labor and politics can benefit communities and households of the working class. One example he cites of system change is the Richmond Progressive Alliance, a labor-community alliance in California's Bay Area that Steve Early details in "Refinery Town: Big Oil, Big Money and the Remaking of an American City" (Beacon Press 2017). Another progressive example Yates writes about is Cooperation Jackson, a community-based, black-led effort to build a socialist community in Mississippi.

Like Yates, Schutz unpacks neoclassical economics for the dogma that it is a justification for social inequality in Inequality, Class, and Economics. He details how employer power over the workplace is the linchpin of the social class system.

Neoclassical economics prefers to ignore the class system that employers dom-

inate. Thus, in part employees' wages get blame for causing inflation, a general rise in prices. However, employers not employees set prices!

There are many social relationships that harm working households, writes Schutz. One, for instance, is the power of the professional-managerial class over workers, while another is of politicians' negative impacts on voters.

Case in point are President Biden and ex-president Trump. They represent the corporations and wealthy. Both politicians use different words to hide policies and politics that shift money from the bottom and middle to the top, a trend underway for decades.

Look no further than prosperity on Wall Street and in corporate America. Contrast that living large with the precarious character of life for millions of Americans hanging by an economic thread, one surprise bill away from insolvency.

I think that Schutz focuses correctly on the role that culture plays in countering the power of war makers and Wall Street internet culture in the form of social media is a major reason why the majority of Americans oppose the Israeli slaughter of Palestinian civilians after Hamas maimed and murdered citizens of the Jewish state on

Oct. 7, 2023.

In the final chapter of his book, Schutz emphasizes a totalistic approach to fixing the problems of a class-based system. This tactic blends the cultural, political and social realms to shift economic power to the laboring majority, the 99%.

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## FILM REVIEW/Ed Rampell

# 'Kipkemboi': Kenya's Genius, from a Mud Hut to Wall Street

The 32nd Pan African Film & Arts Festival, America's largest Black-themed filmfest, took place Feb. 7-19 in Los Angeles. During Black History Month PAFF annually screens movies ranging from Hollywood studio productions and Hallmark Channel TV-movies to indies, foreign films, documentaries, low budget productions, shorts, animation, etc. Films span the spectrum from Oscar nominees to hard-to-find gems from Africa, the Caribbean, America and beyond that L.A. viewers are unlikely to be able to see at any other venue. Here are reviews of just a couple of the films audiences had an opportunity to see.

African director Charles Uwagbai's charming "Kipkemboi" is a well-made Kenyan-Canadian co-production that has almost every ingredient for a film to succeed. In no particular order these factors include: A David versus Goliath storyline that has you rooting for the underdog; attractive protagonists; hiss-worthy villains; plot twists; young love; on location shooting at exotic places; strong female characters; an uplifting POV; and more.

"Kipkemboi" is set in Metipso, Kenya; the traditional village may be hundreds of kilometers from the urbanized capital of Nairobi, yet the title character (Thamela Mpumwana plays Kipkemboi) is such a mathematical genius that MIT offers this teenager a scholarship to study abroad. But tragedy strikes before Kipkemboi can move to Massachusetts to study, and he opts to stay in his hamlet to help his mother and family. Nevertheless, with some encouragement from another village adolescent, Chipchirchir (the effervescent Elsie Chidera Abang), Kipkemboi pursues his visions and sets up a computer lair inside of a mud hut.

From there the math whiz kid works on and invents an extremely complicated algorithm that enables Kipkemboi to play global capital markets and make millions. However, for those who think money solves everything, Kipkemboi's gaming of Wall Street futures trading, et al, triggers a series

of dilemmas, ranging from jealous villagers to nefarious operatives hired by financial sector interests. The latter track the lad down to his remote hamlet in the Kenyan countryside, where they intend to take over his algorithm – or neutralize the pesky teenager who has upended the world's stock markets.

Kipkemboi and Chipchirchir go on the run, and plan to clandestinely meet with the mysterious underground resistance leader Simba, who in the movie's subplot is denounced as a "terrorist" by the Kenyan establishment the social justice warrior opposes. Simba's deep voice is heard throughout Kipkemboi online and in the media criticizing Kenya's powers-that-be – this opposition leader reminded me of the shadowy Emmanuel Goldstein, the so-called "enemy of the people" in George Orwell's anti-totalitarian classic "1984." (Without disclosing a plot spoiler, the surprising revelation of who Simba really is is one of Kipkemboi's best moments, sure to make viewers smile.)

"Kipkemboi" has a strong socially conscious subtext as the village youth becomes a political prisoner. If redistribution of wealth to the least of these among us is a socialist principle, suffice it to say that "Kipkemboi" cleverly achieves this – but through exploiting the capitalist system. The film also is very positive about the role of women as strong equals. Not only is Kipkemboi's mother supportive, but Chipchirchir is no mere cheerleader. She does more than inspire Kipkemboi; she drives their getaway vehicle and this village lass has dreams of her own, aspiring to become an attorney. Watching the romance of the appealing leads blossom is also beguiling.

The engrossing direction by Charles Uwagbai, a veteran Nigerian filmmaker (see: [https://www.imdb.com/name/nm5150818/?ref\\_=tt\\_ov\\_dr](https://www.imdb.com/name/nm5150818/?ref_=tt_ov_dr) and <https://www.newrealfilms.com/>) who divides his time between Toronto and Africa, is admirable. Uwagbai elicits warm, realistic performances from his young thespians and the rest of the cast. Joel Richardson's screenplay is engaging, although some may find certain plot points to be implausible. (But you never know – apparently, there really is some sort of high tech program going on at a real Kenyan village called Metipso – see: <https://metipsoportal.com/home>.) Although the interiors of this co-production were shot in Canada, movie lovers will relish the peek "Kipkemboi" provides of Kenya's countryside and contemporary urban Nairobi.

The PAFF audience at "Kipkemboi"'s world premiere enthusiastically reacted very positively to the movie in a post-screening Q&A attended in person by director Uwag-

bai. African American theatergoers repeatedly remarked at how happy they were to see positive depictions of Africans, who are often portrayed on Western screens as troubled people in media portrayals. Ticket buyers also said they enjoyed the positive picture "Kipkemboi" painted of women in this movie that also co-stars the beautiful Vinessa Antoine, who, according to IMDB.com, is the "the first Black Canadian person to lead a dramatic show in Canada."

The captivating Kipkemboi epitomizes what the Pan African Film Festival is all about – presenting Black-themed productions in the heart of the world capital of cinema, which Angelino moviegoers might otherwise never get a chance to see. Uwagbai told the PAFF ticket buyers that he is in talks with streaming services about releasing Kipkemboi and hopefully through streaming or even theatrical distribution, a wide American audience will have an opportunity to see this highly entertaining, enjoyable, thought-provoking film about the teenage genius from Kenya.

## 'A Double Life': The Radical Lawyer Accused of Giving George Jackson a Gun

Catherine Masud's must-see documentary "A Double Life" is a gripping account of New Left icon Stephen Bingham. The activist attorney spent years underground in Eastern Europe and Paris when he fled the USA after he was accused of passing a gun to legendary Black Panther George Jackson at San Quentin shortly before a bloody shootout at the prison in 1971. Following about 15 years on the lam, the resulting court case is compellingly rendered as Bingham, son of a prominent Connecticut family, fights for his life and freedom. This excellent, well-crafted nonfiction film brings radical history alive, including interviews with Angela Davis and many others, as well as archival clips featuring Black Panther leaders Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale. A bravura, stand-up-and-cheer documentary that's not to be missed.

For more info on PAFF see: <https://paff2024.eventive.org/welcome>.

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 first appeared at [hollywoodprogressive.com](http://hollywoodprogressive.com).

## EDGE OF SPORTS/Dave Zirin

# What the Super Bowl Parade Shooting Has to Do with the Empire of the Gun

It is an indictment of this country that there are few things more American than a mass shooting at a Super Bowl parade. One person was killed and 22 more were injured during the Feb. 14 parade in Kansas City, Mo., celebrating the 2024 Super Bowl champions, the Chiefs. Eight victims were in critical care. Eleven of those shot were children. The one confirmed death is Lisa Lopez-Galvan, a DJ for Kansas City radio station KKFI, who hosted a show called Taste of Tejano. Afterward, President Joe Biden said that the shooting "cuts deep in the American soul," but that's not quite right. This is the American soul.

It is true, as Democrats insist, that we aid and abet these shootings legislatively. Since 2017, Missouri has allowed people to carry concealed and loaded firearms in public, no need for background check or permit. The state's governor, Mike Parson, who attended the parade and fled the gun shots, had recently signed a nullification law proclaiming that no federal gun control legisla-

tion would be adhered to in the state.

We are caught in this numbing cycle of tragedy, because this country reveres the gun. And it is impossible to separate our adoration of the gun from the glorification of how this country was founded, namely the westward expansion of the United States and the conquering of Indigenous people. As sociologist Orlando Patterson wrote, "The quintessential American myth is that of the cowboy. Central to that myth are the role of violence and the reverence for the gun. This violence is embraced and romanticized." It doesn't take a sociologist to notice the brutal irony that this mass gun tragedy took place at the celebration of a Kansas City team adorned with a Native American name.

Indigenous team names and mascots derive from celebrating the "savagery" of Native people—as if they were jaguars, lions, or wildcats. The names tacitly compliment the prowess of settlers, as well as our own prowess in militarily defeating them. Seeing

Native people as warlike is more than just racist; it provides an unspoken justification for attempting to wipe them out.

Native team names celebrate settler colonialism, and there is no settler colonialism without the gun.

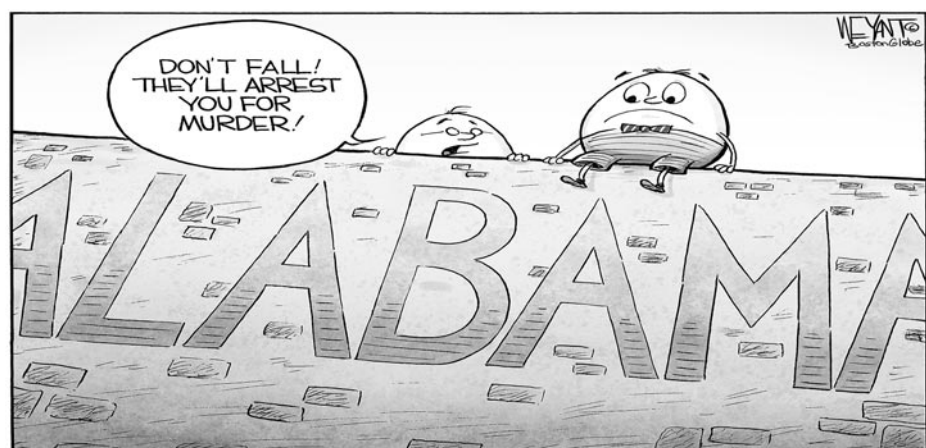
The US, unsurprisingly, is both the world's top gun manufacturer and weapons exporter. Billions of dollars of those weapons are central to another settler colonialist project: the ethnic cleansing of Gaza. The Super Bowl, with hundreds of millions watching around the world, acted as a weapon of mass distraction for Israel as it launched an attack on Rafah in the Gaza Strip, now the most densely populated part of the most densely populated area on Earth. Following the Israeli ethnic cleansing of Gaza City, more than one million Palestinians are crammed into refugee camps in and around Rafah. Over 100 people were reported dead in Sunday's military incursion. While Biden furrows his brow in disapproval of Israel's "over the top" actions, the president nonetheless keeps sending guns and other weapons to the barbaric Netanyahu government.

This is not about hostages. It's about settlements. It's about land. It's about extending, as Netanyahu says openly, Israeli control "from the river to the sea." We in the United States created the template for this kind of political morality. We exported the cowboy myth to the Holy Land: the cowboy myth of expunging the Indigenous "savages" through a savagery that the Indigenous peo-

ple themselves could not replicate or perhaps even imagine. It's the cowboy myth brought to you by Lockheed Martin instead of Paramount Pictures.

The pain and trauma brought home to Kansas City is heartbreaking and enraging. We lack the tools to confront it, because we have politicians who make clear after every school shooting that dead kids are a price worth paying for "freedom." But it's not really about freedom—it's about fear. It's a fear of not being armed to the hilt. It's a fear that the violence their political forbearers glorified in building this country will be visited upon them by the "others." It makes them gravitate to the gun like Linus to his blanket. It also makes them gravitate them to Trump, to the celebration of Jan. 6, to venerating a disturbed murderer like Kyle Rittenhouse, and to fever dreams about race war, secession, and the shooting of migrants as they try to cross a border that we drew. Instead of reparations, today's cowboys want a reckoning. Instead of restorative justice, they want to restore ethno-nationalist supremacy. Instead of peace, we can't even celebrate as a community in public without living in fear. That's as true in Missouri as it is in the Middle East. And it's intolerable.

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## AMY GOODMAN



Prosecution of the Wikileaks founder is a test of whether journalists can obtain and disclose sensitive information in the public interest.

## Australia Demands US, UK Drop Charges Against Julian Assange

Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese said during Prime Minister's Questions on Feb. 15, "This thing cannot just go on and on and on, indefinitely." The Prime Minister was addressing an action he took a day earlier, on Valentine's Day. No, not his marriage proposal to his partner, Jodie Haydon (she said yes). He was explaining his support for a parliamentary motion that passed overwhelmingly, calling for the release of an Australian citizen, imprisoned Wik-

iLeaks founder Julian Assange.

Albanese's support builds on a growing demand from Australians across the political spectrum that the United Kingdom not extradite Assange to the United States, and for the US to drop its espionage and hacking charges against him. Assange, who has been imprisoned in London's notorious maximum-security Belmarsh Prison since 2019, has a court hearing in the UK.

Assange's counsel, Jennifer Robinson, texted us on Feb. 15,

"The appeal next week could be Julian's final appeal against US extradition. If permission to appeal is denied, there are no further appeals available to us in the UK." If extradited, Assange faces up to 175 years in prison in the United States. Said Prime Minister Albanese, "Enough is enough."

Prior to his imprisonment in Belmarsh, Julian Assange spent seven years cramped inside Ecuador's small London embassy, where he'd been granted political asylum.

Assange founded Wikileaks, a website that publishes leaked material while protecting the identity of the whistleblowers. Launched in 2006, it wasn't until 2010 that the US government forcefully and publicly targeted Wikileaks and Assange, after Wikileaks made several massive disclosures of leaked documents related to the US invasions and occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan.

On April 5, 2010, Julian Assange released a shocking video at the National Press Club in Washington, DC. The video, which Wikileaks titled "Collateral Murder," was shot in 2007 from a US military Apache helicopter flying over Baghdad, Iraq. The video shows in grainy black and white detail the

gunship's attack on a group of people on the ground. Twelve civilians, including two Reuters news employees, were mowed down by automatic fire from the helicopter. The voices of the crew were recorded, as they sought permission to "engage" with their targets, and as they laughed and cursed through the slaughter. It was a chilling video, documenting a war crime.

The video's release was followed by the publication on Wikileaks.org of hundreds of thousands of digital records from the US military, dubbed the Iraq War Logs and the Afghan War Diary. These documents provided further proof that the US was committing war crimes. Some elected officials in the US called for Assange to be assassinated. Then-Vice President Joe Biden called him a "high-tech terrorist."

Not long after, the US Justice Department convened a secret grand jury which issued a sealed indictment against Assange. Existence of that indictment itself was revealed on Wikileaks, in a subsequent leak, in 2012. US and UK persecution of Assange since then has been continuous and severe. In 2017, as revealed in 2021 by journalist Michael Isikoff and colleagues, the CIA hatched plans to either kidnap Assange from the Ecuadorian embassy or even to assassinate him.

Andrew Wilkie, an independent Member of the Australian Parliament from Tasmania, introduced the resolution in support of Assange, saying, "This House notes that on 20 and 21 February 2024, the High Court of Justice in the United Kingdom will hold a hearing into whether Walkley Award-winning journalist Julian Assange can appeal against his extradition to the United States of Amer-

ica ... both the Australian Government and Opposition have publicly stated that this matter has gone on for too long; and underlines the importance of the UK and USA bringing the matter to a close so that Mr Assange can return home to his family in Australia."

After the hearing, the court is expected to announce its decision in March.

The Australian government is not alone in calling for Assange's release. In November, 2022, five major newspapers that collaborated with Wikileaks—the *New York Times*, the *Guardian*, *Le Monde*, *El Pais* and *Der Spiegel*—released a joint letter calling for an end to the prosecution. "Obtaining and disclosing sensitive information when necessary in the public interest is a core part of the daily work of journalists. If that work is criminalized, our public discourse and our democracies are made significantly weaker," the letter read.

Assange's attorney Jennifer Robinson will be in the London court for the hearing. She told us, "We have been saying for years: this is a political case which requires a political solution. The unprecedented showing of political support in the Australian Parliament overnight shows that Julian's case is a priority for the Australian government, our parliament and the people. The US should listen to the concerns of its ally—and drop the case."

*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."*

## The Homeless Crisis Should Not Be Treated as Out of Sight, Out of Mind

By BONNIE JEAN FELDKAMP

At a lunch meeting recently, I heard someone say they liked living downtown but moved to the suburbs because "the homelessness is just too much." This same person went on to say that unhoused people should be relocated out of downtown. To where? He didn't say.

I bristled. Someone else's homelessness is not something being done to you. Having to bear witness to their struggle does not make you a victim of a mismanaged city environment.

I work downtown. One afternoon, I took a break to walk over to a gift shop to buy a

friend some chocolates. A woman stopped me and asked, "Will you buy me a sandwich?"

It was an easy yes. If I can afford fancy chocolates for my friend, I can afford \$10 for a sandwich. We walked together into the sandwich shop next door to the gift shop I was headed to, and I asked her what she'd like. She ordered, I paid and I went on my way. It cost me \$10 and five minutes and I'm glad she asked.

I was homeless for two years following high school. I know what it's like to walk through a city or neighborhood and ask strangers for help. I've gone into restaurants to ask for free food and though I was told no many times, I was also told yes enough times to help me make it through. It's overwhelming to need so much but have absolutely no idea where to go for that help. Where does someone begin? There is no social services welcome wagon to the streets. My day was not spent worrying about the city's image or how I might look to the fancy-clothed people out on the town for a night at the symphony,

dining or dancing. I had two things on my mind: Where was I going to sleep and what was I going to eat? That's it.

I clawed my way out of homelessness and I'm in a much better place in my life now, but I didn't do it alone. I had help every step of the way. I see the homelessness crisis in our country every day. I know we desperately need affordable housing options as well as addiction services. If homelessness is hard for you to look at, good. It should be. But that difficulty should prompt acting to help our fellow human beings – not expending energy to simply relocate the problem out of sight so people don't have to confront the emotions that bubble up when they see it.

Another concern I hear is that people are afraid that homeless people will hurt them. Sure, many of our unhoused population are not clean, and many have mental health issues. If a person doesn't struggle with their mental health before they become homeless, the experience alone will challenge anyone's sanity. Homelessness is trau-

matic. But people who are unhoused are not dangerous; they are human beings trying to survive their most difficult days. People experiencing homelessness are much more likely to be victims of violence than perpetrate violence.

My family shops at Costco where we buy snacks in bulk. We buy extra and keep a box of snacks and essentials such as hand warmers in our car to pass to the homeless people we see when we're out and about in our city. It's not much, but if it helps someone get through their day, it's the least we can do. We are all part of the same community, and we are all responsible for helping one another thrive. No one gets through this life without help.

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## Dispatches ...

Continued from page 5

the southern border while "weaponized law enforcement hunts for conservatives and people of faith." America, Trump said, would "sink to levels that were unimaginable" and face "obliteration."

Trump's speech did include an alternate vision to the one in which Christians are hunted for sport. Should America reelect Trump, according to Trump, it would be "richer and safer and stronger and prouder and more beautiful than ever before." Crime would be ended "in one day."

But missing from Trump's speech—and from the *New York Times*' reporting—was any concern about how Trump planned to do that.

In case no one has noticed, Joe Biden is president right now. Social Security is not collapsing. Medicare is doing fine. Not only does America have all the energy it needs, it's actually producing more energy—both renewable energy and oil and gas—than at any point in history. Illegal border crossings are drastically down. The stock market is near record highs. Suburbs are ... suburban.

Trump doesn't bother to explain why any of these things would be different in a second Biden term. And no one seems to be concerned about this.

**CHILDCARE CRISIS GRIPS US AS IRS CHIEF SAYS WEALTHY TAX DODGERS COST \$150 BILLION A YEAR.** A survey of early childhood educators and caregivers shows the post-pandemic collapse of federal funding is fueling a national crisis for young children and their families as centers suffer and out-of-pocket costs soar, Jon Queally reported at [CommonDreams.org](http://CommonDreams.org) (2/25).

The findings of the survey—titled "We Are NOT OK" and put out by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)—resulted from questions posed to over 10,000 professionals in the early childhood education sector.

Of those polled, more than 50% reported staffing shortages in the various kinds of centers they own or operate, including faith-based programs, family child care homes, Head Start facilities, and childcare centers. Those shortages, according to respondents, stem in part from low wages and burnout from staff who are overloaded but underpaid since federal support dried up.

Rising costs but diminishing support from public subsidies have forced operators to increase tuition which in turn has put pressure on families to withdraw—creating a vicious loop. "The loss of federal funds that helped the early childhood sector weather the pandemic has exacerbated long-standing challenges like low wages and high operating costs, leading to staff shortages, program closures, and rising family tuition rates," said Michelle Kang, NAEYC's CEO.

"Significant public investment in child care is needed urgently to ensure programs can retain qualified educators and remain open to serve children and families." Republicans in Congress, joined by too

many right-leaning Dems, have backpedaled on social spending in the wake of the pandemic. Multiple economic analyses and reams of data have shown that public investments in childhood education and poverty reduction had immediate and far-reaching positive impacts, but austerity-guided policies and refusals to raise federal revenues by taxing the rich or corporations have seen those gains erased.

Last fall, Sens. Patty Murray (D-WA) and Bernie Sanders (I-VT) put forward a bill to provide \$16 billion in annual childcare funding over five years to prevent what experts predicted would be a childcare disaster.

No Republican in the Senate backed the measure and the bill still languishes in Congress thanks to GOP control of the US House.

On Feb. 22, Commissioner of the Internal Revenue Service Danny Werfel told CNBC in an interview that the U.S. government loses approximately \$150 billion annually from tax evasion by the nation's wealthiest individuals.

Earlier this month, the IRS announced that it could collect approximately \$560 billion in additional tax revenue over the next decade so long as Republican lawmakers were thwarted in their efforts to claw back large portions of \$80 billion in funding the agency was provided as part of the 2022 Inflation Reduction Act.

As the advocacy group Americans for Tax Fairness (ATF) noted in response to Werfel's comments on, \$150 billion annually would amount to \$1.5 trillion over the coming decade.

That's enough, ATF added, "to expand

the Child Tax Credit for 10 years, lifting millions of kids permanently out of poverty. We can do great things when we crack down on wealthy tax cheats."

That \$150 billion figure is also nearly 10 times what it would cost to fund the Murray-Sanders childcare bill for one year.

### TRUMP WILL DESTROY HEALTH CARE, AND HIS VOTERS DON'T CARE.

Donald Trump has been on the warpath against the Affordable Care Act for a long time now, and the MAGA crowd of Republican officials is still 100% behind his call to replace the ACA. The thing is, a good amount of MAGA voters know that Trump doesn't have a plan to replace the ACA, and sizable shares of Republican voters want to keep its key protections. Joan McCarter noted at *Daily Kos* (2/21).

KFF's health survey in February found the ACA with an almost record-high approval of 59% among registered voters. That figure includes most Democrats (87%) and independents (55%) as well as 33% of Republicans, the highest level of GOP support since the law passed. And one of the law's key protections—ensuring coverage for people with preexisting conditions—enjoys majority support among Republicans, with 54% saying it is "very important" to them and 35% saying it is "somewhat important."

What those Republicans also know is that Trump doesn't have a plan for health care. "A majority of voters, including seven in ten Republican voters, say they do not think Presi-

*Continued on next page*

# Mike Johnson Needs a Cognitive Test

By DANA MILBANK

On Tuesday night, Feb. 14, after House Republicans lost a closely watched special congressional election in New York, longtime Republican pollster Frank Luntz warned them that the result was “a rejection of House Republican chaos” and a House majority that “gave voters nothing to vote for.”

“Tonight is the final wakeup call for the @HouseGOP,” he posted on X. “If they ignore or attempt to explain away why they lost, they will lose in November as well.”

On Wednesday morning, Feb. 15, House Republicans attempted to explain away the loss.

Walking out of the Republican caucus meeting in the Capitol basement, Rep. Max Miller (R-Ohio), explained that part of the district was in the “liberal cesspool” of New York City — while at the same time argued that the vanquished Republican “should have embraced Trump.”

Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-Ga.) attributed it to “a bunch of stupid decisions” by a “bad campaign.”

“Snow played a factor,” offered Rep. Byron Donalds (R-Fla.).

Rep. Marc Molinaro (R-N.Y.), wearing a tie with an ice-cream-cone pattern, sugarcoated it by saying “special elec-

tions suck.”

“Let’s not try to make this into some big narrative on November,” proposed endangered Rep. Mike Lawler (R-N.Y.).

The loss had absolutely nothing to do with the fact that House Republicans, after 14 months in the majority, had produced nothing but mayhem! To judge from House GOP leaders’ message at their Wednesday morning news conference, the only thing they had to do differently was to call President Biden senile more often.

House Republican Conference Chairwoman Elise Stefanik (N.Y.) led off with her view that the president’s “deteriorating mental state” left him “mentally unfit” to serve.

Majority Whip Tom Emmer (Minn.) concurred that Biden was “unfit” and had “zero business occupying the Oval Office.”

And Speaker Mike Johnson, leaning as the others did on the medical expertise of special counsel Robert Hur, a Republican lawyer, opined: “A man too incapable of being held accountable for mishandling classified information is certainly unfit for the Oval Office.”

To emphasize the point, Republicans invited to the microphone Rep. Ronny Jackson (R-Tex.), who as the White House physician was known as the “candyman” for his liberal dispensing of pills. “We need a cognitive test,” the doctor ordered.

But if there is anybody in public life whose actions scream out for the Montreal Cognitive Assessment, it is Johnson. A couple of weeks earlier, the Louisiana Republican got Israel and Iran mixed up in a “Meet the Press” appearance. Now he seems to be forgetting what he did just the week be-

fore.

On Feb. 12, Johnson issued a statement rejecting out of hand an emergency foreign aid package that was sailing through the Senate en route to passage by an overwhelming, bipartisan vote of 70-29. “House Republicans were crystal clear from the very beginning of discussions that any so-called national security supplemental legislation must recognize that national security begins at our own border,” he wrote.

Apparently, he just plum forgot that he was the one who, a week earlier, had killed a bipartisan border security bill — the toughest in a generation — that he had originally demanded but now called “dead on arrival.” He had earlier said that congressional action was indispensable but now claimed Biden already had “all the tools and the executive authority necessary” without legislation.

Mr. Speaker, please remember these words: Person. Man. Woman. Camera. TV.

Johnson’s growing debris field of legislative wreckage has already led to some dire consequences in the real world. As the *Washington Post’s* Nick Miroff first reported, the killing of the border-security bill, which would have sent \$6 billion in emergency funding to Immigration and Customs Enforcement, has forced ICE to prepare plans to release thousands of migrants from detention to cover a budget shortfall.

The abandonment of Ukraine will have even graver consequences.

*Dana Milbank is a political columnist for the Washington Post, where this appeared. Follow him on Twitter @Milbank. Email dana.milbank@washpost.com*

## Walk a Mile in the \$399 Trump Sneakers

By ALEXANDRA PETRI

They always say that to understand a man, you must walk a mile in his shoes. Well, here comes Donald Trump to a tennis-shoe trade show with 1,000 pairs of them. As soon as you saw that the former president was putting the “con” in Sneaker Con Philadelphia, you knew you couldn’t pass up the opportunity.

You pull the Trump sneakers out of their shoe box with the gold tissue paper and the enormous TRUMP on the top. They are just as garish up close — indeed, more so, like a pimple in high definition. They include oversize red areas and have been designed in a confusing way, like the current legislative map of North Carolina. They look as though a lesser Midas tripped over a pair of Yeezys.

You lace them on. You were expecting to immediately feel different in your Trump Sneakers. Maybe you would be able to hear birds speak, and the things the birds would say would be overwhelmingly positive about Donald Trump. Maybe you would

feel a bone spur shoot out of your foot.

But, so far, nothing. “My family members would do a better job running the Republican National Committee than those currently in charge,” you suddenly say. But that’s a standard thing to think. You crave a milkshake, but that’s also normal.

“Let’s do a felony,” you say to nobody in particular. When are the darn shoes going to kick in?

You ask for a picture of Mar-a-Lago, and when you see it, you feel tears start to your eyes. Nothing has ever seemed so beautiful, or worth so much money. You can’t even put it into dollars. It would be like trying to put a price on Jupiter or the Sun! You have forgotten that Tiffany Trump exists.

You look around at your associates. Before, if you had to describe them, you would have said “savory,” but now you would say the opposite. Was Rudy Giuliani there when you put the shoes on? He looks worse for wear and says you owe him millions of dollars.

Oddly, the number of people in the room seems to have been cut in half. Can that be right? You count again. No, it’s right. There are your friends, and there are also women, who are something different and less than people. “Shoes,” you say to them, pointing. Women love shoes!

Before they answer (have their voices

always been this irritating?) you feel someone tugging at your sleeve. He is extremely unsavory and has a big dossier full of ideas, a large section of which involves putting immigrants into camps and deploying troops to the states that disagree.

You glance at your bank accounts to see if people are sending you money. People should be sending you money, just for being you — and also because the government is trying to persecute you. (The government says laws apply to you just like they apply to other people, the worst form of persecution you can think of).

“Take them off!” a friend calls to you, seemingly from a thousand miles away. Before they even begin to work?

This is when your phone starts to ring. “You’re being indicted,” the caller says. Your net worth, which fluctuates depending on how you are feeling on a given day, suddenly plummets. Is it possible, you briefly wonder, that you are getting net worth and self-worth confused?

“It will be fine,” you hear yourself saying, “because I am worth untold millions — or I was, until you brought me down like this.”

The indictments start pouring in, thickly, one after the next. It must be the shoes! You can’t remember being indicted all the time before the shoes.

You try to take the shoes off, but they

won’t go. You struggle and push and yank at the laces, but they just pull tighter and tighter. You strain and strain and then — pop! The laces fly off.

These are not well-constructed, it turns out.

Your feet emerge. They are sweaty. You are panting. You look around for your associates. You look around for the man with the dossier. You check your phone for calls. Nothing.

“Am I being indicted?” you ask. “Lots of times, for a variety of offenses?”

“What?” your friend says. She looks concerned. “Are you okay?”

“No,” you say. “Absolutely not.”

But when you get home, you cannot bring yourself to throw the shoes away. You will just secrete them away somewhere — somewhere secure, somewhere prying eyes will never see them and the public will come to no harm.

The beautiful Mar-a-Lago, you find yourself thinking, in perhaps one of its beautiful bathrooms?

And so you realize that it is too late, and already you have walked a mile too far.

*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

dent Trump has a health care plan to replace the ACA (42%) or that they are not sure if he has a plan (43%),” KFF reports. And just 35% of self-identified MAGA Republican voters believe that he’s got a plan to replace the law.

Health care remains a potent issue in this election year. For instance, KFF finds that 80% of voters believe it’s “very important” for 2024 presidential candidates to address health care affordability. Even key Republicans in the Mississippi legislature see that, and they’re pushing for Medicaid expansion against the wishes of MAGA Gov. Tate Reeves, who’s all in with Trump.

Reeves’ comments come despite the fact that conservatives in Mississippi’s legislature wrote the legislation to expand Medicaid. And state House Speaker Jason White responded to Reeves tweet, telling MississippiToday, “My position’s been pretty clear on the fact that we were going to explore and look at Medicaid as it affects hard-working, low-income Mississippians.”

It will never hurt Democrats to lead on health care, especially after fighting so hard to gain and keep the ACA’s level of protection. Public opinion remains with them. As KFF reports, “Half of the public say they would like to see the next president and Congress expand what the ACA does. A smaller share wants to keep the law as it is (16%) and about a third want to either scale back what the law does (14%) or repeal it entirely (18%).”

**MAKE BIG MONEY PEDDLING COVID MISINFORMATION!** One of the great perplexities of our time is how do we get this country back on the rails if there’s so much money to be made peddling ignorance and dangerous nonsense, Charles P. Pierce notes at Esquire.com. (2/22). The *Washington Post* reports that COVID misinformation has become a viable growth industry:

*Children’s Health Defense, an anti-vaccine group founded by Robert F. Kennedy Jr., received \$23.5 million in contributions, grants and other revenue in 2022 alone — eight times what it collected the year before the pandemic began — allowing it to expand its state-based lobbying operations to cover half the country. Another influential anti-vaccine group, Informed Consent Action Network, nearly quadrupled its revenue during that time to about \$13.4 million in 2022, giving it the resources to finance lawsuits seeking to roll back vaccine requirements as Americans’ faith in vaccines drops. Two other groups, Front Line Covid-19 Critical Care Alliance and America’s Frontline Doctors, went from receiving \$1 million combined when they formed in 2020 to collecting more than \$21 million combined in 2022, according to the latest tax filings available for the groups ...*

*The four groups routinely buck scientific consensus. Children’s Health Defense and Informed Consent Action Network raise doubts about the safety of vaccines despite assurances from federal regulators. “Vaccines have never been safer than they are today,” the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said on its webpage outlining vaccine safety. Front Line Covid-*

*19 Critical Care Alliance and America’s Frontline Doctors promote anti-parasitic or anti-malarial drugs as treatments for covid, long after regulators and clinical trials found the medications to be ineffective or potentially harmful.*

*According to the Post, there are connections between these organizations and some of the more energetic Bible-banging enterprises, as well as the libertarian Right. And the people in charge are living the sweet life as well.*

*As the groups’ coffers grew, so did the salaries of some top executives. Children’s Health Defense paid Kennedy, then chairman and chief legal counsel and now an independent candidate for president, more than \$510,000 in 2022, double his 2019 salary, tax records show. Informed Consent Action Network paid Executive Director Del Bigtree \$284,000 in 2022, a 22% increase from 2019. Bigtree now works as communications director for Kennedy’s presidential campaign. Some of the individuals behind the family foundations or trusts that fund the four groups also contributed the legal maximum in personal donations to Kennedy’s presidential bid, according to OpenSecrets, which tracks political donations. Bigtree did not respond to requests for comment about his or Kennedy’s salary. Neither did the media team for Kennedy’s campaign.*

*They also have connections that reached into the Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021. It’s all one big universe of crazy, and now it pays very well.*

*The Post reported America’s Frontline Doctors paid the group’s founder, Simone Gold, \$581,000 in 2022, more than 17 times what she was paid by the group in 2020, according to tax filings. Gold’s lawyer, Jimenez, said she was re-*

*leased after serving 48 days of an original 60-day prison sentence in 2022 for trespassing in the U.S. Capitol during the Jan. 6, 2021, insurrection by supporters of Donald Trump.*

*“It’s a living, I guess. For these people, anyway,” Pierce concluded.*

**CATHOLIC LEADERS PROTEST TEXAS AG’S ABUSE OF POWER AS LAWSUIT TARGETS EL PASO MIGRANT MINISTRY.** Catholic leaders and local officials condemned an attempt by Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton to shut down a Catholic nonprofit serving migrants and asylum-seekers at the Southern border, calling it an abuse of power and a violation of religious liberty, the *National Catholic Reporter* noted (2/26).

*Paxton’s office accused Annunciation House in El Paso, Texas, of “facilitating illegal entry to the United States” and “human smuggling,” filing a lawsuit in an attempt to shut it down.*

*Paxton’s lawsuit sparked immediate outrage from Catholic Bishop Mark Seitz of El Paso, who vowed in a Feb. 22 statement supporting Annunciation House that the church would “vigorously defend the freedom of people of faith and goodwill to put deeply held religious convictions into practice.” He wrote, “We will not be intimidated in our work to serve Jesus Christ in our sisters and brothers fleeing danger and seeking to keep their families together.”*

*Ruben Garcia, director of Annunciation House, told reporters the nonprofit has been providing food, shelter and water to migrants and refugees who arrive at the border for nearly 50 years in consultation with the US Border Patrol. See more Dispatches at [www.populist.com](http://www.populist.com).*

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