



## Biden Gave \$90 Billion to Rural America. The Thank-You Went to Spam.

*President Biden and Democrats in Congress funneled \$90 billion into high-speed internet for rural areas, with the goal of bringing universal broadband to all Americans by 2030. But Republican lawmakers condemned these projects as "socialism" and resist their implementation.*

By DANA MILBANK

Not long after my wife and I bought a farm in the Virginia countryside, we decided to stream a movie with our kids. This was a perilous undertaking.

With internet download speeds of no more than 15 megabits per second in our home — compared with speeds of 100 or even 1,000 mbps in the city — the internet sputtered and stalled, even on a good day. And this was not a good day. Early in the film, the TV screen froze, then went blank. We checked our phones and laptops: no internet connection. I called the service provider (on my copper-wire landline) to report the outage, the latest of several, and got a recorded message saying the office was closed for the weekend. The internet didn't come back on for days this time, and then only intermittently.

Readers with teenagers will immediately recognize the gravity of this crisis. I tried to think of the outage as one of the charms of rural life, a forced opportunity to unplug, to talk, to read. More charming was the apologetic note days later from the service provider, which explained that the outage had been caused by "wildlife."

This unidentified animal — a chipmunk? a bear? — had apparently gnawed, clawed or pecked a cable at the "access point" across the valley, one of several signal repeaters the company hangs in local trees. As a result, water got into the electronics and fried them. Further complicating matters, "the tree that your specific access point is located in has been rotting for years, and it's reaching a point where our climbers are not really comfortable with it anymore unless it's a very calm day."

How did it come to be that my family's connection to the outside world hung literally by a thread, in this case an animal-mauled wire strung up a rotted tree? The provider attributed the problems to the "re-

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*Hello, Darlin', Patch me into the internet*



Illustration by DOLORES CULLEN

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*As Dems have withdrawn, rural Americans need a new movement to demand more than lip service from their Republican reps.*

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# The Progressive POPULIST

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## AN EDITORIAL

### Biden Goes Long and Scores!

Joe Biden showed up for his State of the Union address in the House of Representatives March 7, facing low expectations after years of Republicans depicting the elderly president as in decline.

But the President effectively jump-started his re-election campaign with a supposedly nonpolitical speech that kicked MAGA Republicans' asses for more than an hour, taking shots at his unnamed predecessor, whom he accused of "bowing down to a Russian leader" in encouraging Russian President Vladimir Putin to do "whatever the hell you want" in Europe. Biden called the former guy's remarks "outrageous, dangerous" and "unacceptable."

Biden talked about how "my predecessor" tried to "bury the truth" of the attempted insurrection on the US Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021. He noted that his predecessor failed to take care as the pandemic began to rage across the nation four years ago, how his predecessor had done little to oppose China and how his predecessor had not acted to curb gun violence.

Biden listed his accomplishments in the past three years, but he also teased Republicans who were heckling his speech.

Biden departed from his prepared text to urge the former president to join him in reviving the bipartisan border reform bill that Trump had ordered Republicans to abandon after the deal was reached in the Senate. Instead, Trump hopes to keep the alleged border "chaos" issue alive in the campaign.

Biden also talked about codifying reproductive freedom, taxing billionaires and corporations, cutting health care costs and banning assault weapons in the hands of civilians. Biden gave Democrats in the chamber and progressives watching on TV plenty to cheer about, and restored confidence that there's fight in the old man, after all.

Conservative commentators had to scramble for new talking points. Sean Hannity on Fox "News" said Biden was "frightening" and called him "Jacked-Up Joe." Erick Erickson complained, "This whole speech is about rallying Democrats. Not persuading independents." But Never Trumper and Bulwark publisher Sarah Longwell, quoting Erickson, observed, "The substance is about rallying Democrats. But the delivery is about showing hesitant swing voters he's still up for the job. And I think it's working."

Taking credit for the economic recovery since the COVID pandemic, Biden boasted that "consumer confidence is soaring" and inflation was dropping. But he also called on voters to "remember" the depths of 2020, before he took over, and compare that to where the nation is now, with more than two years of record low unemployment. "I inherited an economy that was on the brink," he said. "Now our economy is the envy of the world."

He took a swipe at lazy reporting by media that have focused on his age and occasional stumbles instead of his successes, as he noted the economy is "the greatest comeback story never told," but with the nation tuned in to the State of the Union speech, he was determined to tell it.

Biden also predicted that the "power of women" would show itself in the 2024 election, as it did in 2022 and 2023, when Democratic candidates won elections the polls said they'd lose. "We'll win again in 2024," he said, as women are responding to Republican threats to their reproductive rights, including birth control, after Trump's three appointees to the Supreme Court furnished the majority that overturned *Roe v. Wade*.

"My God, what freedoms will you take away next?" Biden

asked the Republicans.

Biden promised to "restore" the abortion rights *Roe v. Wade* had guaranteed if voters re-elect him, as well as a Congress that could pass such legislation.

The centrality of "reproductive freedom" was clear in the speech, as well as guests in the White House's box, who included a woman who had to leave Texas to get an abortion to save her own life and an Alabama woman whose fertility treatments were suspended when the Alabama Supreme Court shut down in vitro fertilization treatments in that state.

He sparred with Republicans in the chamber several times, departing from his prepared text to ad-lib responses to hecklers. And as he neared the end of his speech, the president joked about his age.

"I know I may not look like it, but I've been around a while," the 81-year-old commander in chief said, to chuckles in the audience. "And when you get to my age, certain things become clearer than ever. . . . The issue facing our nation isn't how old we are, it's how old are our ideas. Hate, anger, revenge, retribution are the oldest of ideas. But you can't lead America with ancient ideas that only take us back."

Republicans in the House Chamber were unmoved, but an instant poll CNN conducted that night showed 65% of viewers had a positive review of Biden's speech. Viewers shifted 17 points toward believing the country is headed in the right direction — from 45% before the speech to 62% afterward.

And that was before Alabama Sen. Katie Britt delivered a cringe-worthy performance as the Republican responder. The "highlight" was her story about a Mexican woman who had been a victim of sex trafficking by cartels, which the senator implied had happened in the US under President Biden's watch. "We wouldn't be okay with this happening in a Third World country. This is the United States of America, and it is past time, in my opinion, that we start acting like it," Britt said. "President Biden's border policies are a disgrace."

In fact, Britt's story was based on abuse suffered by Karla Jacinto Romero in Mexico between 2004 and 2008 — while George W. Bush happened to be president. Romero, who has become an activist for victims of sex trafficking in Latin America, told her story to Congress in 2015 and later to three senators, including Britt, on the border in Texas in 2023. But among Republicans, facts are fungible and are twisted to suit their prejudices.

So we're heading into a presidential campaign matching two old men. One of them has a long career in public service and has surrounded himself with capable aides, and his accomplishments during his first three years invite comparisons with Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. His SOTU speech showed Old Joe may be channeling "Give 'Em Hell" Harry Truman as he outpaces his detractors.

The opponent is a disgraced real estate developer, con man, rapist, fraudster and aspiring dictator whose running commentary on "Truth Social" framed Biden as "angry" and "shouting," which he said "is not helpful to bringing our Country back together!" The predecessor raged overnight with more than 75 posts in various stages of derangement. He has surrounded himself with dodgy aides, five of whom needed pardons for crimes before Trump was run out of office, and he has feverishly sought to delay his criminal trials until he can get back into the White House and fire special prosecutor Jack Smith. And now his team has brought the Republican National Committee into his racketeer influenced corrupt organization.

Thus, we propose a slogan for President Biden's re-election campaign: "81 years is better than 91 felony indictments." — JMC

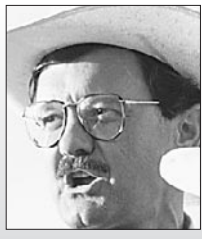
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Cover illustration by Dolores Cullen  
See our blog at [progressivepopulist.blogspot.com](http://progressivepopulist.blogspot.com)

## JIM HIGHTOWER



Corporate hucksters and techno-fantasists have come up with a scheme to prevent climate change without requiring change in human behavior.

### Is 'Icarus' the Solution to Climate Change?

Although the sun is an essential life force, we need to protect ourselves from its relentless glare.

Sunglasses? Check. Beach umbrella? Check. Tinted car windows? Check. A huge, multitrillion-dollar parasol floating in outer space to reduce global warming? Uh ... huh?

Ready or not, here come the corporate hucksters and techno-fantasists with a dazzling scheme to prevent climate change without requiring any actual change in human behavior. Amazing! It's easy, they exclaim: Simply put a massive SpaceBrella between us and El Sol, and — voila! — it will block enough of those bad ol' sunrays to lower the planet's temp enough for us to keep trucking.

This is indeed simple — as in "simpleton." It reminds me of the 1950s atomic bomb drills we had in elementary school, when we tykes were instructed to protect ourselves by crouching under our desks.

Today's SpaceBrella hawkers offer the same sort of approach: Since political and corporate powers aren't doing near enough to prevent cataclysmic climate disaster, they cheerfully say we can hide under their phantasmagoric space shield. That way, we won't have to bother Big Oil, Big Coal and other money powers with our demands to convert from an exploitative fossil-fuel economy to climate-friendly fuels and sustainable systems.

It's embarrassing that this clique of profiteers, politicians and so-called scientists should be so frivolous as to propose that humanity dodge reality and fritter away our future on such a gimmick. The real solution is right here on Earth, basically requiring that we STOP THE STUPIDITY!

These techno-money schemes are like Icarus, the mythological Greek character who created wings of wax and feathers so he could fly — but he flew too close to the sun, and his wings melted, so he plunged to his death in the sea.

### What if there was a natural substitute for plastic? There is!

In 1863, humorist Artemus Ward wrote a satire on hucksterism, making up a tale of Abe Lincoln being asked to endorse a piece of quackery about spiritualism. Not wanting to offend, the Lincoln character slyly offers non-committal praise: "Well for people who like that kind of thing, I think that is just about the kind of thing they'd like."

But sometimes a product really needs no hype — like this new one I've learned about that's damn-near magical! It's a non-polluting, affordable, natural, job-creating alternative to plastic stuff. No, seriously — come back here — this is real!

The only fib in my pitch is the word "new." Actually, this product is ancient. It's cork, used for thousands of years by Persians, Egyptians, Greeks and others to make shoes, fishing gear, etc. But now, it's a sustainable, regenerative material that all sorts of enterprising outfits are using for home construction, clothing, electric cars, spacecraft ... and more.

Maybe, like me, you've pulled many a wine cork without thinking where does this thing come from? Trees! In particular, the bark of evergreen, Mediterranean cork tress that live for some 200 years. But how sad to cut them down for wine stoppers!

No, no — the bark is carefully harvested by skilled workers; then it grows back over about nine years and can be harvested again and again, creating steady income for small farms. The tree is climate-friendly, drought-tolerant and fire-resistant, and the cork itself is renewable, reusable and biodegradable. Even cork dust is used to produce energy.

Before we let corporate profiteers turn Earth (and us) into a throwaway plastic dump, let's recognize that nature is the greatest technologist ever. So maybe cooperating with her can be more beneficial than constantly trying to overpower and trash her.

### How corporate lobbyists can engineer a train wreck

"Corporate crises consultants" (yes, there are such creatures) have patented a formula allowing their wrongdoing clients to champion reform while simultaneously killing it.

A classic case is now unfolding around last year's derailment of a 2-mile-long Norfolk Southern freight train in East Palestine, Ohio. The community's air, soil, water and people suffered a massive spill of toxic chemicals.

So, following the corporate crisis script, Step One was for the CEO to offer "thoughts and prayers" for victims. Step Two: Reject corporate blame but promise a "thorough investigation." Three: Magnanimously pledge to work with lawmakers to prevent future disasters. And Four: Quietly unleash your pack of lobbyists to gut any effective change in the law.

Norfolk honchos are now pushing hard on Point Four. CEO Alan Shaw recently reiterated the corporation's promise of reform, but — shhhh — he quietly orchestrated a \$17 million increase in the rail industry's congressional lobbying to kill or drastically weaken safety proposals that Norfolk had publicly embraced after the wreck. But he keeps talking reform, slyly assuring locals that Norfolk would be "continuing our engagement" with lawmakers.

"Engagement" is a euphemism for payments. Rail executives have poured beaucoup bucks into such compliant Congress critters as Rep. Troy Nehls, the Republican chair of a rail safety subcommittee. He recently wailed that Congress must not impose "more burdensome regulations and all this other stuff" on the poor multibillion-dollar giants. Also, Sen. John Thune, an industry-financed asset who formerly was a lobbyist for railroads (!), has tried to derail even modest safety proposals following last year's derailment, callously calling them a "stalking horse for onerous regulatory mandates and union giveaways."

May I just say the obvious? These people are disgusting excuses for human beings.

### What happened to the 'Miracle of Meatless Meat'?

"Step right up, folks, and bite into the wondrous future of meat!"

Cheap meat! Ethical meat! Animal meat you love — beef, chicken, pork, fish, etc.— all produced without animals! It's the miracle of "meatless meat" — a viscous mass derived from "fetal bovine serum" and then grown not on ranches but in huge vats in corporate factories. Science marches on!

Until it meets reality. Just three years ago, lab-meat hucksters had bedazzled high-tech investors and gullible media commentators into believing the food future was now. Bill Gates, Peter Thiel and other tech billionaires had jumped in with big bucks, as did Tyson Foods and global hedge funds. A *New York Times* editorialist exulted, "This isn't science fiction," demanding that President Joe Biden "supercharge this industry" by putting our government's "money and muscle" into "a moonshot for meatless meat."

So ... years later, where's the beef? Still on the hoof. The wondrous claim that food futurists could "grow" millions of tons of meat in only 15 days from a single drop of cells was just another pile of bovine excrement. They were raising money

rather than doing science, so their billions of dollars and industrial vats of "cell slurry" have only produced a few sad strands of cultured protein. That's not a hamburger ... much less a future.

Even if these monetized technocratic "geniuses" could eliminate animals from animal agriculture, that's not real change, for it leaves the monopolistic industrial structure and the profiteering anti-democratic ethic of today's food system in place. Moreover, agriculture is not a technology; it is a rich blend of culture, history, family and

### Solar Revolution On The Way

By FRANK LINGO

Can you imagine a solar device that produces electricity regardless of weather, time of day or geographical location? Neither can I, but researchers at Chalmers University of Technology in Sweden have created a system that can capture and store solar energy that can be sent anywhere in the world and then converted into electric power.

A website called thecooldown.com covered the story on Feb. 25. Solar power has made good strides in the last few years, becoming cheaper and more efficient, but until now solar had to have direct sunlight. This new process, called Molecular Solar Thermal (MOST) could be a revolutionary change for the world's power grids if it works as successfully on the macro scale as it has on the micro. It's encouraging that they made it work in Sweden, part of which is within the Arctic Circle, so it's a much more challenging locale for solar than, say, Arizona.

The benefits of MOST technology could range from powering cities, ocean ships, railroads, jets and electric cars — all with a carbon footprint of practically zero.

Speaking of electric cars, the right-wingers are attacking them with full force. The *New York Post*, the print equivalent of Fox News (both owned by Rupert Murdoch) ran a hit piece on March 5, headlined "Electric vehicles release more toxic emissions, are worse for the environment than gas-powered cars: study." Also, the *Kansas City Star* ran an opinion column on Jan. 25 with the header, "An inconvenient truth: Electric cars are real garbage."

These articles have a mountain of misinformation and a microdose of facts. A major distortion is that the emissions that the NY *Post* article referred to are from tires, which allegedly give off more micro-particulates when supporting more weight. There are zero carbon emissions from electric

community. Change will not come from the hubris and dull imaginations of plutocratic tech billionaires, but from long-term cultivation of these organic, grassroots sources of progressive policies.

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cars, since they burn no fossil fuel, while gas cars still emit tons of carbon dioxide, one of the causes of the climate crisis. (Carbon dioxide is a natural-occurring gas but it has grown far out of its natural proportion due to humans' burning of fossil fuels.)

So if the weight of the vehicle is the issue on tires shedding particulates, you'd think the right-wingers would disdain all the huge trucks and sport utility vehicles they've been buying the past few decades. But NOOO, they'd rather trash the EVs which tend to be much smaller than America's bigass buggies.

The *Star's* op-ed claimed *Consumer Reports* said no electric cars did well and plug-in hybrid electrics (PHEVs) did even worse on its tests. Hmmm, I wonder why *Consumer Reports* recommends several plug-in hybrids for their readers to buy? And sure, there have been some glitches on the all-electrics but usually nothing serious. Jake Fisher, director of *Consumer Reports* car testing, said, "It's a story of just working out the bugs and the kinks of new technology." And it's worth noting that the New York Auto Show awarded the electric Hyundai Ioniq 6 its World Car of the Year prize. Also, *Car and Driver* magazine, which has long touted internal combustion vehicles, gave the Ioniq a 5-star review.

An issue with some truth about electric cars is the battery source material. Rare earth minerals have problematic mining, including human abuse and ecological abuse. The good news is that electric battery technology is currently undergoing a monumental change and soon batteries will last longer on a charge and be made from more abundant and less toxic materials.

No matter how the anti-environmentalists spin it, there is no denying that burning fossil fuels is befouling our world. They can double-down and say "drill, baby, drill" but the future with a more sustainable way is beckoning if we'll heed its call.

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Where Did Trump Put His Integrity?

Your 3/1/24 issue was wonderful covering Donald Trump at his worst. Authors covering the likes of an asshole: James Cullen, illustrator Dolores Cullen (a wonderful DT image), Jake Johnson, Dick Polman, Thom Hartmann.

Prior to 2016, Trump had already made a fool of himself. He acquired four bankruptcies, two divorces (cheating on his wives, including his current third wife), cheating his contractors, causing Atlantic City casinos to collapse, leaving bonds to fail and economically hurt bond holders, cheat on his income tax (probably more).

He made a habit of disparaging Hillary Clinton, who served our country to our benefit. In reality, she won the 2016 presidential election by over two million votes (the Electoral College saddled us with a disaster).

Trump cast aspersions at veterans, as he was a draft dodger. He even abused John McCain, who was tortured for over three years by North Vietnamese. Even after his death, McCain's family detested Trump.

His four years as president went on an attack to destroy our democracy, we want not to be repeated. He is a Hitler enthusiast and seeks alliance with Putin, the Russian who has spent two years destroying his neighbor. Trump put three crooked Supreme Court justices in place to deny American women safe abortions. He is not an American, rather a Hitlerite, and a buddy with Putin. If elected, he has promised to eliminate NATO, not in our best interests.

Trump has ignored our Constitution, the 14th Amendment, which denies a "president" who fomented an insurrection that resulted in deaths (defending our country). It also forbids a "president" from taking foreign capital, which he did.

Trump supports guns, which are responsible for killing thousands of innocent victims.

Every day of his term, chaos, hiring Cabinet members and agency heads who were totally unqualified, many just resigned and testified against him. Some wrote books.

He ignored the Constitution when he stole the money from a Pentagon account to build a worthless Mexican wall.

Trump was impeached twice. Joe Biden was elected to clean up the mess.

Whatever happened to an American electorate that knew how to read?

Also, how come Trump's over 90 indicted felonies have not been adjudicated? (Something to do with the corrupt judges Trump appointed?)

Trump kept his "integrity" with more than 30,000 lies counted in his four lying years.

RICHARD B. HYMAN, *Stillwater, N.J.*

### Primary factors in mass shootings

Another mass shooting, "We're All in the Next Building" by Barry Friedman (2/1/24 *TPP*). Of course, our hearts go out to the victims and their friends and families, but I can't help but feel sorrow for the shooters as well. They must be filled with a black despair to produce such hopeless rage.

Reports of shootings tell us in some detail about the victims and survivors, be they doctors, shoppers, children, etc., but very little is revealed about the shooters, except where they got the guns. Sketchy reports I've seen include words, such as broken home; loner; struggled in school; health issues.

Surely much more is known about these tragic individuals than we are being told. Somewhere along the line they got lost, in our broken school system and bureaucratic mazes.

I believe these are the primary factors that need to be addressed and rectified. In a sense, the shooters are victims, too. The fact that there are so many of them is worrisome.

BETTY CROWDER, *Honeydew, Calif.*

### Real Americans?

How is it that a fair number of people on the right consider themselves "real Americans"? Why is it that, in their unhappy little minds, all of us can't be real Americans, only them? Why so selfish?

I feel that a large part of their rationale is based on their strong desire for a system of rank order, especially if that rank order has their own kind as Number One. A person is either Number One, or a Loser, so it is helpful to be able to simply assign themselves to the top spot.

Challenging their assumptions, however, are the uncomfortable existence of non-White, non-Anglo, non-straight, and even non-Christian persons in frightening proximity, pursuing their fair share of happiness. Rules now have to be changed, and boundaries reinforced, if Number One is to stay number one.

This state of mind is a poison, not just to our nation, but to our species. We are not, and cannot, be pure of breed. In fact, we would be weaker for it. And it is fundamentally un-American to regard any of us as better or worse than others, because equality under the law is our brand. That's what we supposedly live by and die for.

So whether we were born here or came here, we are all here; therefore, we are all real Americans. It is our ethics, not our borders, that truly define us.

JEFFREY HOBBS, *Springfield, Ill.*

### Don't Blame Joe for Genocide

People on the Left accuse Joe Biden of engaging in genocide because he has allowed Israel to continue to receive arms as they fight Hamas extremists, who broke the cease-fire when they crossed an unguarded border between Gaza and Israel Oct. 7 and killed more than 1,000 people, most of them civilians, including many who reportedly were sexually assaulted, and bringing more than 240 hostages back across the border to Gaza. Israel's Security Cabinet voted to act to bring about the "destruction of the military and governmental capabilities of Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad," and the Israel Electric Corporation, which supplies up to 80% of Gaza's electricity, cut off power to the area, Al Jazeera reported, and Israel cut off shipments of food and other supplies to Gaza.

As Hamas continued to fire rockets into Israel, Israel fired back with rockets and bombing runs reportedly intending to destroy Hamas hideouts, resulting in thousands of casualties in what the Left calls "genocide" but might otherwise be termed "collateral damage."

With due respect, if Israel wanted to commit genocide, they could have killed a lot more Palestinians than the 30,000 that reportedly have perished so far in the crowded Gaza Strip. And Biden advised Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu not to make the same mistakes the US did in overreacting after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks by Islamic terrorists in the US. Biden also has repeatedly supported

ceasefires to enable the return of hostages, but Hamas, which explicitly calls for the genocide of Jews, does not appear to be interested in returning hostages, which they are using as human shields in their tunnels under Palestinian buildings, and they are willing to sacrifice Palestinians to turn worldwide opinion against Israel. Netanyahu may be resisting ceasefires as well, but Biden at least has been trying to get the Israelis to ease off.

DAVID CLANCY, *Denver, Colo.*

### Has Our Democracy Become Poisoned and Corrupted?

Throughout the annals of recorded human history from its evolutionary state of enhanced cognition and reasoning, there has always been a segment of communal populations who were always a bit slower, gullible, easily conned, duped, B.S.'d and just outright defiers of facts and truth because it wasn't "to their benefit." The realms throughout history with the most lies, propaganda and conning to control human behaviors and thinking have "typically been religion and politics," and it continues on today with that ancient proposition and Romanesque strategy coupled with that Machiavellian proposition that "the end justifies the means."

Our nation's purported demise (AI) and our substantiated roughly 43,000 homicides (predominantly males) including the 630 mass killings (predominantly males) in their reversionary state of "more mammalian beingness" just here in our own nation; but replicated in growing numbers worldwide. We've become a nation awash with the lack of accountability, shame, guilt or humility. Misinformation via algorithms and technological facilitation interconnected with religious and political philosophical and mythological B.S. continues to "stupidify" in today's world he same "flat earthers" our colonial hawkers/medicine men, pet rock procurers, QAnon and now MAGA extremists, Pied Pipers of cult leaders, like Jim Jones' followers drank the "Kool Aid" and a thousand lives perished via cultisized and "stupidified" mindsets.

The question society must address in order to save democracy and civilization itself for its entire citizenry throughout one's life are the accounted actions and behaviors that are threatening to the aforementioned and deserved (all or some) to thwart or penalize detrimental acts/actions and threats to individual freedoms and democracy. If AI's creators' predicted demise are not expeditiously adhered to, its realities shall assuredly occur.

FRANK C. ROHRIG, *Milford, Conn.*

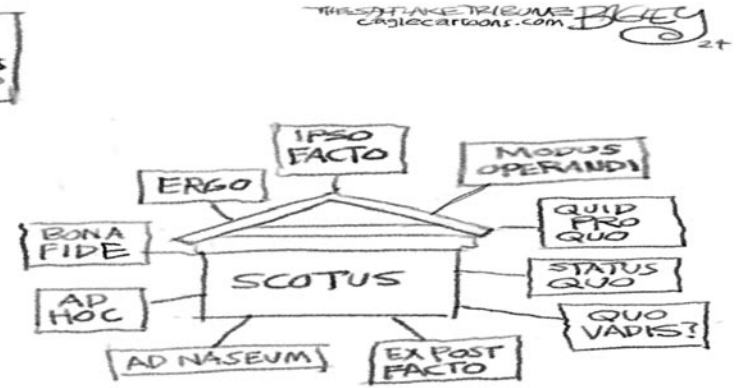
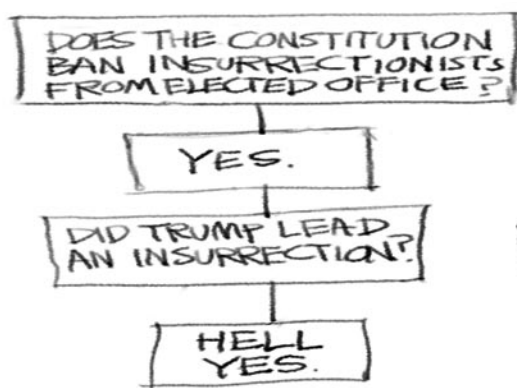
### People's Pets

Sam Uretsky's column, "Pets Keep Us Young," in the 3/1/24 edition of *The Progressive Populist*, was excellent! Bravo, Sam, bravo!

XAVIER SMALL, *Sweet Home, Ore.*

email us: [editor@populist.com](mailto:editor@populist.com)

or write PO Box 819, Manchaca, TX 78652



## The Southern Border: When Suffering Begets Suffering

By DON ROLLINS

"Too often, our debate on immigration in this country takes place in a vacuum, removed from the violence and poverty which too often have been exacerbated by America's own history of intervention and destabilization in Central America." — Rep. Jim McGovern (D-Mass.)

Forty-four years ago in March, a sniper silenced the conscience of El Salvador's brutal civil war. The assassin drove to San Salvador's Carmelite hospital chapel and paused to be sure the priest preparing communion was the designated target. Satisfied, the killer then stepped outside the vehicle,

took aim through the doors and fired a single round into the celebrant's chest. The perpetrator disappeared for the ages, the victim died within minutes.

The celebrant that bright Sunday, March 24, was Archbishop (now Saint) Oscar Romero, voice for peace in a war ravaged country where left-leaning Jesuit clerics were warned to flee or be executed. Long expecting El Salvador's rightwing regime to make good on that promise, tradition has it his final words were a plea for his killer's peace and that of his beloved country — a peace that would be another 12 years and 75,000 civilian lives in coming.

Tormented as the Archbishop's El Salvador of the 1970s and 80s would prove to be, his was one of three Central American states suffering brutal internal conflicts, each aggravated by massive foreign military and monetary interventions. Case in point, the US supplied the death-squad Salvadoran

government with \$6 billion in hardware, training and supplies — wartime aid born of then-President Reagan's preoccupation with imposing western-style governments no matter each nation's unique history, culture, politics and economics.

By 1996 (and with tepid diplomatic assistance from the US) concentrated civil wars within the region had narrowed to one. In December of that year, government officials and rebel leaders in Guatemala signed a peace accord ending 36 years of hell on Earth. War, as defined for two generations, was finally over.

But Central America is still far from the peaceful, equitable place of Archbishop Romero's prayers. With few exceptions, the region suffers rising rates of violence, corruption, organized drug trafficking, unemployment and wealth disparities enough to foment new civil uprisings: The rocket-launcher wars bankrolled in part by Reagan and his advisers may be over, but not

the consequences for those trapped in a generational, dead end existence not of their own making.

Hardly mentioned in the cacophony over our southern border, the suffering America helped inflict on an entire area of earth has returned to us in the form of sun-burned and thirsty families in search of something better than a dead end. Suffering has begat more suffering.

But America has never been much for owning up to its colossal lapses in morality. (See the uphill battles for reparations for slavery and return of tribal lands.) The current Republican obsession with southern border policy minus history and heart should be seen for what it ultimately is: One more instance of a collective capacity to ignore, even deny the worst in us.

Don Rollins is a retired Unitarian Universalist minister in Jackson, Ohio. Email [donaldrollins@gmail.com](mailto:donaldrollins@gmail.com).

'Show Me' Bad Legislative Ideas

Greetings from Missouri ... or, as I think of it, the state where destructive legislation is being tested before being introduced in YOUR state.



Strategies industry uses to pull wool over our eyes is instructive, because Missouri is where bad legislation is tested before coming to YOUR state.

agriculture has tremendous challenges to feed growing populations. These three arguments provide sound bites for lawmakers answering the criticisms.

We've had many bills introduced to amend legal definitions of "Waters of the State." These definitions were codified by the federal government in the 1972 Clean Water Act.

A hydrogeologist talking to a packed hearing room about the varied nature of waters said that the definition put out by

Missouri lawmakers would define waste lagoons, which my neighbors call "turd-ponds," the same as the definition for a fishing lake.

The bill sponsor concluded the hearing by saying that as a former school bus driver he took kids to visit many a stream and because he could be stuck on a bus for hours he always took note of where he could stop and pee.

Missouri lawmakers have also introduced bills to reduce liabilities to industry. Please note that decreasing industry's liabilities means increasing liabilities to citizens.

search and development.

Testifying against this bill was an attorney who reminded the committee that EPA, while it creates labels, does not have money for independent testing.

I love the testimonies around this bill so much that I want them on a billboard. One senator admitted "I don't remember stuff very well ..."

Fair enough. The God card provides #5 on the list of obfuscation in support of a bill.

There are a few more hoops to jump through before any of these bills move to a vote, but here's the thing: Let's say Bayer gets the label restrictions in Missouri, and then in your state, and your cousin's state and so forth, where does it stop?

The mind reels.

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.

DISPATCHES

'SOCIAL SECURITY IS ON THE BALLOT,' SAY ADVOCATES, AS TRUMP THREATENS CUTS.

When President Biden told Congress during his State of the Union speech (3/7), "If anyone here tries to cut Social Security or Medicare or raise the retirement age, I will stop you ... I'll protect and strengthen Social Security and make the wealthy pay their fair share,"

Just four days later, Trump said on CNBC's "Squawk Box," "there is a lot you can do in terms of entitlements—in terms of cutting—and in terms of also the theft and the bad management of entitlements,"

"Make no mistake: Social Security is on the ballot this November," said Nancy Altman, president of Social Security Works after Trump's remarks on "Squawk Box."

A spokesperson for Trump's campaign said his comments were about cutting "waste" in the programs, but the former president's tried to cut Social Security in all of the budget proposals he released during his term, Julia Conley noted at Common Dreams (3/11).

"It is consistent with Trump's past calls to privatize Social Security and raise the retirement age, as well as his slandering it as a 'Ponzi scheme,'" said Altman. "It is also consistent with the House Republican FY2025 budget, which proposes creating a commission designed to slash Social Security and Medicare behind closed doors."

The Republicans' budget proposal, which the House Budget Committee advanced shortly before the State of the Union address (3/7), includes a so-called "fiscal commission" that would be empowered to fast-track Social Security and Medicare cuts.

"The contrast is clear," said US Rep. Jerrold Nadler (D-NY). "Democrats want to protect and strengthen Social Security and Medicare. The other party wants to end the programs as we know them."

Before winning the 2016 election, Trump called to raise the retirement age to 70 and promised to rescind the payroll tax—the taxes working people pay to fund Social Security and Medicare.

Despite Republicans' frequent claims that Americans' earned benefit programs are "bankrupting the country," Social Security is currently fully solvent—able to pay out full benefits to all beneficiaries—through 2034, and even if Congress took no action to expand the program, would be able to cover 80% of benefits after 2034.

On social media, Biden responded to Trump's plan for the programs with four words: "Not on my watch."

Altman noted that Biden's proposed budget included "a very different vision for Social Security's future," with the president releasing a plan (3/11) "for protecting and expanding Social Security—and paying for it by requiring millionaires and billionaires to contribute their fair share."

Under a second Biden term, the White House said, there would be no benefit cuts to Social Security, and wealthy Amer-

icans—who currently do not pay Social Security taxes on income greater than \$168,000 or capital gains—would be required to pay "their fair share" to ensure retirees can continue to benefit from the program.

The Biden budget would also extend the Medicare Hospital Insurance Trust Fund permanently "by modestly increasing the Medicare tax rate on incomes above \$400,000, closing loopholes in existing Medicare taxes, and directing revenue from the Net Investment Income Tax into the HI Trust Fund as was originally intended."

"Current law lets certain wealthy business owners avoid Medicare taxes on some of the profits they get from passthrough businesses," said the White House. "The budget closes this loophole and raises Medicare tax rates on earned and unearned income from 3.8% to 5% for those with incomes over \$400,000."

Advocacy group Americans for Tax Fairness pointed out that with Trump's plan to extend his 2017 tax cuts—which disproportionately benefited corporations and the wealthy and made billionaires \$2.2 trillion richer—\$3.5 trillion would be added to federal government's deficit.

"If anyone tries to cut Social Security or Medicare or raise the retirement age, I will stop them," said Biden after the release of his budget proposal. "Working people built this country, and pay more into Social Security than millionaires and billionaires do. It's not fair."

TRUMP TEAM TAKES OVER RNC, SLASHES STAFF. Donald Trump's newly installed leadership team at the Republican National Committee began the process of pushing out dozens of officials, Alex Isenstadt reported at Politico (3/11).

More than 60 RNC staffers across the political, commu-

nications and data departments are expected to be let go. They include five members of the senior staff, and some vendor contracts are expected to be cut.

The overhaul is aimed at cutting, what one of the people described as "bureaucracy" at the RNC. But the move also underscores the swiftness with which Trump's operation is moving to take over the Republican Party's operations after the former president all but clinched the party's presidential nomination on Super Tuesday (3/5).

On March 8, former North Carolina GOP Chair Michael Whatley was elected the RNC's new chair, and Trump daughter-in-law Lara Trump was elected as co-chair.

The RNC had about \$8 million at the end of December, about one-third as much as the Democratic National Committee.

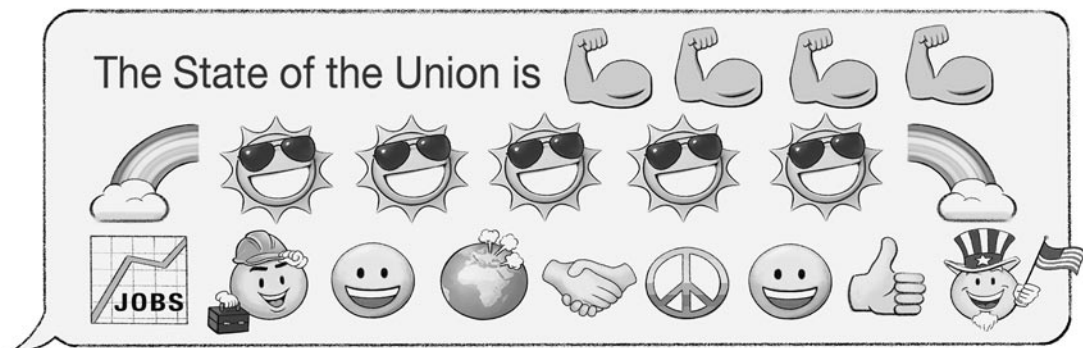
Under the new structure, the Trump campaign is looking to merge its operations with the RNC, Isenstadt reported. Key departments, such as communications, data and fundraising, will effectively be one and the same.

Some Republican state party leaders were watching in horror as Trump prepared to take over of the RNC as an additional funding vehicle for Trump's staggering legal bills, Markos "Kos" Moulitsas noted at Daily Kos (2/23).

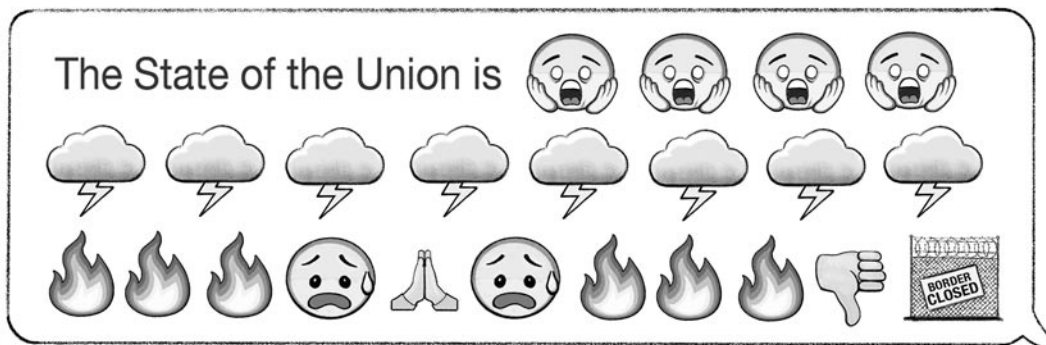
"He's trying to hijack the RNC before he's even the nominee. And it's because he's broke," Katon Dawson, former chair of the South Carolina Republican Party, told NOTUS.org. "He has already spent millions worth of PAC money and he's running out. So he needs another place to go raise money to pay his personal legal bills."

Lara Trump didn't help when she announced in Febru-

Continued on page 22



Republican Response



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## FROM HARROP



The demise of moderate Republicans may help Democrats flip 5 New York City suburban congressional districts the GOP took in 2022

# NY Suburbs Could Return Democrats to Power

In bygone days, Democrats in New York's suburbs could happily vote for Republicans they deemed good guys. Moderate Republicans didn't seem all that different from moderate Democrats, and the two parties worked together in Washington.

Those days are obviously gone. The recent election of Democrat Tom Suozzi to re-

place George Santos in Long Island's 3rd district suggests that Democrats and independents in these swing districts now recognize that they must choose sides. And that may end up reversing more of the Republicans' recent advances in these near-in suburbs.

Those gains reflected the social chaos unleashed by COVID and shrieking headlines about crime in the big city. As a result, Republicans in 2022 took five of the six congressional House districts on Long Island and in the lower Hudson Valley. Four had gone for Joe Biden two years earlier.

The New York suburbs, of all places, helped the GOP obtain its thin House majority.

The problem for these voters, however, is that the House is not run by their kind of nice-guy Republicans but the right-wing Speaker Mike Johnson, Donald Trump and a coterie of fringe extremists with near zero interest in these suburbanites' concerns. On the contrary, they're hostile to reproductive rights, national security and health care.

The Republicans' successful pitch to these suburbs centered on crime, immigration and taxes. Crime in New York, never as rampant as the scary reports suggested, is now down. New York was still one of the safest cities in America, but with COVID

keeping a lot of suburbanites working at home, many had little in the way of a reality check. In any case, the city is back to gridlock.

On immigration, the Republican House just smothered a bipartisan Senate deal that would have actually curbed the chaos at the border. Trump ordered that the problem not be solved, so he could campaign on it.

As for tax relief, the impotence of the suburban Republicans recently went on full display in their failure to restore any of the deduction for state and local taxes (SALT). In 2017, then-President Trump and a Republican Congress slashed the deduction to \$10,000.

One intention was to shake down taxpayers in blue states, where incomes, local levies and the cost of living are high. They were thus forced to pay taxes on taxes they'd already paid.

Limiting the deduction to \$10,000 not only affected rich people. A cop married to a nurse on Long Island could easily have a combined income of \$200,000 — and state, local and property tax bills well north of \$30,000.

Mike Lawler, a Republican representing the lower Hudson Valley, had campaigned on the promise to address this thorn in his constituents' side. He called for dou-

bling the cap on SALT deductions to \$20,000 and only for married couples. But Republican House leaders swatted down even that modest proposal.

Other changes since 2022 may blow wind in Democrats' sails. Democrats are unlikely to again forget to campaign, which contributed to the loss of at least two seats. One of the overly confident Democrats neglected to do any background check on his opponent, the wildly fraudulent George Santos.

Come November, Trump is sure to be on the ballot, and you don't have to be a Democrat in these affluent suburbs to detest him. Recent redistricting in New York State also slightly enhances Democrats' prospects. Finally, with inflation down and stock prices up, moods are improving across middle class America. Then there's the abortion issue.

And so exactly what are Lawler and other suburban Republicans doing for their constituents other than helping keep in power the very people who hold their interests in contempt? Little that we can identify.

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

# Iowa Has Robins in February and We Can Barely Water the Hogs

By ART CULLEN

**Editor's Note:** TV reporter Katie Couric visited Storm Lake a 2018 for a *National Geographic* special on immigration that featured Storm Lake, Iowa. Couric asked *Storm Lake Times Pilot* Editor Art Cullen about what has changed since she was here. Read his response below:

**Couric wrote:** I recently read an op-ed Art Cullen, editor of the *Storm Lake Times*, had written for the *Washington Post* about January's Iowa Caucuses and wondered how Storm Lake had changed and how the immigration debate was impacting his community. So I emailed him and asked for an update. Here's what the ever-opinionated Art emailed me back.

Dear Katie,

Thanks for your note — it's been a while, nearly six years since you visited Storm Lake, Iowa, "The City Beautiful." You asked how things have changed since then. It's not easy to answer. The biggest change is the weather.

We're going into the fifth year of a severe drought in Northwest Iowa, the Buckle of the Corn Belt. The Great Plains to our immediate west have been dry going on 30 years, and it could run another 50 years or so, leading climate scientists say. The great cattle herds are liquidating.

Last summer, just as 40,000 bicyclists were rolling into Storm Lake on a statewide ride, our wells nearly shut down. We're sucking them dry from livestock production and processing — we slaughter 15,000 hogs a day here — and ethanol hooped from corn. We were perilously close to shuttering the Tyson pork and turkey plants. Perish the thought.

The last time Tyson shut down was during the pan-

demic. At the peak in 2020, we were the hottest COVID spot in the US, trading places with other meatpacking towns like Waterloo and Sioux City. Waterloo and Storm Lake shut down for a matter of days, and meat prices shot up 50% in no time. It has taken years to recover.

The immigrants working the kill floors drew you here, to hear their stories. They are quiet, laying low and terrified of what shoe drops next. Donald Trump said they are "poisoning our blood." People in Waterloo cheered him on. He said he wants to deport them. Iowa legislators are targeting immigrant students. People who never met a Mexican think they are invading. In July, Ron DeSantis attended a pork feed hosted by Rep. Randy Feenstra, R-Hull, at which the good Calvinists all bashed the very immigrants whom the attendees employ in their dairy barns, and who actually cut the pork chop that DeSantis pretended to grill. Who cuts your meat, pretty boy?

Some things don't change — the political hypocrisy that leads to self-defeat among them.

Yet everyone knows we need Latinos and Asians and Africans to do the jobs that Ron DeSantis would not have his daughters perform. We can't get enough help. As a result, wages have increased by a third since your visit, up to \$21.50 per hour at Tyson. That's change for the better. The company also provides a free health clinic to employees following the COVID upheaval. Through the worst of it, they worked. Without all the right protection. Without vaccines. Some died — we still don't know how many. Anything to keep the cheap pork and deli turkey moving to your grocery store.

It was awful. We isolated among ourselves while a man with an orange face and orange hair glowed on the TV set from the veranda of the White House to prove COVID could not fell him. Each in our own bubble, you could feel the community fabric giving way. We fed on our ideology and lost ourselves to misplaced fear and misinformation. Friendships faded. Trump lost but insisted he won, they charged the Capitol, Joe Biden took over, and we thought that maybe things actually would change. That we would restitch the social compact: You work hard and you can live

the American Dream.

That pretty much fell apart. Congress passed a huge infrastructure bill, and then a climate action bill disguised as the Inflation Reduction Act. Together, they were supposed to get America on track again. It didn't really work out that way, not with those pesky food prices weighing down the shopping cart precisely because of climate inaction. Biden said he would treat immigrants with dignity. That didn't work out, either.

Not a drop to drink for Storm Lake from that bucket of money. We need nearly \$100 million to keep the water system going. FEMA denied us twice, and the USDA once. The burden will be borne by the immigrants who will get to swallow a disproportionate share of the cost. Call it Bidenomics. Smells like Reaganomics. Acts like Trumpnomics. Hope and change, not so much.

We will get by. We will be forced to come to our senses and get a grip on reality. Democracy as we understand it has endured. Nature will call the shots and we will react. I've learned over the past six years that we are left largely to our own devices. The government is not here to help, which is a shame. The latest National Climate Assessment warns that we can't go on like this for another six years.

We have robins in February and rain on Christmas. And we can barely water the hogs anymore. Buena Vista County is shipping two tons of soil per year down the Raccoon River — 12 tons per acre since you were here. Two years ago Iowa's Raccoon River landed on American Rivers' list of the most endangered because of agricultural pollution. Corn yields are projected to decline by 30% over the next two decades in Iowa, which suggests at least 30% higher egg prices. The soil that gives us life with water was our birthright, now laid at the floor of the Gulf of Mexico.

We need change but it's not happening fast enough. All we Iowans do is watch the weather. You can't change it, right? So let's wall off the immigrants who can't grow corn in Guatemala because of heat and drought for fear they may invade Storm Lake. That's Iowa stubborn, sister. It's in our blood.

Yours,  
Art Cullen

# The Growing Disconnect Between Hard Numbers and Soft Policy

By ALAN GUEBERT

Like much of the news anymore, the initial numbers from the 2022 Census of Agriculture were accurately reported, quickly downplayed — or even worse, ignored — by most Big Ag groups, and then just pushed aside by the rush of the next day's news.

That's a mistake because the numbers, released Feb. 13 by the US Department of Agriculture's (USDA) National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS), show the rapid maturity and coming old age of US agriculture.

But these numbers, like old soldiers, won't just fade away. They're real and consequential.

For example, according to NASS, the number of US farms plunged by 142,000, or 7%, in the five years between 2017 and 2022. It's the largest drop in farm numbers over the last four ag census periods and the lowest total number of US farms since

1850 when the US was a nation of just 31 states and four territories.

Equally shocking is the confounding fact that this slide happened at the same time Congress and USDA were shoveling billions into farm programs to support farmers and ranchers.

According to a Feb. 20 report titled "Unsustainable: the State of the Farm Safety Net," published by the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, the federal government "distributed" \$142 billion "through farm safety net programs" from 2017 to 2022.

The biggest bite over those five years was "ad hoc spending," money not budgeted in any Farm Bill; it totaled \$67 billion. Next came federal crop insurance, the principal revenue-supporting device in US ag policy; it cost \$46 billion. And pulling into third was "commodity programs" at \$29 billion.

How do you send \$142 billion in taxpayer dollars to farmers in five years and still end up with the fewest number of American farms in 172 years? The Census offers clues.

According to it, the only farm size category that increased in numbers was farms "operating 5,000 acres" or more. These big-

gies controlled 42% of all farmland in 2022. Additionally, 6% of farms with \$1 million-plus in annual sales owned 32% of US farmland and generated 75% of all ag sales nationwide.

That ever-bigger bigness was matched by an ever-graying grayness. According to the Census, the average age of US farmers jumped from 57.5 in 2017 to 58.1 in 2022. More to the point, in 2017 one out of four US farmers were 65 years old or older; in 2022, it was one out of three, or an increase of 12% in the ratio.

In the meantime, the number of farmers aged 35 to 65 dropped 9%.

In fairness, the number of farmers with less than 10 years' experience—a group USDA calls "beginning farmers"—grew 11%, a pleasant surprise except for the rude fact that these "beginners" were an average 47.1 years old.

After reviewing the hard numbers, Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack suggested that they prove the Biden Administration is on the right track in its call for a "different model" of agriculture that lends a big hand to small- and medium-sized farmers while continuing to support big farmers, too.

But there's nothing different in that

"different model." In fact, the proposed—and still not done—2023 Farm Bill contains no plan to cap program payments to the biggest of the bigs and offers no favoritism to the "farms in the middle," the smaller-sized farms that survive mostly through substantial off-farm income.

The facts are that our relentless drive to wring profit out of our nation's soil, water, and rural communities has built a highly productive, very fragile, top-down food structure that leans heavily on federal subsidies, environmental degradation, and the slow liquidation of rural America.

That system isn't sustainable—and neither are we—without change.

*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*

# Over Congressional Republicans, Putin Casts His Dark Shadow

By JOE CONASON

If you believed that the Republicans in Congress couldn't sink any lower, recent events have proved you sadly mistaken. House Speaker Mike Johnson, in his latest displays of subservience to Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin, has made his most wretched predecessors seem like statesmen and patriots. For the first time ever in America, a branch of the government, the House of Representatives, appears to be decisively influenced, if not controlled by a hostile foreign power.

These are not accusations to be made lightly, but the evidence of Republican complicity in purveying Kremlin espionage against the United States is now overwhelming.

On Feb. 23, a federal judge in California ordered marshals to seize Alexander Smirnov at his lawyers' office only days after he had been released on bail by a different judge, with the clear implication that he might be preparing to flee the country. Smirnov is the much touted prime witness in the House Republican impeachment campaign against Joe Biden, accusing the president of having taken \$5 million in bribes from Ukrainian oligarchs. It's all a lie manufactured by Russian intelligence.

Smirnov's initial arrest was ordered by special counsel David Weiss, the Trump-appointed Republican investigating Hunter Biden, who has indicted the star witness for fabricating his entire story and lying to the FBI. In subsequent court filings, the prosecutor charged that the lies transmitted by Smirnov originated with Russian spies.

In other words, the No. 1 Republican witness in the public and repeated smearing of President Biden — on the floor of Congress and in right-wing media — was a knowing conduit for Kremlin disinformation. The intent is nothing less than to help elect Trump.

What makes this scandal so much worse — and so embarrassing to Johnson, if he were capable of shame — is that Smirnov's deception emanated from the much broader Russian penetration of American politics that began ... when?

Perhaps with that Trump Tower meeting in 2015, when Donald Trump Jr. enthusiastically welcomed the idea of a Russian dossier on Hillary Clinton from a Russian intelligence operative. And then it continued with the Kremlin's cyber assault against Clinton in 2016, and Trump campaign manager Paul Manafort's secret cooperation with a Russian spy named Konstantin Kilimnik. After Trump became president, he withheld

weapons from Ukraine while demanding a phony probe of Biden. Trump's blackmail attempt triggered his first impeachment.

Along the way, a gang of Trump associates led by Rudy Giuliani worked with various Putin stooges in Ukraine and elsewhere to invent mendacious nonsense about the Bidens. Giuliani worked closely with Putin crony Andriy Derkach and other dubious characters, who were later indicted for attempting to interfere in the 2020 election.

For years, it has been blindingly obvious that the "investigation" of Joe Biden and Ukraine emanated not from any legitimate source but directly from this country's enemies. And yet while those accusers were repeatedly exposed and discredited, congressional Republicans insisted on pursuing the bogus case invented in Moscow.

But Johnson's undermining of American security has gone well beyond the assistance he and Republicans have provided to the Kremlin in subverting American democracy. Now refusing to fund U.S. military assistance to Ukraine in its courageous struggle against Russian invaders, they have helped Putin gain a critical victory in the battle of Avdiivka and jeopardized the Western alliance that is fundamental to European and American security. Johnson has admitted he's taking his orders from Trump, who wor-

ships Putin. The cowardice of Johnson and the Republicans has become crucial to Putin and his savage war.

Johnson has his own little Russian secrets. The speaker must still explain the laundered campaign funds from Konstantin Nikolaev, a Russian oligarch and confederate of confessed convicted Kremlin spy agent Maria Butina. She served a prison sentence here after the exposure of her successful scheme to penetrate the National Rifle Association and other right-wing groups, including some of the "Christian nationalist" outfits that Johnson promotes.

What attracts extremists like the House speaker — and his puppet master Trump — to the Russian dictator who looms above them is an authoritarian political orientation that smells of fascism. Putin is a threat from without, and they are a threat from within.

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*(Gene Lyons is on vacation.)*

## Backlash: Women's History Month in a Post-Roe World

*Hell hath no fury like a woman deprived of her basic rights.*

By MARTHA BURK

It's 2024, but it feels like we're back in 1991 this Women's History Month.

Back then, President George H.W. Bush was following in the footsteps of his predecessor Ronald Reagan by continuing to appoint conservative judges to the federal bench, and *Roe v. Wade* was expected to fall.

Radical anti-abortion activism had gained prominence and strength. Popular media was awash with stories pushing the myth that women were dissatisfied and unhappy — and feminist ideals of women's empowerment were to blame.

Then a blockbuster book hit the streets: "Backlash" by Susan Faludi.

It came out just as the legal notion of "fetal personhood" was taking shape. Among other things, the book captured the horror of giving a fetus, even a hypothetical potential fetus, precedence over an actual living person. "Backlash" posited that any so-called women's unhappiness was not the fault of feminism, but the fact that the struggle for equality was far from finished.

Faludi anticipated by over 20 years the deadly choices that women and their doctors are now being forced to make in a post-*Roe* world.

She was distressed at the prospect of backward momentum — of a world that treated women as vessels for childbearing above all. "What unites women is the blatant, ugly evidence of oppression," she said at the time, "that will come with the inevitable demise of *Roe vs. Wade*."

Faludi was right. There's a new backlash, all right — but this time it's not against women's progress, but against the loss of women's rights and their own personhood. Since *Roe* was overturned, at least three states have blocked new abortion bans, and 16 more have strengthened existing pro-statutes with new protections.

Safeguarding women's autonomy was also front and center in last November's

midterm elections.

Ohio was the epicenter. Advocates put forth a bold ballot question on whether to amend the state constitution affirming the right of individuals to make their own reproductive health decisions — including abortion. The outcome? No contest. Voters opted to enshrine abortion rights by a margin of 57 to 43 percent.

Abortion was also on the ballot indirectly in Virginia. Anti-choice governor Glen Youngkin was pushing voters to flip the state Senate to Republicans while keeping the Republican majority in the House of Delegates.

That would have allowed the governor and his lackeys in the legislature to pass a 15-week abortion ban. That grand plan went down in flames — pro-choicers took full control of both houses of the General Assembly after two years of divided power.

The latest trend in the reproduction wars comes from Alabama. Another attack on women's rights to self determination — but this time from the other end of the argument.

In a first-of-its-kind ruling, Alabama's Supreme Court ruled that frozen embryos are children and anyone who destroys them can be held liable for wrongful death. At

several facilities in the state, the decision has virtually stopped in-vitro fertilization in its tracks for women who are trying to conceive.

It's reminiscent of struggles of the past. It took nearly a century and a half after independence for women to win the constitutional right to vote in 1919. Winning abortion rights took even longer — until 1973, when *Roe* guaranteed it under the 14th Amendment. But that ruling lasted only 49 years. One step forward, two steps back.

Women — both those who want abortion to be legal and those who want to become pregnant through in-vitro fertilization — are furious.

The upshot? Women are the majority of the population, the majority of registered voters, and the majority of those who actually show up at the polls. It's a good bet they'll remember in November.

Hell hath no fury like a woman deprived of her basic rights.

*Martha Burk (@MarthaBurk) is the director of the Corporate Accountability Project for the National Council of Women's Organizations (NCWO). This op-ed was distributed by OtherWords.org.*

## Tales of the Embryonic Highway Patrol

By JOHN YOUNG

Based on any reasonable interpretation of Texas law, the highway cop who stopped Brandy Bottone on a Dallas thoroughfare asked the wrong question.

Instead of, "License, insurance and vehicle registration," he should have asked, "Do you have an embryo inside you? And what do you plan to do with it?"

As the news story reported, Bottone was carrying one of those inside her — yes, pregnant, which makes it Texas' business.

The story was that the officer ticketed Bottone for using a high-occupancy lane without a passenger. She fought it on a novel interpretation of post-*Roe* law.

She said she was in the rightful lane because she was pregnant.

Texas Republican lawmakers and Gov. Greg Abbott have inserted themselves into women's lives with the whole fetus-as-person matter. That meant, Bottone said, that she had multiple passengers in her car. The ticket was dismissed.

Welcome to the made-to-order mess that is state intrusion into the most delicate and important matter imaginable.

A handful of Texas counties have passed ordinances making it illegal for women seeking abortions to come through their confines in route to get to other states for the procedure.

Question: Will the Embryonic Highway Patrol insist

that female motorists pee on a stick?

What about a six-pack of embryos on ice in the passenger seat?

The GOP now is the BGP — Big Government Party — when it comes to the most important decision anyone will make: becoming a parent.

Alabama's Supreme Court just made government bigger and more intrusive by pronouncing frozen embryos people.

This jeopardizes the practice of in vitro fertilization — which, contrary to Sen. Tommy Tuberville's understanding, is not about making gridirons greener.

Many Republicans since have come out in favor of IVF, but many on the religious right see a new opportunity for states to further interfere.

An influential few would be happy to return the nation to the days before *Griswold v. Connecticut*, where the Supreme Court told states they could not ban birth control.

The fact is that we are in a moment where a minority of a minority is calling the shots.

This is not limited to abortion rights, supported by the vast majority of Americans.

It applies to gun safety and gun proliferation. It applies to climate change and environmental protection. It applies to common-sense public health measures like vaccines.

But let's get back to embryos.

Until this untenable point, the most egregious example of minority rule was George W. Bush's prohibition on embryonic stem cell research.

What a dubious debate that was, considering that many embryos in question were destined for the waste bin.

A lot of important research was slowed by those who insisted we itemize how many angels could be hosted on the head of a pin.

Most Americans wanted to save lives instead.

The fate of IVF is analogous to how the religious right has contaminated public policy about reproductive health.

On the news, I heard Sen. Lindsey Graham say that no way, no how, would Republicans prohibit birth control. He didn't ask Justice Clarence Thomas about that.

In fact, "pro-life" extremists are staunchly opposed to the birth control pill. They label it an abortifacient, misrepresenting what it does, just as they do by falsely linking abortion to breast cancer.

It's part of the Right-to-Lie (no typo there) strategy. Like MAGA, this political force isn't interested in truth. It is interested in having its way.

Speaking of birth control: By providing contraception to so many, particularly those of low incomes, Planned Parenthood has prevented more abortions than any single player on the globe. Yet the Republican Party carries out a blood vendetta.

Planned Parenthood also provides fertility counseling — yes, Sen. Tuberville, "more babies" — including referral for IVF.

Long ago I wrote that whenever a politician — or next-door neighbor, if you dare — claims to be "pro-life," we should respond, "Be specific."

Abortion banned even in cases of rape or incest? What to do about frozen embryos?

If you oppose abortion, do you support birth control? Comprehensive sex education?

If not, your cause is penalizing sex and monitoring the movement of zygotes.

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## Cover Story..

Continued from page one

mote area” and the “aging/poor infrastructure.” It went on: “The reason it hasn’t been replaced is partly because, until lately, it worked, and because of the relatively small number of customers serviced by this access point, which has put it at the bottom of the list for being improved.”

Poor infrastructure, small number of customers, bottom of the list: That is the story of rural broadband in the United States.

For me, the lack of high-speed internet was just an annoyance. But there was a workaround: I got on the waiting list for Elon Musk’s satellite-based Starlink, then held my nose and paid the Twitter-killing billionaire \$600 for the equipment and \$120 a month for dependable internet service.

But the situation is much more than an annoyance for the 7 million US households that still do not have access to broadband internet — 90% of them in rural areas. Many times that number are “underserved,” with speeds below 100 mbps, or have high-speed broadband infrastructure but can’t afford service. For these tens of millions of rural residents without a tether to the Information Age, telemedicine, distance learning, telework and e-commerce are all but impossible.

In Rappahannock County, where my farm is, even telephone calls are problematic without high-speed internet. Cellular coverage is spotty, and the old landlines frequently go out when it rains, leaving people entirely isolated. County supervisors told me of an elderly resident with a medical emergency who had no internet service and no dial tone on their landline, so they had to drive to a place where there was cellular reception just to dial 911.

Likewise, distance learning during the pandemic was excruciating in Rappahannock, where most of the 900 public school students lacked reliable internet. Parents would idle their cars in the county library’s parking lot after hours so their children could use the library’s WiFi to send in homework. Web access was so limited during those times that one of the local internet service providers asked customers to ration their internet usage.

But all this is about to change — in Rappahannock and in the rest of rural America.

**THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION** has launched the most ambitious federal program for rural areas since rural electrification. Back in the 1930s, only 1 in 10 farms had electricity. Thanks to New Deal legislation, rural electricity became universal by the mid-1950s. Now, Biden-era programs are funneling \$90 billion into high-speed internet over 10 years, with the goal of having universal broadband (defined as 100 mbps download speed and 20 mbps upload) by 2030.

The 2021 Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, for example, devoted \$65 billion to the task, including \$42 billion for the Broadband Equity, Access and Deployment

program. Among other pieces of legislation, the 2021 American Rescue Plan provided an additional \$10 billion that states could use for high-speed internet.

President Biden probably won’t be getting much thanks from the rural beneficiaries of his programs; nearly three-quarters of those in rural precincts voted for Donald Trump in 2020. Some Republican lawmakers condemned these bills as “socialism” and even applied the label “traitor” to those who supported the infrastructure bill. But the massive rural infusion makes good on Biden’s promise to be “a president for everybody,” as he put it to a gathering of House Democrats in February. “A lot of these things are happening in red states, but the Americans need help,” he said.

Certainly, rural America needs all the help it can get. Eighty-five percent of counties with persistent poverty in the United States are rural. Rural areas have lower rates of college education, lower achievement among K-12 students and an older, less healthy population with lower life expectancy. Rural areas have been declining in population for years, with the exception of those near metropolitan areas, from which some residents fled during the pandemic. The affordable housing crisis, often perceived as an urban problem, is just as pressing in rural areas.

“Since the Great Recession in 2008, employment and labor participation, even before COVID-19 hit, had not been back to the pre-2008 levels, and they still aren’t,” says Tony Pipa, a researcher in rural policy at the Brookings Institution. “In urban and suburban areas, not only have they recovered, but they have grown and sometimes grown significantly.”

The lack of internet access makes rural areas fall further and further behind. While broadband infrastructure is universal in cities and suburbs, it’s absent in roughly 20% of rural and tribal areas, even by a conservative estimate. Eliminating that gap could help pull rural America from its depression.

“For rural Americans, it really connects them in a way that they have never been connected before,” said Molly Ritner, a White House policy adviser who works on broadband implementation. “Not only is it giving them access to telehealth, but it’s giving people access to telehealth who might be 2½ hours from a hospital. ... It’s giving folks access to school who might be two hours from a community college instead of 15 minutes.”

**RAPPAHANNOCK**, an agrarian county of just 7,300 souls, is in some ways atypical because of its wealthy weekenders and tourists. But it also has deep poverty (most public school students qualify for free lunch) and many of the rural ills: no pharmacy, no hospital, only one general practitioner, no higher education, and an aging population (29% of residents are over 65). “When people think of this county, they think of the Inn at Little Washington,” Debbie Donehey, chair of the county board of supervisors, remarked over lunch at one of the elite inn’s restaurants, Patty O’s Cafe.

[the] California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation’s funding to account for previous capacity reductions and for the planned deactivation of a prison in March 2025 (Chuckwalla Valley State Prison in Riverside County),” according to a recent report from the state’s Legislative Analyst’s Office (LAO). “In addition, the budget reflects operation of nearly 15,000 empty beds in 2024-25, which is projected to grow to about 19,000 by 2028. This means the state could deactivate around five additional prisons.”

Closing five prisons will save the state budget over \$1 billion, according to the LAO report. That is no chump change.

The Newsom administration indicates that closing five state prisons “could create challenges, such as reducing the availability of treatment and reentry programs,” according to the LAO. The agency holds, however, “that, while mitigating such challenges could create some new costs, these would be far less than the nearly \$1 billion needed to continue operating five prisons. Accordingly, we recommend that the Legislature direct CDCR

“But we have more than 300 families supported by the food pantry just around the corner.”

Villages in the county have broadband, but when it looked several years ago into extending it over some 300 miles of roads to the remaining 2,000 households, it found the cost would be about \$25 million — a nonstarter for a local government whose entire annual operating budget is \$30 million. Before the pandemic, Rappahannock asked for bids from internet service providers — and it got none.

It was a classic market failure. But the billions coming from the federal government changed all that. In 2021, Rappahannock was invited to be part of an eight-county consortium in the Shenandoah Valley in which a private-equity-funded service provider, All Points Broadband, would work with electric utilities to deliver universal broadband by mid-2025 using funds from the American Rescue Plan.

Because of the federal funds, supplemented by state funds, it would cost the county just \$5.9 million in seed money. A local philanthropist and foundation donated \$4.5 million of that, and the county used unspent covid relief funds for the rest. “It’s the best deal we ever could have found, and only because of massive subsidies,” argues Keir Whitson, the supervisor board’s vice chair.

Even then, two of the five county supervisors raised objections. They forced the county to miss its payment to All Points Broadband by boycotting the vote to approve the funds. Rappahannock now finds itself last in line among the eight counties for broadband installation, a situation All Points Broadband’s chief, Jimmy Carr, told me is “dependent on a number of factors.”

In markets already served by broadband, there are typically at least 30 homes per mile, Carr said, but in areas where his company works, there are fewer than 10. All Points will connect 42,000 unserved households and businesses in the eight counties, hanging some 3,100 miles of fiber from some 70,000 utility poles. But, two years into the project, it hasn’t installed a single foot of fiber yet. First, it has to go through the laborious task of working with utilities to upgrade thousands of poles.

This is not glamorous work. I spent a couple hours this week watching a crew in Stuarts Draft, west of Charlottesville, replace a pole. It took two bucket trucks, a third with a giant auger and a crew of six men a whole morning to do the job. They donned thick protective gear, hung insulation over the wires and pole, removed a transformer, set aside live power lines carrying a total of 22,860 volts, then hoisted the new pole with a crane, placing it into the eight-foot hole. And all that was just to replace a 45-foot pole with a 50-foot pole so that the fiber-optic cable will have enough ground clearance.

With thousands of poles to upgrade or replace, it’s easy to see why All Points official Tom Innes told me “it’ll be tight” to meet the company’s promised completion date of July 2025. Impossible is more like it. Even after the eventual completion, it will take another

year or so to hook up each home.

When it’s done, the fiber-optic cable, just half an inch in diameter, will bring speeds up to 1 gigabit per second, upload and download. Ultimately, those same cables will be able to carry data to homes at a breathtaking 10 gbps. But there’s much that could go wrong between now and then.

At the moment, there’s a squabble between All Points and one of the electric utilities over who will pay for pole upgrades. Then there will be the challenge of getting customers, particularly the old and the poor, to pay for the new service. All Points will guarantee service for just \$30 a month at first for low-income customers. But it’s not at all clear that such pricing can be continued, or that the overall network can be maintained, without ongoing federal subsidies — which have not been promised. The operating costs will be higher than in cities and suburbs. All Points will need more service techs, vans and warehouse facilities to cover the greater distances.

“What you don’t want to do is hook folks up and then three years later, the ISP that hooked folks up is cutting back their services and then you’re in the same place you were,” Brookings’s Pipa warns. Current programs, he says, “won’t be enough” to reach and maintain universal broadband.

From my view on the farm, such potential problems are a long way off. There’s currently no dial tone on my landline; the incoming telephone wire dangles so low over a field that I could touch it. There’s no cellular signal, either. A member of the Rappahannock Broadband Authority, Margaret Bond, explained that this is in part because the county (understandably) resists massive, ugly cell towers on its scenic mountaintops.

Eventually, fiber-optic broadband will allow wireless carriers to boost their signals. But for now, my only hope for connectivity runs through the unstable conduit of Elon Musk. After eight months on Starlink’s waiting list, I was approved for service, though it came with a surcharge because my area has “limited capacity.” I canceled my terrestrial wireless system (the one brought down by “wildlife”) and, in a moment of bravery, or stupidity, I put a ladder on my roof and climbed to the gable top to attach my Starlink receiver.

The speeds bounce around a lot, with some delays, or “latency,” but the SpaceX satellites provide perfectly adequate bandwidth for calls, Zoom meetings, web browsing and streaming. In short, I can now live on the farm while maintaining a lifeline to the world.

In a few years, this, and better, will come to millions of our isolated countrymen. It’s not too much to hope that their belated entry into the Information Age will transform the fortunes of rural America.

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## Closing California Prisons Will Save Taxpayers Money, Budget Watchdog Agency Reports

By **SETH SANDRONSKY**

A nonpartisan fiscal watchdog agency that advises the California Legislature is calling for closure of five additional state prisons to help reduce the state budget deficit, the gap between spending and income. The Golden State operates 34 prisons currently.

Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom declined a reporter’s request for comment on the issue of closing five more state prisons. We return to the California watchdog agency that recommends state prison closures.

“The Governor proposes reductions to

to begin planning to reduce capacity by deactivating prisons and report on how to mitigate any resulting challenges.”

That CDCR report could prove to be interesting reading. Meanwhile, the Golden State, which is unable to run a deficit as the federal government can and does, is facing fiscal misfortune, to put the manner politely.

In January, Gov. Newsom forecast a \$38 billion state budget deficit. Subsequently, the LAO has sounded an alarm of California’s deficit ballooning to \$73 billion, or double the January estimate.

“The Governor’s January budget proposes a total of about \$14.5 billion to operate CDCR in 2024-25,” the LAO report states, “mostly from the General Fund,” a taxpayer-funded pool of money. Gov. Newsom’s budget also proposes total spending of \$83.3 million, \$959,000 of which is from the General Fund, for CDCR capital outlay projects in 2024-25.

Amber-Rose Howard is the Executive Director of Californians United for a Responsible Budget (CURB). “The status quo is no longer sustainable,” she said in a state-

ment. “California must enshrine a commitment to close at least five more prisons in the 2024-25 final budget due in June, and direct those savings to community-based resources to increase safety, reentry programs and supporting towns where prisons close.”

It costs about \$106,000 annually to imprison an adult in a California state prison, according to the LAO. The type of expenditures that comprise per prisoner costs of \$106,000 annually range from security to health care expenditures, e.g., psychiatric, pharmaceutical and dental services).

Meanwhile, Gov. Newsom remains focused on changing San Quentin State Prison into a prisoner rehabilitation center. That construction project costs \$360 million. In January, Newsom’s Advisory Council for the San Quentin project recommended cutting the building cost by \$120 million, according to CURB.

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# During the Pandemic, His Fraudulency Got a Lot of People Killed. Has That Slid Down the Memory Hole?

By DICK POLMAN

It's perversely fitting that the anti-science quack whose imbecilic behavior during the pandemic resulted in an unnecessarily high death toll is now declaring that, if returned to power, he will withdraw all federal funds from public schools that require vaccines.

There's a lot to unpack in that opening paragraph. *The Lancet*, a prominent medical journal, concluded in a '21 report that Donald Trump's "appalling response" to the pandemic (his hostility to mask mandates, etcetera) "expedited the spread of COVID" in the United States; as a result, as many as 40% of the 470,000 deaths that occurred on his watch could have been avoided, had he acted rationally. But has he learned anything since? Of course not. At a Virginia rally in early March, he indeed talked about punishing schools that mandate vaccines, a brain fart he first floated in Iowa a year ago.

As this country slowly goose-steps toward a MAGA Restoration, with roughly half the electorate too dumb or oblivious to take notice, Trump's record on public health would seem to be relevant grist for fresh discussion. I know, the pandemic was so four years ago, ancient history by our standards – Gore Vidal was right when he quipped that USA stands for "the United States of Amnesia" – but since Trump was once an incumbent, perhaps we should treat him like one by re-inspecting his detestable actions.

And there's no better time than right now, because, Feb. 29, we marked the four-year anniversary of America's first confirmed COVID death. Four years ago yesterday, the CDC reported 60 confirmed cases. Four years ago this month, the entire nation virtually shut down.

Trump, we now know, was seriously briefed about the impending crisis long before it hit. But here's what he said

publicly on Feb. 26, 2020: "When you have 15 (infected) people, and the 15 within a couple days is going to be down close to zero, that's a pretty good job we've done... This will end. You look at flu season. (COVID) is a little bit different, but in some ways it's easier... It's a little like the regular flu."

But that's not what he told Bob Woodward in an interview on Feb. 7: "It's also more deadly than even your strenuous flu... This is deadly stuff." Why didn't he share these early warnings with his fellow citizens so that they could be better prepared? He answered that during an interview with Woodward on March 19: "Really, to be honest with you... I wanted to play it down. I still like playing it down." That's why he fired Nancy Messonnier, a top CDC official, who'd made the mistake of committing public candor on Feb. 25 when she said that Americans should get ready for "significant disruptions" to their lives.

Then we got Dr. Trump's miracle cures. He pitched hydroxychloroquine ("try it if you like... it'll be wonderful, it'll be so beautiful") – which was deemed worthless by the National Institutes of Health, the Food and Drug Administration, and the World Health Organization. And when Richard Bright, a prominent federal vaccine expert, stated that the drug "clearly lack(ed) scientific merit," Trump fired him.

Undeterred as always, Trump flashed his medical credentials on the topic of disinfectants. Either half the electorate wants to restore this kind of thinking to the presidency, or, more likely, half the electorate doesn't remember it, or know it even happened, or doesn't care that it happened. Trump was talking to a science official who was off camera:

"So supposing we hit the body with a tremendous – whether it's ultraviolet or just a very powerful light – and I think you said that hasn't been checked because of the testing. And then I said, supposing you brought the light inside the body, which you can do either through the skin or some other way, and I think you said you're going to test that, too... I see the disinfectant that knocks (COVID) out in a minute, one minute. And is there a way we can do something like that by injection inside or almost a cleaning? As you see, it gets in the lungs, it does a tremendous number on the lungs, so it would be interesting to check that."

Suffice it to say that, during the Biden administration, the makers of Lysol hasn't felt compelled to issue a statement warning against internal uses of its cleaning project.

And suffice it to say that the current president has never said anything this stupid: "(COVID) affects elderly

people with heart problems and other problems. In some states thousands of people – nobody young. Below the age of 18, like, nobody. Take your hat off to the young, it affects virtually nobody." Trump said that in September 2020 – five months after the CDC started tracking thousands of COVID cases among Americans under the age of 18, and one month after the CDC warned that "children are at risk for severe COVID."

Five days after Trump's '17 Inaugural, I wrote that he would likely "get a lot of people killed." That was a cinch prediction, and indeed he did. If we're heedless enough to entrust our lives, yet again, to an anti-science sociopath, next time could well be worse.

## Bread and Circuses: For the cult, Super Tuesday was the Russell Crowe primary

With apologies to cinema's "The Gladiator": "Ladies and gentlemen of the cult! I stand before you as a rapist, an insurrectionist, a coup plotter, a financial fraudster, a deadbeat who owes half a billion dollars to courts of law, a thief of classified documents, an accused criminal of 91 felonies, a racist, a porn star philanderer, a denigrator of military heroes, a fear-mongering font of incoherence, a moral vacuum, a doormat for foreign dictators, a vengeful congenital liar with malice aforethought – are you not entertained?!"

And on Super Tuesday they mustered a collective huzzah:

"We are! You are what we want! Give us more!" I have nothing more to say today. I yield to the poet Langston Hughes:

*I am so tired of waiting,  
Aren't you,  
For the world to become good  
And beautiful and kind?  
Let us take a knife  
And cut the world in two –  
And see what worms are eating  
At the rind.*

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## Lack of Political Competition Harms Rural Americans

*Rural Americans need a new movement to demand more than lip service from their elected representatives.*

By TOM SCHALLER and PAUL WALDMAN / *The Daily Yonder*

"We pretty much own rural and small town America," bragged Republican Senate leader Mitch McConnell in 2022, and he was right: According to data from the Pew Research Center, 59% of rural Americans voted for Republican House candidates in 2018, then 65% voted for Donald Trump in 2020, then 69% for Republicans in 2022. The numbers for White rural Americans are even higher: What used to be a small GOP advantage in rural areas has widened into a chasm.

This development has been great for the Republican Party: Not only can it leverage rural support into wins in the Electoral College and competitiveness in the US Senate that it wouldn't otherwise enjoy if all votes counted equally, it can use its support in rural areas within states to secure and maintain power through gerrymandering. But it hasn't been so great for rural people themselves.

That rural areas often lack political competition is not news to many people. But that fact is usually presented as a problem facing Democrats. They are scolded for having abandoned rural areas, which is often true. And it isn't hard to understand why they did: When parties and candidates have scarce resources, there isn't much to be gained from spending time campaigning in a place where, at best, they might reduce their margin of defeat from 30 points to 25 points.

The flip side of this situation is far less often remarked upon: Republicans, too, have largely abandoned rural areas. They're still winning all the elections – indeed, many rural voters are represented by nothing but

White Republicans in every office from US senator all the way down to dog-catcher – but they know that they don't have to do much to keep winning. They don't have to campaign very hard, and they don't have to worry that they'll be turned out of office if they don't make tangible improvements in their constituents' lives.

This was one of the messages we heard repeatedly as we reported and wrote our new book "White Rural Rage: The Threat to American Democracy": As much as people say they hate politics, if anything there's too little of it in rural America.

In Mingo County, West Virginia, for instance, we spoke to Truman and Letitia Chafin. He's the former county Democratic chair and state Senate majority leader; she's a prominent lawyer. The machine built by Senator Robert Byrd that was deeply enmeshed in people's lives is gone, they said, and the Democratic Party is almost a memory. "We don't have the organization down here to help Joe [Manchin]," Truman told us, when it still seemed that the Democratic senator might run for reelection (he eventually decided to retire). "Republicans don't have a good system either," added Letitia, "but they don't really need one."

They sure don't; Trump won 85% of the vote in Mingo County in 2020, and there's no reason to think he'll do any worse this year. But the county's loyalty to the GOP hasn't done much for it: The county is losing population (down 12% between the 2010 and 2020 Censuses), coal jobs are still dwindling, the area was devastated by the opioid crisis, and poverty is still rampant.

There are analogues to Mingo County's story – economic, political, and demographic – in rural places all over America. So if it's clear that voting more and more heavily for Republicans isn't offering rural Americans a path to a better future, what would?

It's a complicated question, and though we're both liberals, the answer we arrived at in writing "White Rural Rage" isn't just that rural people should start voting Democratic. What's needed instead is a genuine rural movement, one that could bring political competition back to rural America.

The most striking thing about the place of rural Whites in the Republican Party is that, despite being the linchpin of Republican

power, they have no coherent set of demands. Every other part of the GOP coalition – evangelicals, gun rights advocates, big business – knows exactly what they want government to do and makes sure the people they help elect know it too. When Republicans come into office, every part of that coalition is sitting at the table, making sure its demands are met. The officeholders know that if they don't come through, they might not be able to count on the same support in the next election. The Democratic coalition works the same way.

Unfortunately, too many rural Americans are not even at the table, because they aren't making demands of the politicians who depend on them on election day. If they could create a movement with a real agenda, Republicans would have to address it – and Democrats would be eager to show that they could speak to the agenda, too.

Days after the book published, we tracked down Shawn Sebastian, director of organizing for RuralOrganizing.org, a progressive group that works hard to mobilize and educate rural voters. We asked Sebastian about the possibility of building wide-ranging coalitions to empower rural voters.

"There are leaders in rural communities who are trying to solve local problems with local people – they're the ones fighting to build a local nursing home because there isn't one within three hours of where they live, they're working to make sure their hospital doesn't shut down, and they're the ones ensuring people have clean water to drink,"

he told us. "These local rural leaders hold relationships across ideological differences in their communities and do the hard work of cooperating with their neighbors to get things done... These rural leaders are doing this work without resources – for every dollar Democrats spend in rural counties, Republicans spend \$14."

If political competition returned to rural America, votes would be up for grabs, activists could be more influential, and politicians could be held accountable for what they deliver. That's how politics is supposed to work. But in too many rural areas, there isn't much politics to speak of.

And if a real rural movement was built – especially if it was a multiracial movement, including the 24% of rural Americans who are non-White – politicians at the national level would have to listen, too. Right now, rural people have a particular kind of power: Their votes often count for more than those of people who live in cities and suburbs, and they're flattered by politicians touting "small-town values." But they don't have much to show for it. The answer is for them to use the power they have, and start demanding something more concrete. If they could do that, the whole country would benefit.

Tom Schaller and Paul Waldman are co-authors of "White Rural Rage: The Threat to American Democracy" (Random House, 2024). This story was originally published in the *Daily Yonder*. For more rural reporting and small-town stories visit [dailyyonder.com](http://dailyyonder.com).



# Defying the South's Corporate Lackeys

By DAVID McCALL

Tanya Gaines and her co-workers launched a union drive 10 years ago because it was the only way to win livable wages, fair treatment and safe working conditions at the Golden Dragon copper tube manufacturing plant in Pine Hill, Ala., one of the state's poorest areas.

Workers anticipated management's opposition, but they felt blindsided when Alabama's Republican governor at the time, Robert Bentley, also came out against the organizing drive and wrote a letter demanding they vote against the union.

Gaines and her colleagues stood up to Bentley's bullying, joined the United Steelworkers (USW) and began building better lives.

More and more workers across the South seek the same path forward that union membership provides. But they're still forced to defy Republican officials who'd rather toady to wealthy corporations than support workers' fight for a fair economy.

Autoworkers in Alabama, for example, vowed to stay the course last month after the state's current governor, Republican Kay Ivey, publicly rebuked their efforts to unionize a Mercedes-Benz plant.

Equally furious USW members and other workers in South Carolina demanded that Republican Gov. Henry McMaster correct course after he bragged during his state of the state address in February that he'd oppose unions "to the gates of hell."

Unionizing is entirely the workers' choice, a right guaranteed under federal law. And yet Ivey and McMaster stuck their noses where they didn't belong, just like Bentley did with the workers at Golden Dragon in 2014.

"It was like a slap in the face," Gaines, who grew up in a union family and learned the power of solidarity at a young age, said of Bentley's interference.

"We're here on site, doing the job. He had no idea of the problem it was to work here," she added, recalling the exploitation that workers faced. "We need a voice. This is our voice."

Gaines said she and her co-workers continue battling Golden Dragon over safety and other issues—a fight she can't imagine waging without the protections and resources the USW provides.

"They know better," Gaines, vice president of USW Local 00176, said of company bosses. "They just don't do better."

When workers begin organizing, companies regularly go on the attack.

Employers squander hundreds of millions of dollars every year on anti-union consultants and force workers into captive audience meetings where they disparage organized labor and threaten union supporters. Companies flood workers' social media and cell phones with anti-union propaganda. They post anti-union messages and videos throughout workplaces, even in restrooms.

Instead of standing up for workers who face these kinds of abuses, Republicans in the South pile on.

Feb. 8, Georgia's Republican-controlled Senate passed a bill aimed at creating additional obstacles for workers seeking to unionize. Among other restrictions, the bill—championed by Republican Gov. Brian Kemp—threatens to withhold state grants and other resources from forward-thinking companies that would prefer to voluntarily recognize unions instead of forcing workers to go through an additional drawn-out election process.

Meddling by elected officials helps to explain historically low union membership in the South. But now, not even desperate measures like the Georgia bill can stem the wave of workers forming unions in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"They're seeing what the union has to offer. They're seeing some of the advantages of being in the union," said Reggie Thomas, president of USW Local 572, which represents hundreds of workers at Graphic Packaging in Macon, Ga.

Thomas traveled to nearby Fort Valley, Ga., last year for rallies supporting the union drive at Blue Bird Corp. When 1,400 workers at the bus company voted overwhelmingly to

join the USW, he said that victory sent a message to others throughout the South: "If the workers at Blue Bird can do it, I can, too."

As workers empower themselves, they also build a stronger economy and healthier communities.

USW members and their counterparts in other unions advocated for the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, which unleashed \$1.2 trillion for upgrades to transportation, communications and energy systems nationwide.

Republican officials—including Ivey, McMaster and Kemp, hypocritically welcomed these investments while attacking the union workers who helped to bring the money home.

"Beware the messenger before you listen to the message," William "Bump" Roddey, a member of USW Local 1924, said of Republicans' anti-worker scheming.

"Look at where some of the big donations come from," said Roddey, who works at the New-Indy mill in Catawba, S.C., and serves on York County Council. "They come from CEOs, the people who have a vested interest in keeping wages low."

While career politicians like McMaster have no problem making ends meet, that isn't the case for average South Carolinians applying for jobs at New-Indy.

Roddey said new hires, many of them first-time union members, marvel at the life-changing wages, workplace safety measures and work-life balance, among other benefits their USW contract provides.

"It's an eye-opening experience," said Roddey, who often hears new union members make remarks like, "I didn't have that at my last job. I didn't have that opportunity."

And when these workers tell others about what the union does for them, support for labor only snowballs in spite of Republicans' plotting.

"The other side can't define us," Roddey said. "People are looking to make their lives better, and it can only come through the union, because the job pays your mortgage, pays your rent, pays your light bill, feeds your family. Unions are the backbone of the economy."

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

## Workers Once Again Try to Organize the South

By JOSEPH B. ATKINS

OXFORD, Miss. — At the beginning of the Congress of Industrial Organizations' "Operation Dixie" campaign to organize the US South in 1946, Sidney Hillman, the leader of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, called the South "a venture into unplowed fields."

Nearly 80 years later, organized labor has vowed finally to plow those fields and plant seeds that will ultimately help build a new labor movement across the nation.

"Take heart, learn the lessons and apply them to your situation, and thing big," former UE (United Electrical, Radio & Machine Workers of America) Director of Organizing Ed Bruno told participants from across the South in a Southern Workers Assembly online discussion Feb. 29.

Indeed, the United Auto Workers, fresh off its Stand Up Strike victories with General Motors, Ford, and Stellantis in 2023, has pledged \$40 million to organize non-union auto plants, with a focus on the South. Results are already coming in. In February, workers at both the Volkswagen plant in Chattanooga, Tennessee, and the Mercedes-

Benz plant in Vance, Alabama (that German company's largest US plant) announced majority support for unionizing.

They're among some 10,000 non-union autoworkers signing union cards at 14 plants across the country.

After failed unionizing efforts at the Nissan plants in Mississippi and Tennessee and the Volkswagen plant in Chattanooga in recent years, many wondered if the South would ever shake off its longheld distinction as the least-unionized region in the country, whether its "unplowed fields" will ever grow rich with a true harvest of its underpaid, overworked laborers.

After what has been dubbed "The Year of the Strike" in 2023, with UAW victories at the Big Three, nationwide organizing at Starbucks cafes (Starbucks has finally agreed to stop opposing unionization), among nurses in hospitals, and on college campuses across the land, workers have a new confidence. The pandemic and record corporate profits also helped create a new worker consciousness, and polls show public support for unions at its highest level since the 1960s.

"We've learned that we can't trust Mercedes with our best interests," Mercedes-Benz workers in Vance, Alabama, said in their announcement of majority union support this month. Citing the company's "record profits," widespread use and abuse of temporary workers, and imposition of a two-tier pay scale, the announcement con-

tinued, "There comes a time when enough is enough. Now is that time."

At the Southern Workers Assembly Zoom session in February, Bruno and Jim Wrenn, a founding member of UE Local 150 at the Cummins Diesel Engine Plant in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, talked at length about the reasons behind the widely acknowledged failure of Operation Dixie between 1946 and 1953. The exploitation of divisions between Black and White workers, the rank anti-communist demagoguery of the era, and inability of organizers to network campaigns at different plants in the region and work in solidarity rather than individually were all factors in the campaign never reaching its goals.

Bruno contrasted Operation Dixie with the massive pro-union surge in the mid-1930s that gave rise to the UAW and other unions, a high point in the history of organized labor in this country.

Five factors were key to the success of the 1930s labor movement, Bruno said:

1. A committed cadre of organizers who were few in number but young and energized and who networked with other organizers. They were "not isolated."
2. A militant minority who "were fed up and ready to do something."
3. A high degree of class politics with pro-labor President Franklin D. Roosevelt leading the nation and powerful pro-labor forces in Congress and beyond.

## Support for Aid to Ukraine is Waning

By MARK ANDERSON

Americans' support for continued assistance to Ukraine—economic as well as military aid—is waning, according to a new survey. But ironically, Democrats are the holdouts, despite the Democratic Party's tradition of embracing a pro-peace worldview.

This survey, conducted by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs (CCGA), compares responses from Republicans, Democrats, as well as Independents. It shows that those who identify as Democrats are the most zealous to keep pumping billions of US dollars into Ukraine.

From March of 2022 when the Russia-Ukraine conflict started (85% of those surveyed approved) until February of 2024 (78% approved), Democrat respondents (with past CCGA surveys included for continuity) maintained the highest level of approval for such economic aid.

Republicans' support dropped most sharply, from 74% supporting economic aid in March 2022 down to 40% in

Feb. 2024. Independents went from 75% to 54%.

As for sending US arms to Ukraine: Dems went from 83% to 75% in the same time period; Republicans, 80% to 45%; independents, 79% to 54%.

Interestingly, Democrats also are the most supportive of sending US troops into the Ukraine-Russian conflict. Democrats' support to send US troops there went from 42% to 35%; Republicans, from 34% to 21%; independents, from 33% to 26%. (Ukraine leaders have not requested US troops.)

Clearly, support is dropping among all respondents regarding any kind of Ukraine aid. It's just that the Dems have maintained the most support.

This survey of 1,039 voting-age adults was conducted with the help of the Lester Crown Center on US Foreign Policy, an institution within the CCGA. The research firm IPSOS took part, too. Lester Crown is the son of the late Henry Crown, founder of General Dynamics, a major defense contractor. The CCGA's CEO, Ivo Daalder, is a former US envoy to NATO.

So while the survey suggests that Republicans have traded places with Democrats as being the most reluctant

to go to war—an interesting development, given the overly worshipful view most Republicans have of the military—another intriguing twist is that there is strong support across the board for Ukraine to join NATO. Only the Dems' support actually went up, from 80% to 83%, from March 2022 to Feb. 2024.

But if you're a NATO member, an attack on one member is an attack on all, meaning that if Ukraine joins NATO, the US would be obliged to enter the conflict versus Russia; yet, the republicans and independents surveyed gave a resounding "NO" to the US directly committing troops to Ukraine under its current non-NATO status.

The CCGA claims this disparity arises from general public ignorance of how NATO works.

But the "take away" here is that the clear intent to make Ukraine a full NATO member could bring World War III with it. Thus, the time for serious reflection is now. It might be wise to deny Ukraine full NATO membership to avoid a wider war—a war that would be immensely profitable to defense contractors if the US were to directly involve itself.

*Continued on next page*

## MARY SANCHEZ



Biden is considering plans to restrict asylum claims at the border, but offering sanctuary to people who have been persecuted is a baseline of the US ethos.

## Biden Eyes US-Mexico Border With a Trumpian Gaze

How close to Republican hardliners can President Joe Biden creep without losing Democratic votes?

Can he sound tough on immigration by pleading for Congress to give him the power to “shut down the border?”

Check – he did that a few weeks ago. It was a desperate pitch to convince the US Senate to follow through with a bipartisan package of reforms that would have given Biden more leverage and resources to fairly address the historically high numbers of migrants arriving at the southern border.

It didn't work.

The Senate failed to pass the bill,

which also meant they bailed on providing necessary funding to Ukraine, which was also included in the measure.

Now, Biden is moving onto Plan B.

Trial balloons have been sent up in recent days. His people are weighing the pushback.

The headlines tell the story:

“Biden considering new executive action to restrict asylum at the border; sources say” – CNN.

“Biden weighs invoking executive authority to stage border crackdown ahead of 2024 election” – CBS News.

“Biden mulling plan that could restrict asylum claims at the border” – *The New York Times*.

“Anonymous sources” close to the White House are leaking the plans. It's a scheme that would undercut the asylum process. Anyone who can arrive on US soil has the right to at least request safe haven.

It doesn't mean they'll qualify under the strict guidelines, which were set up to offer protection to people who have been persecuted or fear they will be in their native land due to race, religion, nationality and/or membership in a particular social group or political opinion.

In fact, many asylum seekers will not pass this scrutiny. But they have the right to ask.

It's a baseline of the US ethos. Offering sanctuary is a core tenet of our country.

Biden might crack down on the standards, making it more difficult for people to establish having a “credible fear.”

There's also word that he's considering only allowing people to request asylum at

ports of entry. Another proposal would act as a breaker, shutting down the process if too many people arrive.

Never mind that former President Donald Trump also tried similar tricks. Remember Trump's Muslim ban, when he barred entry of people from six predominantly Muslim nations? It got him sued on constitutional grounds.

Now here's Biden, increasingly frantic to head off election year criticism of his handling of the border. He's allowing himself to be lured into adopting Trump's policies.

That's a twisted game and one that Biden is risking human lives to play.

There is a humanitarian crisis at the US-Mexico border. An astounding 250,000 arrived in December 2023 alone, a record.

But they're not an army of terrorists. They're not trafficking fentanyl, intent on helping American children overdose.

They are not seeking to “invade” or “infect” the nation, as some far-right voices continuously claim.

They're people who fled life-threatening situations in Haiti, for example, where gangs control many parts of the country.

They're families who've crossed through multiple countries, including through freezing temperatures in the Andes Mountains, to flee as the Venezuelan government slides into dictatorship.

And they're Hondurans caught in traps set by drug cartels, which extort the meager earnings of farmers who've been devastated by catastrophic flooding.

Once they cross the border, migrants turn themselves into US authorities and wait to make their case, to assert that they

have a credible fear of returning to their native land.

This is all “the right way” to do it. They're following the process.

It's just that there are so many of them. There are not enough asylum officers to hear their stories, enough space to keep them safe, enough resources to help women and children, some of whom risked sexual assault and robbery on their journey.

The danger for Biden is that he's stretching to meet a problem that is partially being framed by his predecessor.

Trump reportedly didn't want the bipartisan bill – which would have addressed immigration needs at the border – to pass. It's simply too rich of an issue to tap on the campaign trail.

Trump is an expert at twisting the narrative, of pounding podiums and telling outright lies about immigrants.

And Biden, at least with these immigration reform trial balloons he has been floating, is dangerously mimicking his opponent.

It won't work. He risks losing voters, people who value what our nation stands for: resettling people in our country who then greatly contribute to it.

Worse, Biden is dabbling with exposing these desperate migrants to the whims of a Trump White House.

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## Civil War II

**As Southern states again assert their dubious right to countermand federal law and the national Constitution, Biden needs to be as resolute as Lincoln.**

By ROBERT KUTTNER

Republicans in the former Confederacy seem determined to re-fight the Civil War.

As you recall, the deeper cause of that war was the battle over slavery—first whether it would be expanded into the territories and then whether it would be abolished entirely. The constitutional question was the right asserted by slave states to nullify federal law. A related question was whether slave states could countermand the laws of other states.

You will also recall that we fought a terrible war to settle these questions; and that Lincoln and the federal union won on all counts. Or so it seemed.

Today, many Southern governments are determined to assert their right to nullify federal law or to encroach on rights protected by other states. Exhibit A is the effort by Texas Gov. Greg Abbott to take over enforcement of border protection, a power explicitly granted to the national government in the Constitution.

In a series of theatrical stunts, Abbott has directed the Texas National Guard to install 17 miles of razor wire along the Rio

Grande. He has dispatched the Guard to block outnumbered federal Border Patrol agents from accessing a 2.5-mile stretch in Eagle Pass. In plain violation of federal law, Guardsmen who intercept would-be refugees deny them their right to seek asylum.

Even the Roberts-Trump Supreme Court found this usurpation of clear federal authority unconstitutional. In January, by a 5-4 vote, the Court vacated a previous injunction from the US Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals that prevented Border Patrol agents from cutting the concertina wire. Chief Justice Roberts and Trump appointee Amy Coney Barrett joined the Court's three liberal justices.

But Abbott continues to use the National Guard to block US Border Patrol agents from accessing the 47-acre Shelby Park in Eagle Pass. So far, it hasn't come to an armed confrontation, but only because the Border Patrol keeps standing down.

In March, a new state law will take effect directing the Texas National Guard to arrest migrants attempting to seek asylum, a clear violation of federal and international law. The penalty is a year in prison. Guardsmen are already pushing asylum seekers who make it across the Rio Grande back into the river.

Greg Abbott joins Bibi Netanyahu in making a fool of Joe Biden and demonstrating the president's weakness. The time is long overdue for Biden to join other presidents who federalized state National Guard units when governors used them to defy federal courts and federal law.

He would be in good company. That Bolshevik Dwight D. Eisenhower federalized the entire Arkansas National Guard to enforce court-ordered school desegregation

in Little Rock. Ike, who knew something about military logistics, even sent in elements of the 101st Airborne to help. Presidents John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson both federalized state National Guard units when governors were menacing civil rights workers and defying court orders.

Former Texas Congressman Beto O'Rourke and current Rep. Joaquin Castro have both called on Biden to federalize the Texas National Guard. Failing to do so only reinforces the games that Abbott is playing.

What is Biden waiting for? The Constitution empowers the president to enforce the laws. But that power is not self-executing.

There is both a principle here—the sovereignty of the federal union that Lincoln saved—and high political stakes. As Biden and the Republicans hash out immigration policy, will Biden be a pushover for cheap political stunts that only weaken his influence and credibility?

Meanwhile, on another front of the impending Civil War II, health care professionals in several states have mobilized to help women in states that ban abortion. Not only are women and medical providers welcome to travel to sanctuary states for needed reproductive and gender-affirming care; in Massachusetts and five other states, medical professionals will fill prescriptions for medication abortions and mail the medications out of state.

Massachusetts, Washington, Colorado, Vermont, New York, and California have enacted shield laws that protect doctors, nurse practitioners, and midwives who prescribe and send abortion pills to patients in states that ban or sharply restrict abortion.

Anti-abortion zealots have vowed retribution, against both the professionals and

the women. Some states have even tried to impinge on the right of travel to keep women bottled up in restrictive states. Idaho, Arizona, and Missouri have laws authorizing prosecution of people who help minors travel out of state to get an abortion.

In August, Alabama's attorney general asserted the power to prosecute people who helped residents leave the state for an abortion, relying on criminal conspiracy laws. Some counties in Texas have passed ordinances that would outlaw using their roads to drive someone out of state for an abortion.

This all has echoes of the Fugitive Slave Act, which Congress passed as part of the so-called Compromise of 1850, in a last-ditch effort to appease the slaveholding South. The act required that escaped slaves be returned to their owners, even if they had made it to a free state, and required the federal government to help with their capture. Revulsion against the Fugitive Slave Act only increased abolitionist sentiment in the North.

With a Democratic president and a divided Congress, we are unlikely to see a fugitive abortion act, but several states are acting as if they have the right to pursue women and health professionals into free states. We would all be better served if our president were much more resolute in facing down these efforts to weaken the Union in order to promote substantively disgraceful policies.

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## Anderson...

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Is there a potential conflict of interest, given the Crown family's defense-tech background and its involvement in this survey? Is Mr. Daalders' NATO background an issue? You be the judge.

One thing is crystal clear. Think tanks like the CCGA, although they publish scholarly, useful work, tend to be heavily plutocratically connected, running the gamut from big pharma to major defense contractors that sponsor their conferences.

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# The Saudi & Putin Scheme for Screwing Biden's Election Hopes

**So, get ready: it's coming this fall. And unless the administration acts quickly, there will be nothing they can do about it. Gas at \$6 a gallon could easily throw the election to Trump ...**

By THOM HARTMANN

**H**ave you noticed gas prices are rising? Get ready: you ain't seen nothing yet.

The bloodthirsty leader of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia loves his dictatorial soul-mate Donald Trump and is setting the stage to intervene in November's election in a big way, much like he did with a smaller test run during the fall of 2022 when he drove US gas prices up above \$5, forcing President Biden to release oil from the US strategic petroleum reserve.

As Stanley Reed reported for the Business pages of the *New York Times* three days ago:

"Saudi Arabia, the de facto leader of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, said Sunday that it would extend [their one-million-barrels-a-day] cuts in

oil production through June, noting that it was acting 'in coordination with some' other states."

That "other state" would be their OPEC+ partner Russia, which also announced in March a simultaneous production cut of 471,000 barrels a day. Putin wants Trump back in the White House, too.

This time, though, because Trump refused to block the sale of America's largest gasoline refinery to Saudi Arabia in 2017 (completed in 2019 with Trump's blessing), no matter how much oil Biden releases from the reserves will be irrelevant: if the Saudis shut down their Port Arthur, Texas, refinery this October "for maintenance," US gasoline prices will explode.

It's the largest refinery in America, as *Foreign Policy* magazine noted in May 2017: "Port Arthur, referred to as the 'crown jewel' of US refinery infrastructure, can process 600,000 barrels of oil a day."

That alone is enough to radically swing gasoline prices in the US.

So, get ready: it's coming this fall. And unless the administration acts quickly, there will be nothing they can do about it. Gas at \$6 a gallon could easily throw the election to Trump, as Biden will take the blame (just like in November 2022) and Fox "News" and rightwing hate media will hang gas prices around his neck like a flaming tire.

MBS and his sovereign wealth fund have funneled literally billions of dollars into the Trump family, between Jared's investment company and Trump's golf courses and the LIV Tour, in addition to giving Trump himself additional hundreds of millions over the years renting and purchasing Trump properties.

During Trump's presidency, MBS funneled additional millions directly into the Trump family's pockets via Trump's DC hotel and NYC properties in clear violation of the Emoluments Clause of the US Constitution.

In exchange, Trump broke with the US tradition of new presidents visiting democratic allies and made Saudi Arabia his first overseas destination, blowing away congressional concern about MBS having ordered the brutal murder and dismemberment of *Washington Post* journalist Jamal Khashoggi and elevating the international status of that country beyond anything ever done by any US president.

Trump followed that up by organizing a 2019 sale of \$8.1 billion in US weaponry in clear violation of US law (such sales require congressional approval). When the Senate voted to block the sale, Trump killed their effort. As Frontline noted in a July 2019 report:

"Both chambers have registered their disapproval of the emergency declaration — the Senate voted to block the sale in June. President Trump, however, has pledged to shoot down the measure when it arrives at his desk."

When Saudi Arabia and Russia tried to screw Biden and the Democrats by cutting oil production — in October leading up to the midterm 2022 elections — President Biden was furious. Russell Baker wrote about it for the *New York Times* on Oct. 11, 2022:

"President Biden vowed on Tuesday to impose 'consequences' on Saudi Arabia for teaming up with Russia to cut oil production, signaling a rupture in the relationship

between two longtime allies and a reversal of his own effort to cultivate the energy-rich kingdom.

"Amid deep anger over last week's decision by the Saudi-led OPEC Plus, Mr. Biden's staff announced that he would re-evaluate the entire relationship with Saudi Arabia and expressed openness to retaliatory measures offered by congressional Democrats such as curbing arms sales or permitting legal action against the cartel.

"There's going to be some consequences for what they've done with Russia," Mr. Biden told CNN's Jake Tapper in an interview broadcast on [Oct. 10, 2022]."

Weighing in for Democratic Senate leadership, Illinois Senator Dick Durbin added on an October 2022 CNN appearance:

"Let's be very candid about this. It's Putin and Saudi Arabia against the United States."

The Saudis are well aware of the power of gas prices over US politics. Retired Saudi Oil Ministry Adviser Ibrahim Al-Muhanna wrote in his book "Oil Leaders: An Insider's Account of Four Decades of Saudi Arabia and OPEC's Global Energy Policy":

"During the midterm election in 2018, President Trump pushed for lower oil prices—meaning gasoline—and he succeeded, but he used completely different methods. In the middle of June 2018, the oil price was about \$75 and the gasoline price in the United States was more than \$3.50 in some states. Trump was worried that the Republican Party might lose the majority in both houses of Congress. ...

"The OPEC+ group, led by Saudi Arabia  
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## Free Boris Kagarlitsky

**Join the global appeal for his release.**

By KATRINA VANDEN HEUVEL

**A**s people flooded Moscow's streets March 1 protesting Aleksey Navalny's death in an Arctic prison camp, the outpouring became a display of dissent at a time of growing repression. As the Russian Orthodox service unfolded in the working-class Marino district, where Navalny and his family lived for decades, other Russian antiwar dissidents are confronting a new and expanding wave of repression and arrests.

Perhaps in anticipation of Presidential elections slated for March 17 (no cliffhanger), the growing strength of nationalistic "siloviki," or part of an attack on the Russian Left movement, Russian authorities are handing out harsher sentences to those who appeal their charges. Prominent Russian activist Oleg Orlov, a veteran human rights campaigner and a leader of the Memorial human rights organization that jointly won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2022, was initially fined \$1,630 for an article "discrediting the armed forces." When Orlov appealed the ruling, a Moscow Court sentenced him in February to two and a half years for opposing Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

And on February 13, a military court sentenced Boris Kagarlitsky, prominent sociologist, Marxist scholar and labor activist, to five years in prison for criticizing the war in Ukraine. This was after a Moscow court initially ordered him to only pay a \$6,500 fine for "justifying terrorism," charges which Kagarlitsky denied. Prosecutors appealed the lower court's decision to fine him, calling it "excessively lenient." Kagarlitsky, the founder and chief editor of the left-labor news organization Rabkor, and director of the Institute of Globalization and Social Movements (which was labeled a "foreign agent" in 2018), was first detained in July 2023 in connection with a since-deleted YouTube video about the 2022 Crimea bridge explosion.

Perhaps because Boris has been arrested before as a dissident—in 1982 during the Brezhnev years and in 1993 when he protested Yeltsin's shelling of the country's elected Parliament—he responded to the decision with calm and dignity: "We just need

to live a little longer and survive this dark period for our country."

I met Boris Kagarlitsky in Moscow in 1982. He was a research assistant to the Marxist dissident historian Roy Medvedev, author of "On Socialist Democracy" and "Let History Judge. My late husband, Stephen Cohen, who was living in Moscow on IREX's academic exchange in 1976, met with Medvedev—who lived far from the city's center—every few weeks to exchange ideas and historical documents. Our visit was unusual because of Boris's presence, but even more so due to the presence of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's first wife, Natalya Reshetovskaya. She had asked Roy whom she might trust to take her typescript/manuscript about her life with Solzhenitsyn to the West for safekeeping. Steve had experience with taking out—and bringing in—books, from Russia to the West and vice versa, and he agreed to do so. (It may have been one reason why neither Steve nor I could get a visa to travel to Russia from 1982 to March 1985. On March 11, 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev came into office.)

Boris became a friend, introducing me to the Rabkor team, the Fellows at his Institute, sharing insights, history, and gossip about the media and political scene. He visited *The Nation* many times over the years and contributed articles. Boris is a person of integrity, great intelligence, and, yes, irony, humor, and creativity, qualities necessary to keep living and working in Putin's Russia.

Boris has been a steadfast and productive dissident. He was editor of the samizdat journal *Left Turn* from 1978 to 1982, which led to his arrest for "anti-Soviet activities" in 1982. He was released in 1983. In 1988 he became coordinator of the Moscow People's Front, and in 1990, he was elected to the Moscow City Soviet. He cofounded the Party of Labor. In 1993, he was arrested for his opposition to President Yeltsin during the September-October constitutional crisis—but was released quickly after international protests. Later that year, his job and the Moscow City Council were abolished under Yeltsin's new Constitution.

Boris wrote in a letter to global supporters when he was arrested last year:

"This is not the first time in my life. I was locked up under Brezhnev, beaten and threatened with death under Yeltsin. And now it's the second arrest under Putin. Those in power change, but the tradition of putting political opponents behind bars, alas, remains. But the willingness of many

people to make sacrifices for their beliefs, for freedom, and social rights remain unchanged.

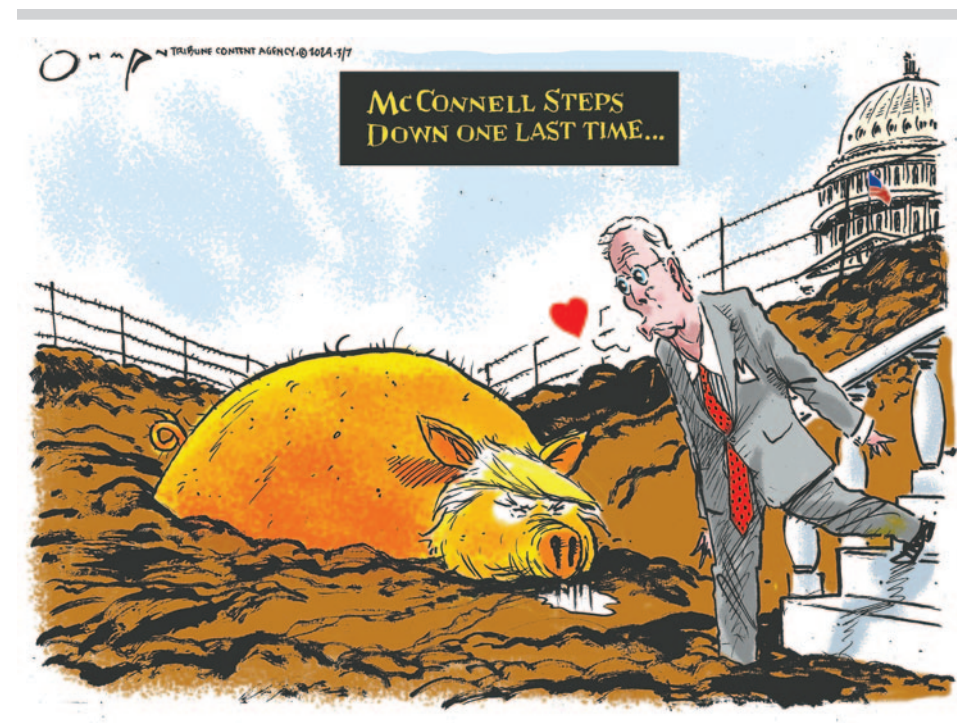
"I think that the current arrest can be considered a recognition of the political significance of my statements. Of course, I would have preferred to be recognized in a somewhat different form, but all in good time. In the 40-odd years since my first arrest, I have learned to be patient and to realize how fickle political fortune in Russia is. ...

"The experience of the past years... does not dispose much to optimism. But historical experience as a whole is much richer and gives much more grounds for positive expectations. Remember what Shakespeare wrote in *Macbeth*?

"The night is long that never finds the day."

Boris's daughter, responding to Navalny's death, made this statement: "And for all of us, this is a special sign, especially for those of us who have relatives, friends, associates, in the hands of Putin's regime, we are all not safe. Now when Boris is behind bars, it is especially important... to show even more solidarity around Boris, around his case and around other political prisoners."

In late February, in a post on Telegram, Boris said he was "in a great mood as always" and that he plans to continue collecting materials for new books, "including descriptions of prison life."



# Countering Corporate Propaganda

*We are steeped in the cultural glorification of capitalist exploitation. What if we rejected economic individualism and instead embraced ideas rooted in collective well-being?*

By SONALI KOLHATKAR

Streaming television channels these days are increasingly inserting advertising into their paid subscriber content. Thus, I recently found myself sitting through several commercials that struck me as emblematic of how out of touch corporate marketers are with the economic struggles of ordinary Americans.

A company offering cash advances to low-wage workers makes light of people's financial difficulties. Take this ad, where a man buying groceries finds himself in the awkward position of having bought more food than he can afford to pay for. A fellow shopper in line points out that a simple app he could download on his phone "gives you up to \$250 instantly." The man pulls out his phone and instantly exclaims, "I got money!" and proceeds to make his purchase. But he sets aside the broccoli he had planned to buy with a wink and a nod to the kid in line next to him, because who likes broccoli anyway, right?

Not only does the ad mislead viewers about how long it takes to actually open an account on the app and have access to cash, but it deceptively portrays the app as "giving" money to a person in need when it's

money that he is borrowing against his own wages. Moreover, he will pay a monthly charge, or extra fees to access the money earlier. And, if he cannot pay it back in time, he will incur hefty interest charges out of his forthcoming wages. The ad also makes light of the plight of those who run out of money to buy groceries, and may have credit scores so low that they cannot get a credit card.

Other ads I encountered were similar. A food delivery service that pays a low base wage but allows workers to keep tips touts itself as a fun activity for those "looking for something new to do,"—in case of boredom? The company has ads showing workers happily dancing in their cars or glamorously shaking their hair (think shampoo ads) out of a scooter helmet, eager to pick up restaurant orders and deliver them to residences. They do this just to "keep things interesting," because what could be more interesting than driving around all day to deliver hot food? The average pay is about \$19 an hour but does not include the cost of fuel or car insurance, or account for income taxes. And of course, health and retirement benefits, as well as paid leave, are entirely out of the question.

Subcontracting companies that allow people to hire others to do grunt work for them also portray themselves in a similarly tantalizing manner. One company recently came under fire for a billboard ad showing a White man who had a project "due ASAP," but was able to hire a smiling Black woman who would "be on it before EOD." The ad's corporate work-lingo gave a light-hearted veneer to what was effectively an exploitative situation.

The gig economy, which promises flexibility and autonomy, has always been touted as beneficial for workers. What often remains unsaid is everything workers lose in exchange: job security, reliable hours, health and retirement benefits, paid sick leave or vacation, promotion opportunities, and meaningful work. Companies based on the gig economy model command an army of part-time workers competing with each other for crumbs.

The seductive marketing that these

companies employ has us laughing along at our own misfortunes. They want us to be grateful to live in a digital age where smartphones can turn our daily grind into uncertain wages that are a fraction of what our predecessors got as we smile through the pain of having no healthcare.

The pressure of the gig economy has infected the entire economic system. "Flexibility" is doublespeak for uncertainty. The "perk" of keeping 100% of all tips received is a euphemism for downward spiraling wages. The "freedom" of driving one's own car as an integral part of the job hides the high cost of gig work.

Despite the relentlessly happy face painted over our exploitative economy, many Americans aren't falling for it. A study by researchers at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences found deep dissatisfaction with the current system. The researchers, in a guest op-ed for the *New York Times*, found that most people see "greed" as the driving force of the economy, and they "believe the rich and powerful have designed the economy to benefit themselves and have left others with too little or with nothing at all."

They point out that "[s]tress is a rampant part of American life, much of it caused by financial insecurity." But corporate ads routinely portray financial insecurity as a fun experience and Americans as willing and enthusiastic participants in a system designed to impoverish them.

Not only are the ads entirely out of step with what Americans face, but the indicators that economists, news media, and politicians use to measure the health of the national economy, are also deeply out of touch with reality.

This disconnect between capitalism's reputation as an efficient economic system rewarding hard work and innovation and its reality as a system of mass impoverishment is endemic to our culture. At its heart, it is a system rooted in individual well-being, a seductive idea that appeals to the very human need to take sole credit for our achievements and feel shame when we fall through the cracks.

The modern American economy preys

on our belief in this ideal. When we can't afford to pay for groceries it's our fault. If we can't pay back the cash advance, we are to blame. Those who don't grin with joy while delivering takeout are the ungrateful ones.

And if the economy is "booming," the persistent feeling of collective malaise seems jarring. "Americans remain gloomy about the US economy, even as GDP continues to expand and unemployment is at a five-decade low," writes a CBS.com economic reporter. That's because Americans are still struggling to pay off debts, keep up with bills, or afford housing. Have they all failed themselves, or has the economy failed them?

I fantasize about ads centered on economic narratives rooted in collective well-being: A man paying groceries with ease and showing off his union card in his wallet to those in line behind him. A woman who hops on a comfortable, reliable, and free public bus to a well-paying job at the same time every day because her hours are stable and she never has to pay for gas because her taxes cover the bus that she and her fellow workers use every day.

Such ideals are hardly radical and are based on liberation from the capitalist grind: unions even the playing field between bosses and workers, while publicly funded goods and services benefit us all.

If we think of the glorification of exploitative work as corporate propaganda, we can direct our anger over it into realizing the very real, and not-so-radical alternatives.

*Sonali Kolhatkar is the founder, host and executive producer of "Rising Up With Sonali," a television and radio show that airs on Free Speech TV and Pacifica stations. Her most recent book is "Rising Up: The Power of Narrative in Pursuing Racial Justice" (City Lights Books, 2023). She is a writing fellow for the Economy for All project at the Independent Media Institute, which produced this article, and she is racial justice and civil liberties editor at Yes! Magazine. This appeared at LProgressive.com.*

## ROBERT REICH



Some politicians and government officials wonder how to gauge the seriousness of Trump's threats to democracy and potentially them and their families.

## Escaping Trump's Revenge

Nikki Haley won the Republican primary in Washington, D.C., March 3, with about 63% of the vote to Donald Trump's 33%, securing all 19 available delegates, and becoming the first woman to ever win a Republican presidential primary.

To be sure, the contest was tiny: Just over 2,000 Republicans voted in the overwhelmingly Democratic city of Washington. But I admire Nikki Haley's tenacity.

On the other hand, I'm learning something disturbing about other Trump opponents, both Democrats and Republicans.

When I served in Bill Clinton's Cabinet, one of my favorite progressive lawmakers was Rep. Jim McDermott, who represented Seattle from 1989 to 2017. Jim had a long and distinguished legislative record. In his final year in Congress, he became one of the most trenchant critics of Donald Trump. He's still criticizing Trump — from his safe house.

Soon after Trump was elected in 2016, Jim blasted him for issuing inflammatory tweets, such as claiming without evidence that millions of people had voted illegally in the presidential election. Jim also openly worried about future sessions of Congress. "I think it's going to be a very tough ...

helping the new president understand how a democracy actually works."

Jim is now living in Civrac-en-Medoc, a town of a few hundred people in western France, north of Bordeaux.

In a recent interview with Elizabeth Becker, a former *Washington Post* correspondent, Jim said he's getting calls from former colleagues in Congress who fear what a vengeful Trump might do if reelected.

They wonder how to gauge the seriousness of Trump's increasingly dire threats to American democracy and potentially to them and their families. "They are scared to do what I did — [to expatriate from the US] — but are scared to stay," Jim said. He tells them: "If you can afford it, buy a second home in France, or Spain, or Portugal, wherever ... a second home that could become a safe house."

I've heard similar concerns in recent months from lawmakers, officials, prosecutors, journalists, and celebrities who have been publicly critical of Trump.

They worry about Trump's promise of "retribution" if reelected, his intention to direct the Justice Department to investigate "every Marxist prosecutor in America," his claim that his indictments have "released the genie out of the box" that would allow him to weaponize the government against his opponents, and his vow to "root out ... the radical-left thugs that live like vermin within the confines of our country."

They're also concerned about the apparent willingness of Trump's followers to resort to violence against his opponents.

A third of Republicans agree with the statement that "true American patriots may have to resort to violence in order to save our country." Among Republicans with a favorable view of Trump, 41% now agree that violence may be necessary. (By contrast, 22% of independents and 13% of Democrats agree.)

"It only takes one crackpot, like the guy who tried to kill Paul Pelosi," one former lawmaker told me.

I never thought this nation would get to a point where critics and opponents of a

potential United States president begin to wonder whether to leave the country to keep themselves and their families safe. That's standard for critics of bloodthirsty dictators like Vladimir Putin and Kim Jong Un, but in America?

Elizabeth Becker asks, rhetorically: "Is the United States facing a situation so dangerous that you would be foolish if you didn't have a backup plan? Is it hyperbole to imagine the country sliding into authoritarian rule that would unleash violence, repression, and repression?"

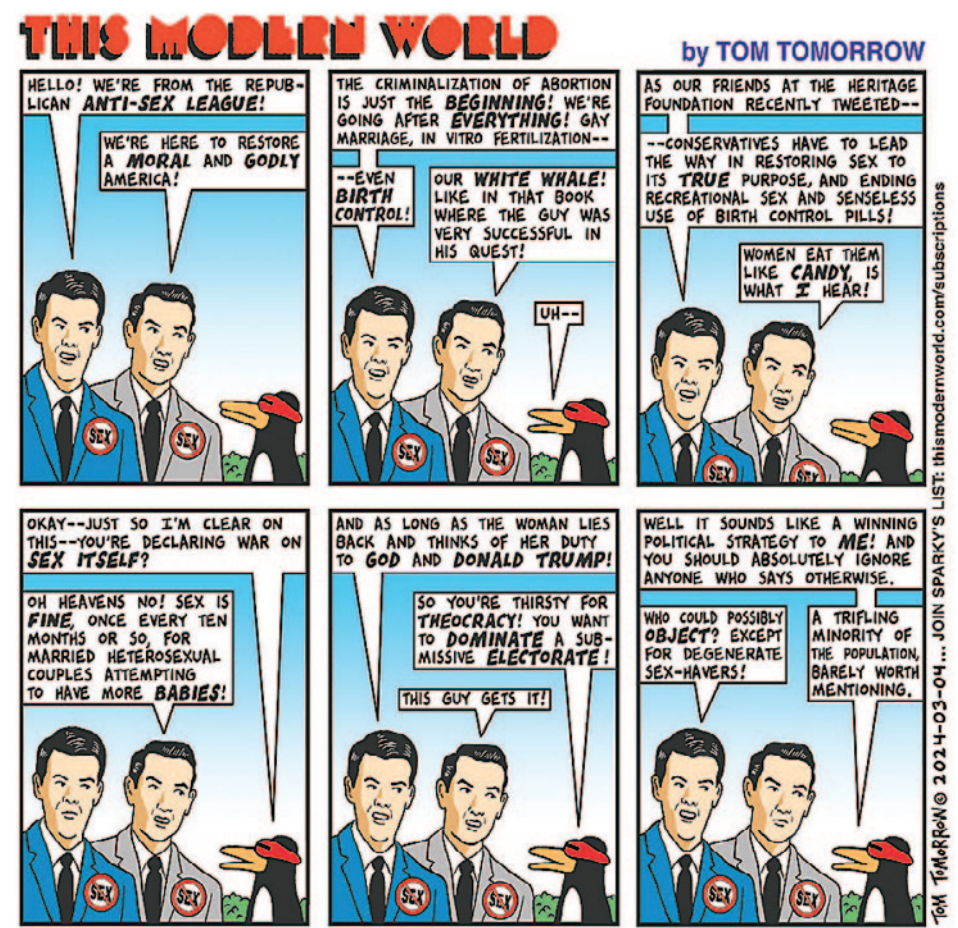
I hope not. But the mere fact the question is being posed is itself a frightening commentary on where we've come — and may be heading.

Every American, including Jim McDermott, has a right to live where they feel safe, of course. And if they can afford a "backup plan," they may be wise to consider one.

But I hope people with Jim's principles and abilities — and Nikki Haley's tenacity — remain here to defend America against Trump's threats to democracy, even if he's defeated in November.

*Robert Reich, former secretary of labor during the Clinton administration, is professor of public policy at the University of California at Berkeley. His latest book is "The System: Who Rigged It, How We Fix It."*

He blogs at [www.robertreich.substack.com](http://www.robertreich.substack.com).



## JESSE JACKSON



The Biden administration has begun to recognize the scope of the horror in Gaza, where 30,500 already are reported as dead and millions are suffering.

### It Is Time to Save the Children

Health officials report that 16 Palestinian children have died of starvation and dehydration in Gaza in recent days. UNICEF warns that the number will increase rapidly with the million children in Gaza suffering from inadequate food and water, horrible sanitation, and spreading disease. The 30,500 already reported as dead in Gaza from Israel's attacks, the majority women and children, are only the beginning of what may become an unimaginable death toll. A month ago, the International Court of Justice called on Israel to take "immediate and effective measures to protect Palestinians from the risk of genocide," by "ensuring suf-

ficient humanitarian assistance." Since then, the situation has grown more dire, not less.

The Biden administration has begun to recognize the scope of the horror. Vice President Kamala Harris, speaking in Selma on the 59th anniversary of "Bloody Sunday," a major milestone in the civil rights movement, issued the most forceful statement to date, calling on Israel to do more for the people in Gaza. "We have seen reports of families eating leaves or animal feed. Women giving birth to malnourished babies with little or no medical care, and children dying from malnutrition and dehydration. ... The Israeli government must do more to significantly increase the flow of aid. No excuses."

Harris called for an "immediate ceasefire for at least the next six weeks in exchange for Hamas freeing Israeli hostages. Administration spokespeople suggested an agreement was awaiting Hamas approval, but virtually as she spoke, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu was ordering his negotiators to boycott the negotiations, claiming that Hamas hadn't provided a full list of living hostages.

US and Jordan planes joined in air-lifting in 38,000 ready-to-eat meals to Gaza, far short of what is needed but a symbolic step. The Biden administration says it is pushing for a humanitarian corridor by sea to allow the emergency supply of food and medicine. Apparently, the Netanyahu government has yet to agree to this.

The US efforts to provide aid must be ramped up immediately. That leaves the US in the contradictory position of continuing to

provide arms and ammunition to the Israeli military, while launching what hopefully will be a rapidly expanding emergency effort to save lives. We can't long remain in the position of supplying food to sustain Gaza civilians and bombs to kill them.

In supplying weapons to Israel, the Biden administration is violating US law and many of its own regulations governing the transfer or sale of weapons to foreign countries. For example, Joe Biden released the Conventional Arms Transfer Policy in February 2023, dictating that the US will not transfer weapons when it is "more likely than not" that those weapons will be used to commit "grave breaches" of the laws of war, including "attacks intentionally directed ... against civilians." The 26-year Leahy Law prohibits the US from providing arms to foreign military units that have committed gross violations of human rights." That the State Department, the White House and the Congress have chosen to ignore these laws is a shameful dereliction of duty.

Biden has chosen to stand shoulder to shoulder with Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu in the wake of the heinous Hamas terror attack on Israel. The US has stood virtually alone at the United Nations, issuing veto after veto of resolutions condemning Israel's assault on Gaza. In response, Netanyahu has scorned Biden's call for a two-state solution, called for an unending Israeli occupation of Gaza and the West Bank, and slowly ramped up efforts to spread the war to Lebanon and elsewhere. Netanyahu's cabinet includes the

most extreme leaders of right-wing factions that openly call for removing the Palestinians. Netanyahu has a personal stake in continuing the war, for when it ends, he will lose his position and will face criminal proceedings that are now pending.

It is long past time for the US to push hard to bring this horror to an end. The Israeli leaders must be told that the US will no longer arm nor defend a continued massacre in Gaza. They must be told that the way must be opened for massive and immediate humanitarian assistance to Gaza. A ceasefire should be policed by international forces to prevent a recurrence of the Hamas attacks, while clear steps toward a long-term solution are laid out.

In the end, Israeli security and Palestinian freedom are inextricably linked, two sides of the same coin. Neither can be built over the graveyard left by a continued humanitarian horror in Gaza. It is time to save the children. It is time for a ceasefire.

Rev. Jesse Jackson led the Rainbow PUSH Coalition for 51 years, but he can still be reached c/o Rainbow PUSH, 930 E 50th St., Chicago, IL 60615.

Email [jjackson@rainbowpush.org](mailto:jjackson@rainbowpush.org). Follow him on Twitter @RevJJackson.

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### We Need a 'Marshall Plan' for Public Media

**Local news is too important for our democracy to live and die by ad dollars or fundraising. Public funding could help.**

By CHRIS MILLS RODRIGO

America's media institutions have had a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad start to 2024.

The Messenger, a well-funded, high-profile news site, dissolved after less than a year. Big newspapers from the *Los Angeles Times* to the *IndyStar* saw major layoffs. And *Sports Illustrated* fell into licensing limbo while sites like BuzzFeed, Vice News, or Complex found themselves at best on life support.

The over 500 media jobs eliminated so far this year reflect a broader, worrying trend. By this year's end, according to one recent estimate, America will have lost one third of all its newspapers — and two-thirds

of all its newspaper staff — since 2005.

The losses have been particularly acute in poor and rural communities, leaving ever expanding news deserts all across the nation.

The collapse of news outlets, especially local papers, is robbing our communities of indispensable watch dogs. The disappearance of reporters from city council meetings and public safety hearings is creating oversight vacuums that leave citizens in the dark and enable shady dealings that let the wealthy exercise undue — and undetected — influence.

How did a country once chock-full of influential newspapers morph into a land of news deserts?

One major factor, says University of Pennsylvania media studies scholar Victor Pickard, has been the disintegration of the advertising model. In short, search engines and social media sites are eating up revenue that once went to local papers.

Hence the rise of paywalls everywhere as more outlets resort to subscriptions. That works well for some, but subscriptions haven't been enough to replace ad funding in most cases — especially for larger publications or those that serve less wealthy audiences.

Other outlets have counted on the benevolence of billionaire buyers. But that

creates real concerns about the influence of exorbitantly wealthy owners — who have been increasingly unwilling to foot the bill for quality journalism.

The *Washington Post* — owned by Jeff Bezos, who recently became the richest man alive again — offered buyouts to 240 employees this past fall. And *Los Angeles Times* owner Patrick Soon-Shiong's net worth of nearly \$6 billion didn't save the jobs of the 115 workers the paper laid off this January.

Is there an alternative to for-profit journalism? To be sure, we've seen some exciting developments in nonprofit and worker-owned journalism. But these proposals remain limited in scope.

Given all this, some experts are calling for a fundamental rethinking of how we value journalism.

"The information produced by journalism should always be — and should have always been — treated as a public good," Victor Pickard told me. "And that, by its very nature, is not something that's easily monetized."

Good reporting simply takes more resources to produce than it can easily recoup in digital ad dollars or fundraising. The answer? A real commitment to public media funding.

The United States does, of course, in-

vest some money in public media.

Last year Congress allocated \$535 million to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the private nonprofit corporation tasked with investing in public radio and television. And some promising experiments are taking place at the state level, with California, New Mexico, and Washington devoting public tax dollars for local news coverage.

But that funding is a drop in the bucket compared to what's needed.

A 2022 study comparing funding globally found the US spends just \$3.16 per capita on public media, compared to \$142.42 per person in Germany and \$110.73 in Norway. Spending as much on journalism as the United Kingdom does on the BBC would mean \$35 billion a year going to sustaining coverage.

We need, as *The Nation's* John Nichols recently argued, a "Marshall Plan" for journalism — a robust new era of public funding. Our democracy deserves better than to rely on ad dollars that are rapidly drying up.

Chris Mills Rodrigo is the managing editor of *Inequality.org* at the Institute for Policy Studies. This op-ed was adapted from *Inequality.org* and distributed for syndication by *OtherWords.org*.

### Hartmann...

Continued from page 12

bia and Russia, decided in June 2018 to increase their production by 1.2 MBD. Saudi Arabian production in November rose to more than 11.3 MBD, its highest ever."

For reference, Saudi oil production right now is standing at around 9 million barrels a day, and they just announced a million-barrel-a-day production cut to kick in this summer/fall just in time for the presidential election.

So, what can President Biden do?

One step would be to nationalize the Port Arthur refinery, the "crown jewel" essential to US energy security that never should have been sold to a foreign nation. I've written extensively about the process of nationalization here and here, but it would require congressional approval and would probably take more time than Biden has before the November election.

Nonetheless, it would be a shot across the bow of Saudi Arabia and may get their attention sufficiently to stop their intended manipulation of US gas prices this fall. And it's the right thing to do, even if it takes a year or more.

Another would be to take America back to the oil export policy that was put into place during the Nixon administration, prohibiting the export of any US crude petroleum products. US oil production is higher today than it's ever been in history, and in 2019 America achieved technical energy independence, as noted by the US Energy Information Administration:

In 1973, at the height of the Arab Oil Embargo, President Richard Nixon and Congress put into law legislation that

banned the export of US crude. It stood until December, 2015, when Congress and President Barack Obama, under pressure (bribes legalized by five Republicans on the Supreme Court) from the fossil fuel industry, repealed the ban.

American oil companies are currently exporting a bit over 4 million barrels a day, while we're only importing around 900,000 barrels a day from Saudi Arabia and 290,000 barrels a day from Russia (yes, it sounds wacky). Ending exports would cut the tie between US oil prices and Saudi and Russian production. (Which only leaves that Port Arthur, Texas refinery owned by the Saudis as the weak link MBS could use to manipulate US elections via gas prices.)

While it would be challenged in court, there are emergency powers the president has that may allow him to reinstate that ban, at least temporarily, by executive order. Both the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Financial Times* have argued in editorials that banning exports and lifting such a ban are both within the president's powers.

Finally, President Biden could get ahead of the Saudis and Putin by exposing what they're up to. They increased production (lowering US gas prices) in 2018 to help Trump and the Republicans in that year's midterm elections, and cut production (raising US gas prices) in 2022 to hurt Biden and the Democrats in those midterms. Arguably, they got a Republican-controlled House of Representatives out of that effort.

Most Americans are probably unaware of this, and letting them know how our system is being manipulated by these two malevolent foreign powers would take some of the political sting out of the high gas prices that we can ex-

pect to see this fall.

And even if Biden chooses not to engage in this kind of public and high-stakes brinkmanship with MBS and Putin, you and I can. Tell everybody you know what's happening and how we can expect it to play out: it may well begin to bleed through to the mainstream media if enough of us raise hell.

Pass it along!

Thom Hartmann is a progressive radio talk-show host and the author of *The Hidden History of American Oligarchy* and more than 30 other books in print. He is a writing fellow at the Independent Media Institute.

This appeared at [hartmannreport.com](http://hartmannreport.com).



## Welcome to the Twilight Zone: Strange Rulings in Family Care

The Twilight Zone reigns. Left is right; good is bad; sane is insane. In this topsy turvy mindset the Supreme Court of Alabama — a “pro-life” state — decided that frozen embryos are children, thereby threatening in vitro fertilization, a procedure designed to increase births. “Embryo justice” is the mantra.

In Kansas, which allows a Wild West access to guns, the shooting after the Super Bowl victory prompted not a call for stricter gun laws, but a call to curb gun-fire after athletic triumphs. An outbreak of measles in Miami spurred the state’s public health honcho to say that unvaccinated children could attend school. In our democracy, “patriots” embrace a despot who spurns democracy, while evangelical Christians embrace an adulterer, a cheat, a misanthrope. Rod Serling could not have written better scenarios.

The solons in Tennessee, though, have produced the eeriest Twilight Zone episode (aired by ProPublica, Feb. 15, “The Year After a Denied Abortion”). Watch poverty, abetted by government, destroy a family. A 31 year-old mother, three years sober, married to a man also in recovery, was living at home with a 3-month old baby; three other children were in foster care because she left them alone in the car while at a vape store. She learned she was pregnant. Because

the fetus was implanted in scar tissue from the previous caesarean, her uterus might rupture during the pregnancy, and the baby might be born dangerously premature. Physicians advised abortion. But the US Supreme Court scuttled *Roe v Wade*, which offered women the chance for an abortion. Instead, the pro-life enthusiasts on the court sent the decision to the states. And Tennessee proudly passed one of the most restrictive abortion laws in the nation. The state said “no” to this mother, “no” to her physician. The mother couldn’t pay to travel out of state, and she feared losing access to her three children if she left Tennessee for an abortion. She gave birth.

At his point, her story spiraled downward. Pre-pregnancy, the couple had earned enough to pay for (\$1,400/month) an apartment with mice and erratic heating, in a neighborhood with addicts, a car (\$550), and the lawyers’ fees to regain custody of the three children in state custody. They were setting aside money to help with the newborn.

Her uterus did rupture, and the tiny baby remained in intensive care for months, on a breathing tube. The state and federal government via Medicaid paid the huge hospital tab.

But the day the mother left the hospital, she was arrested. She posted a \$6,000 bond, plus agreed to pay an attorney \$6,000 in increments. Poof! went their savings.

From there, the family descended into debt.

First, the hospital was an hour away. The free housing nearby designated for parents of ill children was full. The parents juggled jobs and an old car to make the trek as often as they could to see this very sick baby. Once the baby returned home, the baby came with a feeding tube and a breathing machine. The baby needed to see not just a pediatrician, but an ophthalmologist, a lung specialist and an occupational therapist. Any help on the way? No. (The hospital sent a nurse to help with the feeding tube, but the nurse arrived too late). The federal government technically allowed her \$30/month short-term disability for a baby weighing less than 2 pounds, but she could not figure out the paperwork.

Parental leave? No. No states that ban abortion require paid parental leave. Any subsidized child care? No. The mother quit her job to take care of the family. The baby returned twice to the hospital. The mother decided not to apply for unemployment: she had earlier applied, but didn’t understand the rules, ended up paying back some of the money. As for disability pay after her surgery, that was considered short-term, so she was not eligible.

The baby came off the machines — a “pro-life” victory: a dangerously premature infant can survive. Life, however, got harder for this family. Both parents worked long hours. They found an inexpensive young babysitter to cope with the toddlers. Experienced child care would have taken most of their income. But the husband needed a reliable truck for his job installing vinyl siding. No bank would loan them money, so they turned to high-interest credit cards. The debt mounted.

The next crisis: an arrest warrant for the mother. After she was booked, she was quickly released, to return home to a sick baby. She pleaded guilty to reckless endangerment, would be on probation for a year. Eventually the family, unable to pay the rent on their current apartment, moved. But wait: the mother’s mother, along with her husband, both former addicts, moved in. The marriage disintegrated. The mother stayed off drugs (a positive drug test would make it hard for her to regain custody of the children in foster care), but turned once again to alcohol.

As for the government’s helping hand? It didn’t help. Housing subsidies? Food stamps? Child care? Income subsidies? Unemployment insurance? Legal aid? Didn’t happen. Tennessee spent thousands of dollars to save a newborn, but destroyed the troubled family that was supposed to nurture that newborn. In yet another Twilight Zone irony, “pro-life” can mean “anti-family.”

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

## The Pandemic Has Long-Term Effects on the Economy

By SAM URETSKY

If you’ve been reading “The Economic Impact of the Black Death, IIEP-WP-2020-14” from the Institute for International Economic Policy Working Paper Series (Elliott School of International Affairs The George Washington University), August 2020, you might believe “The Black Death was the largest demographic shock in European history. ... it was a plausibly exogenous shock to the European economy.” On the other hand, you might find that the Book Of Genesis 6:9-9:17 describes adverse weather conditions as a greater demographic and economic problem than bacterium *Yersinia pestis*. Ultimately, the study of economics is the study of response to a stimulus. The Plague, for example, was an infection that killed 30 to 50% of the population of England, France and Spain, and resulted in the end of the feudal system and the development of capitalism.

The COVID 19 epidemic was not as severe as the Black Plague, the Great Flood, or perhaps even the Dust Bowl of the 1930s, but it came at a time when technology was advancing and could adapt to

change. In the United States, the growth of the great cities was related to the concomitant growth of the Internet, but also of the great cities. The growth of the cities was largely primed by well educated people wanting good jobs, and wanting to live near, not so much the jobs that they had, but the jobs that they wanted to get. While the Internet had not progressed as much as would have been desirable, there were attempts to have people work and go to school on-line. Too many people did not have fast broadband or even home computers.

A study, “Effects of remote learning during COVID-19 lockdown on children’s learning abilities and school performance: A systematic review (*International Journal of Educational Development*, September 2923) “reported several adverse effects of remote learning on children’s mental health have been identified, mostly related to the excessive use of electronic devices and lack of in-person contact with school classmates and teachers. These reported effects include disturbed sleep patterns, attention deficits, frustration, stress, depression, and boredom ... However, positive effects of distance learning have also been reported, such as improved competitive and motor skills. Therefore, the overall impact of school closures and remote learning remains controversial.

But, with the lockdown completed, many people preferred working from home, and resisted going back to the work, or at least going back full time. The result was an

exodus from the major cities, not to rural areas, but to smaller cities, with lower costs, and shorter commutation times.

The Brookings Institution reported, “Big cities saw historic population losses while suburban growth declined during the pandemic.” San Francisco’s population fell 6.3%, New York City lost 3.5%, San Jose, Calif. lost 2.7%, and Chicago lost 1.65%. The Brookings report noted that the people leaving the cities They were well to do. The folks who fled New York represented some \$21 billion in residents’ income and about one-third of the people who left moved from Manhattan with a mean annual income of \$214,300.

On the other hand, San Antonio, Texas, Phoenix, Arizona, and Fort Worth, Texas, each had a net gain of more than 13,000 well off residents. While the opportunities for job advancement might be poorer than when they were closer to the corporate headquarters, the quality of life was better, and significantly less expensive. Business Insider made a list of advantages of moving to a suburb of a smaller city, or even a small town. The costs of living are distinctly lower, and the sense of community higher. Even jobs that require part time work in an office are easier to live with if it’s only two or three commutations a week. The shortage of broadband is still around, but most small cities have adequate Internet connections.

There are even benefits to the cities that are losing population. In New York City,

as remote and hybrid work practices have hardened from trend to “new normal,” office occupancy rates are at an all-time low. The city has more than 95 million square feet of office space currently unoccupied — the equivalent of 30 Empire State Buildings. The goal has been to repurpose these office buildings. From the *New York Times*, “It’s definitely all happening, for sure,” said Eric Anton, an agent with the firm Marcus and Millichap who specializes in selling buildings. Of the seven hotels in New York he currently represents, three will likely become senior housing, one will become market-rate apartments, and the balance will stay hotels.” Another use has been widely proposed — vertical farms. As reported in *Smithsonian*, “office spaces already provide an ideal environment for growing food, since they are already air conditioned, heated and well ventilated. Not many modifications have to be made to the buildings themselves.” The benefits include year-round food production and alleviation of food insecurity that afflicts many urban centers. Farming is no longer the red barn farm of the past, and significantly not the economically stable occupation that it should be. The COVID-19 epidemic may be as much of an economics change as the plague — and we will have to adapt.

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## Gazans are Starving — Don’t Cut Aid Now

**To feed children, treat the wounded, and save innocent lives, the US must restore UNRWA’s funding.**

By PHYLLIS BENNIS

Earlier this year, the International Court of Justice ruled that Israel’s actions in Gaza plausibly constitute genocide. The world’s most influential judicial body ordered Israel to stop killing civilians and to admit more humanitarian aid.

Unfortunately, Israel was having none of it. Israel’s killings have continued, with over 30,000 Palestinians in Gaza now dead and tens of thousands more at risk of dying from hunger and disease. Precious little aid is getting in.

And worse, the U. has joined Israel’s ef-

forts to incapacitate Gaza’s most important relief agency.

Just hours after the Court’s decision was announced, Israel alleged that 12 Gazan employees of the UN’s Relief Works Agency (UNRWA) — the primary body responsible for providing humanitarian support to Palestine refugees — were Hamas members connected to the Oct. 7 attacks.

For more than half a century UNRWA has provided all the services in Gaza that would ordinarily be provided by a government. Most of Gaza’s doctors, nurses, teachers, engineers, and street sweepers are UNRWA employees. Without UNRWA, all the other UN agencies and nonprofits would be unable to carry out their crucial work in the region.

UNRWA employs thousands of people in Gaza. Israel’s claim about 12 of them was dubious — and the country’s government offered no evidence for it.

In fact, the names of all UNRWA employees had been provided to Israel earlier in the year for vetting and no concerns were raised. But just in case, UNRWA immediately announced it was firing the named employees

(minus two who’d been killed). And the UN launched two separate investigations.

Instead of waiting for these investigations to play out, the Biden administration immediately cut its entire aid allocation to UNRWA, despite the agency’s irreplaceable role in getting desperately needed aid into Gaza. Many key US allies followed suit, and the US Senate voted to explicitly bar UNRWA from receiving future humanitarian aid.

Some in Washington suggested they might redirect UNRWA funds to organizations like UNICEF and the World Food Program, but UNICEF and WFP together have less than 70 staff on the ground in Gaza — UNRWA has over 13,000. US officials themselves had admitted earlier that UNRWA was “the only game in town” in terms of getting any significant aid into Gaza.

The impact of these cuts on the already threatened lives of 2.3 million displaced Gazans — as well as millions more Palestinian refugees in the West Bank, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria — can hardly be overstated. Defunding the agency further undermines Palestinians’ access to water, food, medicine, shelter, and fuel — and alongside ongoing US

military support for Israel, makes Washington complicit in genocide.

Thousands of Palestinians — especially babies, children, pregnant women, and the elderly — will die as a result of these cuts. And the millions of Palestinian refugees throughout the region will lose the only international agency in the UN system that’s mandated to protect their rights, including their right to return someday to their homes in what’s now Israel.

Creating conditions that threaten the survival of all or part of a given population is part of the very definition of genocide under international law. To feed children, treat the wounded, and save innocent lives — and avoid being complicit in genocide — the US must restore UNRWA’s funding and use its leverage to compel an immediate ceasefire in the conflict.

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## WAYNE O'LEARY

# Big Pharma on the Defensive

Joe Biden's record on healthcare policy is not the best. In 2020, he opposed Medicare-for-All, demagoguing the issue by calling it "socialism," in order to deny Bernie Sanders the Democratic presidential nomination. The announced Biden alternative was an Obamacare public option, which was allowed to die a quiet death once the president's nomination was secured.

Later, under the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022, the main Biden healthcare initiative was to extend for three years the higher Obamacare marketplace subsidies temporarily raised during the pandemic and to cap individual out-of-pocket Medicare costs for prescription drugs and insulin.

Much has been made of the subsidy-stimulated record of 21 million Obamacare marketplace sign-ups for 2024 (approaching double the 2020 level), supposed proof of the program's popularity. Actually, it's more a sign of practicality on the part of Americans, who are not stupid: If the system can't provide what you really need or think you deserve, take the best thing on offer; it's better than nothing. What with the failure of 10 states to expand Medicaid, the marketplaces are all there is for many uninsured, but the increased Obamacare subsidies, purely a stopgap, will end in 2025 — a potentially fatal flaw in the program.

Nevertheless, one area where Biden and the Democrats have followed through on healthcare with apparent success is on mandatory Medicare prescription-drug negotiations, a last-minute inclusion in the In-

flation Reduction Act. If Obamacare is complicated, confusing and subject to change — Paul Krugman, an advocate, admits it's a Rube Goldberg device — drug-price negotiations are relatively cut and dried, an exception to most aspects of America's convoluted healthcare system.

Starting two years from now, in 2026, the first 10 brand-name drugs chosen for negotiation (from among those of highest cost to the Medicare program) will have their prices adjusted for purchase under Medicare's Part D prescription entitlement. They will be followed by 15 more drugs in 2027, another 15 in 2028, and 20 per year thereafter.

The 40 drugs to be selected through 2028 represent less than meets the eye. They will make up a tiny share of the thousands of drugs on the market and be limited to those with no generic or biosimilar competitors; they will also retain patent protection, most for nine years after entering the market and the more complex for 13 years.

Although the program is incremental and extremely modest — progressive Democrats initially wanted all drugs negotiable from the start — a comparison with what went before is like night and day. Medicare's original Part D drug benefit, enacted as part of George W. Bush's 2003 package of "reforms" that accelerated privatization of the overall program, was incorporated in the Medicare Prescription Drug, Improvement, and Modernization Act, passed mostly (but not entirely) with Republican votes; it created a watered-down entitlement, beginning in 2006, with its infamous "doughnut-hole" coverage gap.

Part D aimed at a minimal lowering of drug costs for seniors without disturbing in the least the profits of Big Pharma. Negotiation of drug prices, which some thought then could reduce drug-company revenues by 3% to 10%, was expressly forbidden by law. Accordingly, industry profits continued unabated, reaching \$50 billion annually by

2020.

Such outlandish profits are made possible by US prescription-drug prices that average 250% higher than the combined averages for the 38 advanced countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), according to a 2022 RAND Corporation study. The companies making up Big Pharma justly fear the precedents Medicare price negotiations will set in the US, their favorite unregulated place to do business, especially in forcing down prices in the private, non-Medicare market. One estimate suggests negotiations will save the Medicare program itself close to \$100 billion during the first decade alone.

These savings, however, will be meaningful only if negotiated prices proceed in conjunction with other steps to limit abuse of the system by the pharmaceuticals. Foremost of these will be ending the corrupt "evergreening" of drug patents; that is, allowing federal patent renewals for continued exclusive production and sale of existing drugs rationalized by minor chemical or cosmetic changes aimed at marketing them for alternative conditions, claiming the drugs are "new" when they're not. Patent protection, it's clear, is mainly profit protection.

Panic is beginning to set in among Big Pharma members at the prospect and ramifications of losing their Medicare cash cow. It's reflected in their radically expanded advertising budgets, which have doubled since 2016 to a combined \$12 billion annually, a cost factored into retail prices. (The US is unique in permitting drug ads aimed directly at consumers, something banned in most countries.)

There's also the inference that lower negotiated prices will mean fewer new drugs being developed because, presumably, companies won't risk their reduced profits on innovative research. In 2021, the Congressional Budget Office, influenced no doubt by industry-friendly econ-

omists, estimated lower prices will mean eight fewer new drugs over the next decade and 30 fewer the following decade, a 13% decline. It's an unknowable contention, but it provides a conveniently scary scenario, encompassing an evidence-free veiled threat Big Pharma has used for years to protect its turf.

In the end, the real threat to healthcare consumers is that the Supreme Court may rally to Big Pharma's defense. Already, six drug firms, including four targeted in the first round of Medicare negotiations (Merck, Johnson & Johnson, Squibb and AstraZeneca), have joined their lobby PhRMA (Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America) and the US Chamber of Commerce to sue the government, charging price negotiations are unconstitutional.

As written, the law requires companies to negotiate, or choose between paying a penalty tax or withdrawing their drugs from the Medicare program. Industry lawyers plan to resuscitate the 19th century doctrine of "substantive due process," devised by Court conservatives to protect monopolistic railroads from public regulation by declaring them "persons" that couldn't be deprived of their property under the Fifth and 14th Amendments without "due process of law" and "just compensation." A Supreme Court that revived the concept of corporate personhood in its 2010 *Citizens United* decision may find that's a hard rationale to resist.

Let's give Sen. Mitt Romney (R-Utah) the last word. Defending the drugmakers at February's Senate healthcare hearings, ex-CEO Mitt imparted this choice bit of corporate wisdom: "In capitalism, if you're running an enterprise ... you try and get as high a price as you can."

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## GRASSROOTS/*Hank Kalet*

# An Assault on Campus Speech

We are witnessing what I think is the biggest threat to free expression in my lifetime. That sounds like hyperbole, but I don't think it is.

I've lived through the "wars" over political correctness and cancel culture, which were "tempests in a teapot," to use the cliché, and not real threats and were more or less about people being mad that, were they to be racist or sexist in public, there might be push back.

The current climate is different. These earlier debates were about what might be acceptable to say in polite company or in public more broadly. They were about cultural and social mores and not hard-and-fast institutional rules. That is not the case with what is happening on college campuses today, where most of these battles have been and continue to be fought.

Take what is happening at Barnard College. As reported by *The Forward*, "Barnard students may no longer display messages on their dorm doors," a move made in "response to the tense climate at the New York college since the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war."

Some students at Barnard and Columbia University, of which it is a part, have placed signs on their dormitory doors charging Israel with genocide in Gaza and of being an illegitimate state. Jewish students filed a lawsuit, accusing both schools of failing to protect students from "pervasive" antisemitism and anti-Zionism. "Anti-Zionism is not merely a political movement—although many try to disguise it as such—but is a direct attack against Israel as a Jewish collectivity," the suit read.

The administration reportedly sent an email to students informing them of the change in policy, and told them (again, from *The Forward*) it was put in place to ensure that "everyone feels welcome and safe" at Barnard.

"While many decorations and fixtures on doors serve as a means of helpful communication amongst peers, we are also aware that some may have the unintended effect of isolating those who have different views and beliefs," read the email from Leslie Grinage, the college's dean.

The Barnard policy appears to cover all decorations and, as such, is neutral. As does American University's new restrictions on the posting of fliers on campus property "unless those fliers provide details about events organized by student clubs or university-affiliated organizations." Similar prohibitions have been put in place at Lehigh, Cornell, the University of Pennsylvania, and elsewhere.

Supporters of these kind of restrictions argue that order

on campuses demand the curtailment of free speech rights, that in most of these cases speech is harassment.

"If free speech impedes another individual's ability to learn, it's a violation of that right to equal access," said Lynn Pasquerella, president of the American Association of Colleges and Universities. "At what point does one person's free speech violate another student's right or faculty member's right to free thought, free speech, or academic freedom?"

This argument strips the phrase free speech of its meaning and puts universities in the dangerous position of policing what their students can say and what kind of protest is acceptable.

Photos of Israeli children kidnapped by Hamas on Oct. 7 or Palestinian children killed during the Israeli bombardment of Gaza are political actions that universities should be protecting. At Rutgers, where I teach, these posters dotted the New Brunswick campus, often occupying adjacent spaces. They offered a dueling narrative that, when taken together, eloquently outlined what is at stake in Israel, Gaza, and the West Bank. The dueling fliers called attention to the humanity on both sides, though that may not have been the purpose.

Do we really want to ban these expressions on campuses, to tell students that their growing political awareness is less important than their test scores? Shouldn't these debates be a part of their university experiences? I certainly think so, which is why I invite students in my journalism classes to discuss these issues and to cover them for class, to present on news stories from sources as varied as the *Jerusalem Post*, Al Jazeera, and the *New York Times*. And I ask them to question their own beliefs, not to change them but to challenge their foundations because if they do that their own commitments will be stronger.

Look, I get that free speech is not an absolute right. Direct threats and obvious harassment on campus — as when a student wearing a keffiyah (Palestinian head scarf) or kippah yarmulke (Jewish head covering) are verbally, but directly attacked as terrorists or murders — are generally not seen as protected speech. And in a classroom setting, the use of racial or ethnic epithets usually crosses a line.

Sorting through these issues often is not easy. There are slogans and phrases that make me uneasy, make others uneasy, but that are part of the larger discourse. The slogan "From the River to the Sea, Palestine Will Be Free" leaves many Jews — including myself — feeling threatened, but it is not a threat. It is not, despite what politicians like Elise Stefanik argue, usually for self-serving political reasons.

The phrase, in fact, is one used often by the Israeli settlement movement, whose chief goal is to chase Palestinians from their homes in the Occupied Territories and ultimately create a Greater Israel.

But the hearer does not get to decide what can be said, should not be allowed to use hurt feelings to govern what others say and believe. If free speech is to mean anything, we cannot invite governmental and corporate institutions

(higher ed falls into these groupings) to act as arbiters or to shut down debate. Governments are notoriously bad at policing speech and protest, because governments have their own motivations, their own reasons for quieting dissenters.

These new rules being pushed by American colleges and universities in the name of tolerance do no one any favors. They curtail debate and play to a minority of students and faculty who just do not want to hear arguments with which they disagree — including the posting of fliers showing the faces of Israelis kidnapped by Hamas on Oct. 7 or Palestinian children killed in the Israeli onslaught that followed.

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# Military Rivals of the US in the Second Cold War

By JASON SIBERT

Those who follow foreign policy understand our divided world and how this division impacts the idea of a world governed by the rule of law.

In the later part of the first Cold War, the United States and Russia (in its Soviet and post-Soviet forms) cooperated in several landmark treaties to draw down the number of nuclear weapons in the world and limit the number of conventional forces in Europe. The new Cold War pits the US and its allies against the Russia/China orbit. One issue surrounding this Cold War is how much we spend on defense compared to the People's Republic of China — the second leading power in the world, defining power in military, diplomatic and economic terms. Russia is a distant third.

US military spending dwarfs that of the People's Republic of China. Writers William Hartung and Christopher Preble stated in their Feb. 22 article at NationalInterest.org, "The US Is Playing the Wrong Game in the Competition with China," that the US defense budget is at least four times larger than China's official number (\$905.5 billion vs. \$219.5 billion) and more than twice as large as the International Institute for Strategic Studies estimate for China's spending, adjusting for differences in purchasing power (\$407.9 billion). Remember, the PRC supposedly gets more bang for its buck, spending less for an equivalent amount of military power, an issue rarely mentioned.

*Continued on next page*



# Trump, Like Biden, Supports Israeli Campaign Against Gaza: 'You've Got to Finish the Problem'

By JUAN COLE

ANN ARBOR – Donald Trump telephoned in to “Fox and Friends” on Tuesday, March 5, breaking his long silence on Israel’s campaign against Gaza. So reports Sanjana Karanth at HuffPost.

One host, Brian Kilmeade, asked Trump, “Are you on board with the way the IDF is taking the fight to Gaza – in Gaza?”

Trump replied, “You’ve got to finish the problem. You had a horrible invasion that took place, that would have never happened if I was president, by the way. As you know, Iran was broke, Brian, they were broke. They had no money for Hamas, for Hezbollah – they were broke. This would have never happened – and for another reason, they wouldn’t have done it to me. I guarantee you that. They did this because they have no respect for Biden. And frankly they got soft. And what happened here is incredible. That – it should never have happened. Likewise, Russia would never have attacked Ukraine.”

Vaughn Hillyard and Allan Smith at NBC called up the Trump campaign for further comment. They report that Karoline

Leavitt, Trump’s national press secretary, said:

“President Trump did more for Israel than any American President in history, and he took historic action in the Middle East that created unprecedented peace ... When President Trump is back in the Oval Office, Israel will once again be protected, Iran will go back to being broke, terrorists will be hunted down, and the bloodshed will end.”

NBC recalls that Trump had said last October, that he would “fully support Israel defeating, dismantling, and permanently destroying the terrorist group Hamas.”

What is striking is that Trump’s position on Gaza is not any different from that of Joe Biden. Barak Ravid at Axios reports that Israeli politician Benny Gantz, a member of the current war cabinet, came to Washington on March 4. He wasn’t told there must be an immediate ceasefire. He wasn’t told that Hamas can’t be destroyed with Israel’s current tactics. The White House officials pleaded with him to let more food and aid in to Gaza and to establish means of distributing it safely. Vice President Kamala Harris and National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan told Gantz he can’t invade Rafah without evacuating 1.4 million Palestinian civilians first, and expressed skepticism that it could be done. But they didn’t say he couldn’t invade Rafah, and they didn’t object to ethnically cleansing a million and a half people for a second time in order to enable this military operation. They also never threatened to cut off transfers of ammunition and military equipment to Israel’s war effort, which Biden could do with a single phone call.

Both Trump and Biden, along with Antony Blinken, however, agree with the goal of Israel “defeating, dismantling, and permanently destroying the terrorist group Hamas.” That is why the US keeps vetoing UNSC ceasefire resolutions and makes sure that the Israeli officials operate with impunity.

That this goal seems plausible to the Washington Blob explains why US officials are comfortable with the Israeli total war on Gaza. They may wish that fewer than 30,000 Palestinians, mostly civilians, could have been killed in the pursuit of that goal. They may wish that the fascist government of Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu had been more circumspect and less openly brutal in its tactics and less of an embarrassment to the US. But they believe that “you can’t make omelettes without breaking some eggs.”

When Hilary Clinton, who shares the Blob mindset, was asked in February if she was shocked by the high civilian casualties in Gaza, she replied, “Of course I’m not shocked, because that’s what happens in war.”

Actually, if US soldiers did the things to civilian noncombatants that Israeli soldiers are doing in Gaza, they would be court-martialed. Airman Aaron Bushnell committed suicide over the shame of the US military being complicit in these war crimes. Veterans have burned their uniforms in protest, and active duty personnel are circulating anonymous letters of protest. Ms. Clinton once remarked of Vladimir Putin that “he doesn’t have a soul, he is KGB.” But it turns out it takes one to know

one.

Meanwhile half of American adults believe Israel has gone too far in Gaza, which means half of Americans have more common sense than either Trump or Biden.

As for Trump, as usual nothing he said was true. Iran was not behind the Oct. 7 attack on Israel, and in fact was entirely taken by surprise, according to a CIA assessment. For this reason, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei told Hamas official Ismail Haniya that Iran would not intervene militarily on the side of Hamas in the current conflict.

Iran is still broke, since the Biden administration has kept Trump’s “maximum pressure” sanctions on Iran intact. This policy is unwise, since it pushed Iran into the arms of Russia, which gained a strategic asset in its struggle against Ukraine, and because being on a permanent war footing with another country can easily spiral into a shooting war. Iran got around Trump by smuggling oil to China, and it is getting around Biden the same way.

As for destroying a clan-based resistance movement like Hamas by brutalizing the civilian population within which it operates, that was also the US plan for the Taliban in Afghanistan.

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## ‘The World Cannot Afford Conflict in Asia’

By N. GUNASEKARAN

Many foreign policy experts have been warning that conflicts in Asia would aggravate in coming days. The US is continuing efforts for hegemony in the Asian region, and its ongoing military encirclement of China is threatening peace and stability in the region.

Some of the conflicts endangering the peace and security of Asia are China’s counteroffensive to resist US hegemony, the confrontation between China and Taiwan, escalation of the Russian conflict in Ukraine, ongoing Israeli attacks on Gaza, North Korea’s development and testing of nuclear weapons and military confrontation between Israel and Iran.

East and Southeast Asia have witnessed many lasting conflicts along with territorial and maritime disputes. Myanmar’s military junta assumed power in February 2021 and a coordinated resistance is continuing, precipitating a serious crisis in the region.

The 60th Munich Security Conference, an annual meeting that brings together heads of government, defense and foreign ministers, parliamentarians, military leaders and security experts from around the world, was held in Germany Feb. 16-18. In this conference, Singapore’s Minister for Defense, Ng Eng Hen, asserted categorically that “the world cannot afford a conflict in Asia and it should be avoided at all costs.” He argued that diplomatic solutions for all conflicts in Asia must be arrived at via multilateral forums. He rightly pointed out that the world “cannot have three simultaneous theaters of instability” – referring to the war between Russia and Ukraine, the Israel-Hamas conflict, and the intensified conflict between the US and China.

Since 2011, the US has been following the “pivot to

Asia” policy, of increased US interventions in Asia. Based on this approach, the US has increased its naval and air force activity in the Asia-Pacific region. It has treaty obligations to aid Taiwan, Japan and South Korea in case of attacks on them. Naturally, this led to increased US military spending. It is reported that the US would spend about \$1 trillion on defense each year by 2030. Consequently, countries in the Indo-Pacific region have been compelled to protect their interests by allocating large sums of money for defense spending. China has to spend about \$500 billion each year by 2030.

US allies in the Asian Pacific region, Australia, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and the Philippines, have increased their total defense budgets by about 7.4%, from about \$984 billion to over \$1.05 trillion between 2022 and 2023. The biggest increase among the allies was from Taiwan, which increased its defense budget by about \$3 billion, or 20%, heightening tensions between China and Taiwan.

A report from the International Institute for Strategic Studies revealed that the total global defense expenditure reached \$2.2 trillion in 2023, a 9% increase from the previous year. The report also pointed out that the major drivers of this increased spending were the ongoing Russian war in Ukraine, and the exacerbating relationship between the US and China.

These billions of defense expenditures support a massive global arms industry. The big military corporations are reaping the benefits of conflicts. The US Department of Defense (DOD) revealed that Lockheed Martin Corporation, Raytheon Technologies Corporation and General Dynamics Corporation together accounted for \$297.68 billion in market capitalization in 2022.

The world’s arms manufacturers always aspire for wars and the risk or fear of wars, since wars and conflicts guarantee the continued flow of profits. Currently, they take advantage of the conflict in Ukraine, since many countries increased their military spending. The current military op-

eration in Gaza increased revenues of military contractors while the US went on providing Israel with additional military funding.

According to a report from Watson institute for International and Public Affairs at Brown university, war violence caused the deaths of over 940,000 people in the 22 years since the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks and its “reverberating effects” caused about 3.8 million deaths. The combined death toll in post-9/11 war zones was about five million.

Due to wars, towns and cities in countries such as Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Libya and elsewhere were destroyed, with estimated total costs over \$8 trillion. The impact on the mental and physical health of millions of people which would last for generations was another worst dimension of destructive wars.

Asia’s poor nations are constantly increasing their defense expenditures due to the intensified conflicts and wars. Massive spending on defense have a dreadful impact on spending on human development, poverty eradication efforts and food security in these countries. Particularly, it hampers efforts to reduce severe poverty in the region. Already, due to political instability, weak governance, economic insecurity, and vulnerability to natural disasters, many of the poor people in the Asian region are living in horrific conditions. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) stated that Asia and the Pacific remains home to a large share of the world’s poor: 263 million living on less than \$1.90 a day and 1.1 billion on less than \$3.20 a day. The conditions of the people living in fragile and conflict-affected areas in Asia are very appalling.

The global resistance to war mongering, selfish exploitation of lasting conflicts by the big powers led by the US and the giant military corporations is the need of the hour.

*N. Gunasekaran is a political activist and writer based in Chennai, India.*

## Sibert...

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Hartung and Preble stated: “The just-released edition of IISS’s Military Balance notes that China’s ‘official defense budgets have fallen as a percentage of GDP to an average of 1.23% between 2019 and 2023, from 1.28% between 2014 and 2018. The small increase in national-defense burden in 2023 to 1.24% of GDP mainly stems from the relative slowdown in economic growth.’ By contrast, US defense spending as a share of GDP has risen in the last three years, from 3.26% in 2021 to 3.36% in 2023.”

Does Beijing pose a military challenge to the US? China has nothing approaching our network of 750 overseas military bases, its 170,000 troops abroad, or its regular engagement in counter-terror operations—78

in all during the Biden years, according to an estimate by the Brown University Costs of War project, as stated by Hartung and Preble. The best way to head off a US-China war over Taiwan is through diplomacy, not military build-ups. The two writers said: “The balance close to China’s shores, as in a potential conflict with Taiwan, is a different matter, but the best way to head off a US-China war over Taiwan is through diplomacy, not military build-ups. Credible deterrence is not simply a matter of military capability but also a function of reassurance. As Bonnie Glaser, Jessica Chen Weiss, and Thomas Christensen explained in *Foreign Affairs* late last year, ‘A threatened state has little incentive to avoid war if it fears the unacceptable consequences of not fighting.’ Paradoxically, an overemphasis on matching or overmatching an adversary’s military capabilities might undermine

the effectiveness of deterrent threats by making credible assurance less believable.”

The PRC’s strategy for being a player on the world stage involves diplomacy, trade and development assistance on a global scale. Through these weapons, China influences world events. Countries with relatively meager militaries have outsized influence in international law (Canada), economics (Switzerland) and culture (Nigeria, with its Nollywood film center). Working-level relationships, even at the level of engagement among civilians, build trust, an invaluable asset in international relations. Contrast the PRC’s approach to the US’ – an overmilitarized approach to international relations has other harmful side effects, as involvement in major conflicts, either on the ground or through arms sales, inevitably causes tensions with some nations, especially the Global South. Remember, China

has not fought a war in over 50 years.

Hartung and Preble criticize our PRC policy for being too concentrated on how to win a war. Our country should find ways to lower tensions and cooperate despite profound differences on issues like human rights and the military balance in the Western Pacific. Hartung and Preble said: “A better approach would involve finding ways to lower tensions and cooperate even in the face of profound differences on issues like human rights and the military balance in the Western Pacific.”

If the tensions between the US and the Russia/China block subside, then maybe the world’s great power blocks can cooperate and create a strong system of international law.

*Jason Sibert of St. Louis, Mo., is Lead Writer of the Peace Economy Project.*

# The Roberts Supreme Court: Too Extreme for Voters

By JAMIE STIEHM

The John Roberts Supreme Court, a.k.a. the Extreme Court, is a clear and present danger to democracy. Its approval rating has sunk to a record low, under 40%. Chief Justice Roberts is responsible for the worst rulings since Chief Justice Roger Taney rode into town for 30 years and set off the Civil War.

In fact, the court may yet grant Donald Trump presidential immunity from crimes committed in office. After all, Trump gloated, he named three young conservative “Federalist Society” members.

We may witness a hard political bargain this year.

But few will forget the June 2022 *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization* ruling against reproductive rights.

Roberts heads a partisan Republican majority of six to three liberal members, all women. He’s the one whose name will go down in history with Taney (“Tawny.”)

The *Dobbs* decision may split the electorate into a volcanic rupture. A protest vote could come to the ballot box. Such a harsh stand against abortion rights (for your daughter, sister, wife or partner) could turn out to be a gift to the blue side of the spectrum.

Democratic lawmakers and strategists say the extreme Supreme Court is their secret weapon.

Across the nation, people registered outrage at violating a constitutional right. *Dobbs* meant for the first time in American history, the high court took rights *away* from citizens.

Five men and one woman (all raised Catholic) didn’t blink an eye in reaching a radical opinion, blistering in tone, by Justice Samuel Alito, age 73.

As for Taney, he enraged the Northern half of the nation with his dreadful *Dred Scott* ruling in 1857. Considered a catalyst for the Civil War, the case helped lift Abraham Lincoln to the presidency in 1860.

Taney viciously denied all Blacks any rights “which the White man is bound to respect.” This made free states see red. Taney was the ugly face of antebellum America, President Andrew Jackson’s man.

Taney, from a slave state, went further: He decreed that Blacks, free or enslaved, could never become American citizens. Free states already hated slavecatchers for crossing borders to capture fugitives. The *Dred Scott* decision raised a hue and cry at a terrible injustice.

Former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., calls the current Supreme Court “rogue.” Yes, sitting on high, judging the rest of us, with no checks or balances on their power. (Hello, James Madison?) Five of the nine were named by a president who lost the popular vote.

Roberts also overturned voting rights and campaign finance reform.

Other critics like Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse, D-R.I., say the Roberts Court is “captured” by dark money, with no enforceable ethics code on their conduct, plush vacations and lavish gifts. (Hello, Clarence Thomas?)

Remember the Supreme Court answers to nobody, with nine unelected justices given the last word (or vote) on democracy. I mean literally: 5-4, *Bush v. Gore*.

Roberts and alter-ego Taney felt they could turn the tide of American progress in the ocean of justice.

Now in an election year, Republicans don’t talk so loud, but make no mistake. They are still on the war path against health and human rights for women and girls, on the state and federal level.

The Alabama Supreme Court decision on IVF embryos only intensified the storm.

Americans of all kinds feel the court intruded too far into our personal lives, causing agonizing medical plights and travel to other states.

In a tragic result, Texas logged 26,000 rape-related pregnancies since *Dobbs*. The human toll that outlawing reproductive rights takes is coming home.

The first rule of politics: There is nothing like witnessing personal injustice to mobilize one. Life, liberty and all that jazz is on the line for women and girls. (Minors have it even worse.)

*Dobbs* is making females captive to their own bodies, forcing them to cross state lines for medical treatment. In Alito’s voice, the Roberts court is saying that females can never have full human rights. We are a second-class caste.

With sweet dreams of *Brown v. Board of Education* (desegregating schools), elite law professors teach the court as a fair, wise and rational branch. But students often challenge that.

The echo across time is all too clear.

*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.*

## Summer of Discontent/Part 2

By BARRY FRIEDMAN

(Tuesday, Sept. 10, 2024. Mansions on Fifth Hotel, McCook Suite, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania)

His vision suddenly blurry, Donald Trump put his hand on the shower wall to steady himself. His fingers slid down the ceramic tile. Then he couldn’t feel them. His legs gave out. When his head hit the thick, ornate porcelain rim of the tub, it opened a gash on his forehead and knocked out a tooth.

He didn’t feel any of it. He was already dead.

He was on all fours, his knees inside the tub, his torso, head, arms hanging over the edge. The shower was still on.

A picture of a naked, dead Donald Trump would be worth millions. The Secret Service agent who found him was tempted; instead, he covered him with a towel.

An ex-president, he told himself, shouldn’t be seen like this.

Seven weeks after the Republican National Convention, three weeks after the Democratic Convention, both the Republican and Democratic presidential nominees were dead.

America had never been here.

Nikki Haley, whom Trump reluctantly chose to be his running mate at the RNC convention in Milwaukee in July, surprising everyone, was campaigning in Colorado Springs when she got the news. Michael Whatley, Trump’s first pick for RNC chairman, had been forced out after telling CNN’s Jake Tapper that Trump would “most probably” accept the results of the November election, so it was Lara Trump, the nominee’s daughter-in-law, Eric’s wife, the new RNC chief, who made the call.

“We have a problem, Nikki. You may not be the one. Many people are already saying they want Don Jr.”

She was lying. Nobody was saying that. Haley wasn’t buying it.

“Go f\*ck yourself,” she said and hung up the phone.

But the GOP did have a problem. The Democrats were lucky, by comparison. President Biden hadn’t yet been officially nominated by his party when he died of stress cardiomyopathy, so when Kamala Harris, the vice president, was named to the head of the ticket, there was a begrudging logic to it. But the GOP hadn’t thought about life without Trump. His running mates — first Mike Pence, now Haley — were seen as mere courtiers, staffers. Pence and Haley couldn’t get them to storm the Capitol, Lara Trump told herself. She called

Mitch McConnell.

“Laurie, announce Haley. Do it quick.”

“Lara.”

“What?”

“My name is Lara, you called me—”

“What are you talking about?”

Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis announced he was back in the race and was willing to lead the party.

Trump’s private physician, Dr. Bruce Aronwald, said the ex-president suffered an intracranial aneurysm; still, a CNN poll indicated 31% of the GOP believed the ex-president had been poisoned, 11% said he was still alive, and 9% said they had no intention of voting now that Trump wasn’t in the race. Steve Bannon called for a military coup.

The president, Kamala Harris, tried calling Melania Trump to offer her sympathies. On the third attempt, Mrs. Trump picked up.

“Doug and I are sorry for your loss. How’s Barron?”

Nothing.

“Melania, we’re sort—”

“Heard you,” Melania said.

On Thursday, Chris Christie, Vivek Ramaswamy, Asa Hutchinson, and Doug Burgum, all former candidates, wrote an op-ed in the *Washington Post* that the party had to coalesce around Haley.

DeSantis said he wanted to meet with Haley and RNC leadership to figure out the party’s direction.

Christie, according to Reuters, called him and said, “Ron, stop being a d\*ck.”

Trump was buried near the pool at Mar-a-Lago.

The family told President Harris not to come.

Sen. Lindsey Graham gave the eulogy. He cried for the second time in three months over a dead president.

Don Jr. said, “The Democrats hounded my father to death. They killed him. They will pay.”

On the way to Florida for the service, Haley gave a speech in Skokie, Illinois, and told supporters that, as president, she would continue the legacy of Donald Trump.

Lara Trump was furious.

“Nikki, please, slow down on this. It’s not official.”

“Your f\*cking brother-in-law will be the Republican nominee over my dead body.”

Haley hung up on Trump again.

House Speaker Mike Johnson and McConnell announced they were backing Haley. Former senators Mitt Romney and Jeff Flake issued similar endorsements. Liz Cheney offered her unqualified support. Current senators Marco Rubio and Ted Cruz did the same.

On Friday, DeSantis said he wouldn’t contest Haley.

A *Washington Post*/ABC poll had the race tied between President Harris and

Nikki Haley.

Haley went on CBS’s *Face the Nation* and told Margaret Brennan, “I am the nominee. I am the leader of the party.” She then announced that Texas Gov. Greg Abbott had agreed to be her vice president. The *Guardian* reported that Abbott told an aide, “If we lose, they’ll blame Haley, not me. But I can say I sacrificed for the party. It’ll help in 2028.”

Lara Trump called Haley for a third time. “You win,” she said.

“No sh\*t,” said Haley.

The following Sunday, Lara Trump broke down on NBC’s *Meet the Press*, telling host Kristen Welker, “I fear the country won’t survive the loss of my father-in-law.” She never mentioned Haley by name. Melania Trump told Reuters she felt “bad” about her husband’s death, “but that I will survive, as I always have.”

Haley challenged Harris to three debates. The first debate was scheduled for Oct. 14 — Columbus Day, according to the RNC; Indigenous People’s Day, according to the DNC.

Nimrata “Nikki” Haley or Kamala Devi Harris, both first-generation Americans —

## SATIRE/Rosie Sorenson

### Say it Ain’t So, Joe

Taking my cue from Joe Manchin, I am announcing that I will not run for President in 2024. Or ever.

I am announcing that I will stop praying for the Great Felonious Trump to be sent to Solitary Confinement and that instead he be housed in Cell Block D.

I am announcing that I will eschew bribes from Egypt, although I am still a bit tempted by those shiny gold ingots.

I am announcing that I will stop accepting pills from strangers and ending up in rehab.

I am announcing that I have screwed movie stars, but destroyed the drafts of my tell-all. So sorry. No kiss; no tell.

I am announcing that I will refrain from purchasing hospitals with my Private Equity money, robbing them blind and forcing them into bankruptcy.

I am announcing that I will stop impeaching librarians and teachers for doing their jobs.

I am announcing that I will stop staring

Haley’s parents were born in India; Harris’ mother, too, was born in India; Harris’ father is Jamaican — would be president of the United States in a matter of months.

Two women of color, opposite political worlds.

Any other time in America, it might have been a time to celebrate. But this was America in 2024.

Joe Biden and Donald Trump were dead.

A country that didn’t want either had gotten its wish.

*Barry Friedman is an essayist, political columnist, petroleum geology reporter 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.*

at the dreamy mouse face of Ron DeSatan and wondering what might have been.

I am announcing that I will stop comparing myself to Alexei Navalny for the (unreasonable, illegal) parking ticket I received for not turning my wheels to the curb on a downhill street. Victim!

I am announcing I will stop claiming that Black people like me because I’ve been persecuted, just like them, for nothing whatsoever!

I am announcing that I will refrain from bitching out Fox News reporters and calling them \*\*\*\* \* \*\*\*\*\* \*\*\*\*\*

I am announcing that I’ve lost confidence in Nikki Haley’s ability to twist herself into a pretzel to accept Trump’s offer of Vice President.

I am announcing I will refrain from taking my appeal to the Supreme Court for my alleged crimes (none of your business) and will instead allow a jury of my peers to judge me.

I am announcing that I will no longer sell Gila monsters to unsuspecting dudes who let themselves get bitten and die.

I am announcing that I have nothing more to announce.

*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*

Remember The Progressive Populist in your will.

## Count the Real Gaza Death Toll

Since the Hamas raid penetrated the multi-tiered Israeli border security on October 7, 2023 (an unexplained collapse of Israel's defensive capabilities), 2.3 million utterly defenseless Palestinians in the tiny crowded Gaza enclave have been on the receiving end of over 65,000 bombs/missiles plus non-stop tank shelling and snipers.

The extreme right-wing Netanyahu regime has enforced its declared siege of, in its genocidal words, "no food, no water, no electricity, no fuel, no medicine."

The relentless bombing has destroyed apartment buildings, marketplaces, refugee camps, hospitals, clinics, ambulances, bakeries, schools, mosques, churches, roads, electricity networks, critical water mains — just about everything.

The US-equipped Israeli war machine has even uprooted agricultural fields, including thousands of olive trees on one farm, bulldozed many cemeteries and bombed civilians fleeing on Israeli orders, while obstructing the few trucks carrying humanitarian aid from Egypt.

With virtually no healthcare left, no medications, and infectious diseases spreading especially among infants, children, the infirm and the elderly, can anybody believe that the fatalities have just gone over 30,000? With five thousand babies born every month into the rubble, their mothers wounded and without food, healthcare, medicine and clean water for any of their children, severe skepticism about the Hamas Health Ministry's official count is warranted.

Netanyahu and Hamas, which he helped over the years, have a common interest in lowballing the death/injury toll. But for different reasons. Hamas keeps the figures low to reduce being accused by its own people of not protecting them, and not building shelters. Hamas grossly underestimated the savage war crimes by the vengeful, occupying Israeli military superpower fully and unconditionally backed by the

US military superpower.

The Health Ministry is intentionally conservative, citing that its death toll came from reports only of named deceased by hospitals and morgues. But as the weeks turned into months, blasted, disabled hospitals and morgues cannot keep up with the bodies, or cannot count those slain laying on roadsides in allies and beneath building debris. Yet, the Health Ministry remains conservative, and the "official," rising civilian fatality and injury count continues to be uncritically reported by both friend and foe of this devastating Israeli state terrorism.

It was especially astonishing to see the most progressive groups and writers routinely use the same Hamas Health Ministry figures as did the governments and outside groups backing the one-sided war on Gaza. All this despite predictions of a human catastrophe in the Gaza Strip almost every day since Oct. 7, 2023, by arms of the United Nations, other besieged international relief agencies on the ground, eyewitness accounts by medical personnel, and many Israeli human rights groups and brave local journalists in that Strip, the geographic size of Philadelphia. (Unguided Western and Israeli reporters and journalists are not allowed to enter Gaza by the Israeli government.) (See the open letter titled, "Stop the Humanitarian Catastrophe" to President Biden on Dec. 13, 2023, by 16 Israeli human rights groups that also appeared as a paid notice in the *New York Times*.)

Then came the December 29, 2023, opinion piece in *The Guardian* by the Chair of Global Public Health at the University of Edinburgh, Devi Sridhar. She predicted half a million deaths in 2024 if conditions continue unabated.

In recent days, the situation has become more dire. In the March 2 *Washington Post*, reporter Ishaan Tharoor writes: "The bulk of Gaza's more than 2 million people face the prospect of famine — a state of affairs that constitutes the fastest decline

is nearly impossible to obtain the necessary working permits, much less citizenship. Capital is fluid; labor is stationary.

The Left seeks to level the playing field between labor and management.

US labor laws are "at will," meaning you can be fired for any reason other than discrimination because of your race, sex, sexual orientation or other legally protected class. At-will is a license for companies to overhire during booms and impose mass layoffs when the economy cools down, as we saw tech companies do after the COVID-19 pandemic. It enables bosses to vote themselves a raise at the same time they lay off workers, many of whom disrupted their lives to take those jobs, lost other opportunities and have no responsibility for poor management decisions.

At-will must go. An employer who wants to get rid of an employee should have to prove to the Department of Labor either that the move is required due to the company's finances — and then only after upper management have absorbed pay cuts and stockholders lose their dividends — or that the employee did something wrong, in which case they should be entitled to a hearing before an impartial court system established to litigate labor-management disputes before a jury.

Workers' power relies chiefly on the right and ability to withhold labor after contract negotiations break down. Therefore, every American worker in an enterprise with 10 or more employees ought to be legally guaranteed the right to join a union — even if they are the only member of their company's workforce who wants to sign a union card. Existing laws prohibiting employer retaliation against union organizers and members, which are weak and rarely enforced, must be strengthened so that it is nearly impossible to fire someone for standing up for higher wages and working conditions. Needless to say, state "right to work"

in a population's nutrition status ever recorded, according to aid workers. Children are starving at the fastest rate the world has ever known. Aid groups have been pointing to Israel restricting the flow of assistance into the territory as a major driver of the crisis. Some prominent Israeli officials openly champion stymying these transfers of aid."

Tharoor quotes Jan Egeland, chief of the Norwegian Refugee Council: "We must be clear: civilians in Gaza are falling sick from hunger and thirst because of Israel's entry restrictions." "Life-saving supplies are being intentionally blocked, and women and children are paying the price."

Martin Griffiths, the United Nations lead humanitarian officer, said "Life is draining out of Gaza at terrifying speed."

UN Secretary-General António Guterres, according to the *Post*, warned of an "unknown number of people" — believed to be in the tens of thousands — lying under the rubble of buildings brought down by Israeli strikes."

Volker Turk, the UN high commissioner for human rights, said "All people in Gaza are at imminent risk of famine. Almost all are drinking salty and contaminated water. Health care across the territory is barely functioning." "Just imagine what this means for the wounded, and people suffering infectious-disease outbreaks. ...many are already believed to be starving." UNICEF, the International Rescue Committee, the Palestinian Red Crescent, and Doctors Without Borders are all relating that the same catastrophic conditions are getting worse fast.

Yet, and get this, in this article, the *Post* still stuck with the "more than 30,000 people in Gaza have been killed since the ongoing war began."

Just like the entire mass media, many governments, even the independent media and critics of the war would have us accept that between 98% and 99% of Gaza's entire population has survived — albeit the sick, injured and more Palestinians about to die. This is lethally improbable!

From accounts of people on the ground, videos and photographs of deadly episode after episode, plus the resultant mortalities from blocking or smashing the crucial necessities of life, a more likely estimate, in my appraisal, is that at least

laws allowing workers in union shops to withhold union dues while receiving negotiated benefits should be eliminated.

Laws like the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947, which ban solidarity strikes and strikes by the military and other public-sector workers and have been expanded by courts and presidential executive orders to include "essential" workers like coal miners and rail workers, go far beyond regulations in other developed nations and must be abolished. If firefighters and postal workers, for example, are truly essential to the functioning of the nation, they should be remunerated accordingly. In the case of exceptional categories of workers deemed essential in matters of life and death, which should be highly limited, the loss of the right to strike should be compensated by guaranteed raises pegged to the inflation rate.

US workers are divided into arbitrary classifications designed to allow corporations to treat them like dirt. I work at least 40 hours a week as a cartoonist and columnist yet my syndicate misclassifies me as an "independent contractor." Same for Uber and Lyft drivers, though there's nothing independent about a job which specifies everything about your tasks down to the model of car you must drive, though you pay for it yourself.

The system is random and arbitrary. When I lost my W-2 job as a syndicate executive, I qualified for unemployment even though I had only worked half-weeks. If my syndicate cans me as a cartoonist and writer, I do not.

For the Left, all work is work, all work has value and all workers must be protected. The "independent contractor" loophole should be closed. A 20-hour-a-week job should come with at least half medical benefits. A third of US citizens are self-employed; they should qualify for unemployment benefits when work dries up, just like people who work for other people.

200,000 Palestinians must have perished by now and the toll is accelerating by the hour.

Imagine Americans, if this powerful U.S.-made weaponry was fired on the besieged, homeless, trapped people of Philadelphia, do you think that only 30,000 of that city's 1.5 million people would have been killed?

Daily circumstantial evidence of the deliberate Israeli targeting of civilians and civilian infrastructures requires more reliable epidemiological estimates of casualties.

It matters greatly whether the aggregate toll so far, and counting, is three, four, five, six times more than the Health Ministry's undercount. It matters for elevating the urgency for a permanent ceasefire, and direct and massive humanitarian aid by the US and other countries, bypassing the sadistic cruelty against innocent families of the Israeli siege. It matters for the columnists and editorial writers who have been self-censoring themselves, with some, like the *Post's* Charles Lane fictionally claiming that Israel's military doesn't "intentionally target civilians." It matters for accountability under international law.

Above all, it lets weak Secretary of State Antony Blinken and duplicitous President Biden be less servile when Netanyahu dismisses the low death toll by taunting them: what about Dresden, Hiroshima and Nagasaki?

As a percentage of the total population being killed, Gaza can expose the Israeli ruling racist extremists to a stronger rebuttal for ending US co-belligerent complicity in this never-to-be-forgotten slaughter of mostly children and women. (The terrifying PTSD on civilians, especially children will continue for years.)

Respecting the more accurate casualty toll of Palestinian children, mothers and fathers presses harder for permanent cease-fires and the process of recovery and reparations for the survivors of their Holocaust.

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And work *will* dry up. Because boom-and-bust cycles are intrinsic to capitalism, until the Revolution comes the Left should agitate for a safety net that reflects this reality. Jobless benefits should be far more generous than they are now. They should expire when you find a new job, not after the six-month limit set by most state legislatures. By way of comparison, countries like Denmark, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal and Spain provide up to 24 months of unemployment payments. Iceland gives 30.

As we've seen with robotics and are seeing with artificial intelligence, disruptive technologies destroy entire lines of business at once, rendering hard-earned education and experience worthless overnight. The heartland has plunged into despair and drug addiction after decades of deindustrialization fueled by pro-globalization policies. Surely we could use the lost productivity of these millions of fellow citizens who have filed for federal disability checks because they have no hope of ever being gainfully employed! Those willing to take classes to be retrained for positions that will be needed in the near future must currently bear all or most of the cost themselves. Retraining programs should be gratis, and the government should pay a living stipend so people can focus on their studies.

The ultimate manifestation of economic insecurity, the abject poverty that leads to homelessness, hunger and death, ought to be impossible in the wealthiest country in history. Even if they "want" to do so, the Left should not allow people to sleep outside, for the freedom to die in the cold is no freedom whatsoever.

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

## TED RALL

### Let's Declare War on Economic Insecurity

Wages high enough to cover basic expenses are only the beginning of the Left's struggle to eliminate economic insecurity.

We must also fight for workers' rights on the job, as well as a robust and sturdy social safety net to protect people when they find themselves out of work. Americans suffer the worst worker benefits of major developed countries; we are tied with Botswana, Iran, Mexico and Pakistan. Our safety net also comes in dead last.

For as long as anyone can remember, the balance of power between labor and management has been radically tilted in favor of capital. While nine out of 10 workers are not organized, employers not only form cartels to set prices for labor, they enjoy outsize influence in Washington and state capitals through campaign contributions to politicians.

Globalization has exacerbated this imbalance; an apparel company like Nike may manufacture goods in low-wage, anti-union countries like Vietnam or Indonesia and ship them to high-income/high-price markets like Europe or the United States on container ships whose expenses are subsidized by taxpayers of the latter. As much as an ambitious worker might be willing to abandon their family and native culture to move to a higher-wage place like Norway or Qatar, it

# Glen Canyon Dam Has Created a World of Mud

By DAVE MARSTON

When the San Juan River flows out of the San Juan Mountains in Southwestern Colorado, it contributes 15% of Lake Powell's water.

But there's a problem: The river carries a hefty 55% of the sediment entering the reservoir, and that mud is piling up.

The sediment-heavy river flows south into New Mexico before jogging into Utah, then it joins the Colorado River close to the Arizona border. The confluence is submerged under Lake Powell.

After decades of drought, the reservoir created by Glen Canyon Dam has dwindled to just a third full. Now, as the San Juan River flows toward Lake Powell, it rambles over a huge pancake of mud that's 49 miles long, a mile wide in some places, and as much as 120 feet deep in the final reaches of the San Juan River.

Unique hydrology has contributed to this plug. A relatively wide canyon and multiple waterfalls slow down the river, allowing sediment to drop out. Though the San Juan is the muddiest tributary, all the Colorado's

tributaries drop a good deal of mud 100 miles or more upstream of Glen Canyon Dam.

It's a Western phenomenon caused by damming swift rivers, said Jeff Geslin, a geologist at Fort Lewis College in Durango, Colorado. The result is that reservoirs in the West have become "temporary sediment storage facilities."

If that mud could move through the Grand Canyon, like it did before the dam, biologists say that would help restore the canyon's ecosystem, which depends on sediment-laden flushes in spring to scour riverbanks. Then, as the river slows, beaches form and vegetation returns.

Gary Gianniny, professor of Geosciences at Fort Lewis College in Durango, Colorado, has been studying the San Juan River, along with river researchers who call their team, "The Returning Rapids Project."

The group's big worry is that without drastic action—draining Lake Powell to let the Colorado River run free—time may be running out for the languorous San Juan River.

Mike DeHoff, principal investigator of the Returning Rapids Project said the sediment layer on the San Juan has created new channels and new waterfalls. DeHoff added that no one knows whether the river's sediment plug would dissipate even if Glen Canyon Dam were breached.

Researchers boating the San Juan River where it approaches Lake Powell say they're forced to navigate an ever-moving pile of sediment that also involves portaging around rock waterfalls. When they finally arrive at Lake Powell, there's dangerous liquefied clay and sand to navigate.

"I've seen people sink to their chests in the mud, saved only by their flotation devices and nearby boaters," said DeHoff of Moab, Utah.

"We'll need a drone to study that area," added Gianniny.

Researchers with the Returning Rapids Project talk a lot about what to call these giant slabs of calving sediment. DeHoff suggests "mud bergs."

Semi-solid mud walls along the river have already been dubbed "the Dominy Formation," named after the avid federal dam-builder Floyd Dominy.

"Technically, Gianniny said, the giant mud plug is a "mass of uncompacted mud and sand that causes alluvial fanning." And falling slabs of sediment, those "mud bergs," act as semi-permanent river features.

BLM River Ranger Chad Niehaus uses a packraft to regularly visit what researchers are calling the Lowest San Juan. He floats over 30-plus miles of the muddy river, finishing with a four-mile backpack out to a four-wheel drive vehicle 48 miles from Page, Arizona as the crow flies.

Niehaus marvels at the deserted region. "Sediment is moving around, and you must be vigilant in a different way than you do on a 'normal' river."

Drought, climate change, "whatever you call it, the Lowest San Juan has re-emerged," Niehaus said about wildlife in the once-submerged canyon. "I've seen river otters, mountain lions, coyotes—even pelicans—but the most astounding aspect is how quickly nature is coming back." In places, cottonwood trees are 20 feet high, he said.

"When I was a teenager there were places on maps that were considered forever gone," he said, pointing to sections on the map entitled, "Glen Canyon National Recreation Area."

Now, he said, "some forever-gone places are revealed." He mentions Cathedral in the Desert, a wondrous site on the nearby Escalante River. Enough water has receded to make it visible, though some of this sacred place for Indigenous people is buried under 30-plus feet of sediment.

Meanwhile, the muddy end of the San Juan River is wild again: "I rarely see a footprint."

*Dave Marston is the publisher of the independent nonprofit, Writers on the Range, writersontherange.org, dedicated to spurring lively conversation about the West. He lives in Durango, Colorado.*

# 'The Crown' Was a Crowning TV Achievement

By ROB PATTERSON

During the sixth and final season the Netflix series about the life of Queen Elizabeth II, "The Crown," there's been much hubbub in the media about the creative liberties it takes and the show's imaginings about private moments within the royal family. Yes, historical accuracy matters ... in the historical record. But we should keep this in mind: it's a TV show.

"The Crown" has been the most regal soap opera ever on TV, evening division. It follows the broad strokes of the story around Britain's longest reigning monarch. But it also makes the usual dramatic adjustments the medium can call for to succeed as entertainment. And it is cracking good television done excellently.

If I were English, I might have a more wry view of the UK monarchy. An even greater critical view would be apt for my

Scots-Irish paternal lineage. But being an American who believes that monarchies are among the many governmental, cultural, social and further aspects of the human order today that mankind should evolve beyond to foster a better and fairer world, I nonetheless confess to some fondness for the late monarch.

At the core of that is a family connection. And at its heart, "The Crown" is a family story. My beloved late mother, who died in early 2021, was also named Elizabeth, and was the same age as the Queen.

Even without that commonality, it's hard not to come away from "The Crown" with an affection and admiration for Elizabeth of the House of Windsor as portrayed in the series, as a TV show like this must for its central character. She ascended to her throne at 24 years old, and for all the cynicism, pot shots and even cheap shots one might take at someone of not just massive inherited privilege and wealth but also a certain power, both in the monarchical and political senses, I do feel that in her seven decades on the throne she seems to have largely lived her life and duties with a certain aplomb, common sense, dedication and dignity — and in doing so, did win the hearts

of a large swath of her subjects.

On the other hand, I get an eternal jolt of frisson every time I hear the anti-royal rant of "God Save The Queen" by The Sex Pistols.

"The Queen" succeeds as a rather majestic work of entertainment, one that woos you into its rarified realm, is that. It feels real for reasons that have only something to do with Elizabeth II and her legacy.

First, contextually, the show must have spent a small king's ransom on its sets and settings. It's shot beautifully, wonderfully written, and every character feels full-blooded. The acting by both the stars and lesser knowns is uniformly superb, and it pulls off changing those playing its major roles from season to season rather smoothly. It gives sympathy to most all of the main characters, especially Charles and Diana within what became the mess of their marriage and divorce.

It should not be mistaken for what was; maybe better thought of in a good-hearted manner as what we — or at least some of us — might have imagined an maybe even wish the story and the royal family to be. If one can set aside concerns about how the show and reality might differ plus feelings

about monarchy and Elizabeth II and her family and simply assess it on dramatic and entertainment terms, it's a masterful series. If you haven't yet seen it, it's ready to be binged and enjoyed.

## Populist Picks

**TV SERIES:** "Reacher" — This show based on the Lee Child book series won me over in its first season about a good-hearted but tough-as-nails Army vet who's a wandering loner. Season two reunites him with his elite Army unit's members in an even more winning adventure.

**TV DOCUMENTARY:** "Gatsby in Connecticut: The Untold Story" — Although F. Scott Fitzgerald's classic novel was set on Long Island, its origins and character were likely across the sound, where the author lived with a millionaire's mansion next door, as this film persuasively makes a case for.

*Rob Patterson is a music and entertainment writer in Austin, Texas. Email orca@prismnet.com.*

# The Creep of Christian Nationalism

By ELWOOD WATSON

Historically viewed as a fringe belief system, Christian nationalism has become a considerable force in American politics, particularly as it relates to the current Republican Party.

A new survey from Public Religion Research Institute and the Brookings Institution revealed more than 50% of Republicans believe the country should aspire to become a devoutly Christian nation by ascribing to the fundamentals of Christian nationalism, or, at a minimum, identifying with such beliefs.

Christian nationalism is the assumption the United States is a Christian nation, and that the nation's laws should be deeply rooted in Christian values. Such a mindset has long been prevalent in White evangelical spheres, but has rapidly gained considerable traction within the mainstream Republican party.

Committed Christian nationalists represent only 10% of the population, according to a 2023 PRRI/Brookings Christian Nationalism Survey. Despite such a distinct minority, Christian nationalists have been successful in garnering additional influence by aggressively integrating themselves into a more sizable Christian electorate and declaring themselves as ordinary men and women.

Not surprisingly, support for Christian nationalism is heavily correlated to political ideology. Americans who reside in culturally conservative red states are much more likely to espouse Christian nationalist beliefs or be more inclined to harbor Christian nationalistic sympathies. More than half of Republicans also hold Christian nationalist beliefs, compared with a quarter of independents and just 16% of Democrats.

In 2022, a collection of right-wing writers and leaders

published a document titled "Conservatism: A Statement of Principles." The section on God and public religion stated, "Where a Christian majority exists, public life should be rooted in Christianity and its moral vision, which should be honored by the state and other institutions both public and private."

That is an alarming and troubling statement, implying non-Christians should have second-class status in our country. That Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, atheists, agnostics, and others should be deprived of equality under the law. Such rhetoric is the antithesis of freedom to worship enshrined in the Constitution.

Christian nationalism is not an ideology where an individual's belief system defines their political values. Human beings can certainly hold divergent opinions as they relate to immigration, reproductive rights, or any other political issue. Like everyone else, Christians routinely spar among one another on such issues. Debate and a diversity of viewpoints are often beneficial to both the debaters as well as the larger society.

What distinguishes Christian nationalism is not religious participation in politics but the myopic perception that Christian primacy and theology must be deeply saturated in virtually every aspect of our society. It is tied to a visceral sense that the well-being and survival of the church is closely tied to the outcome of any given political race. Christian nationalism's supporters have little, if any, compunction about attempting to impose their personal value system upon others. Such beliefs often manifest themselves through linear ideology, a specific identity, and unbridled passion.

If Christian nationalism were successful in becoming the norm, it would abolish our current Constitution and further fragment our democracy.

Incidentally, it was the thrice-married serial adulterer and wayward (at least by traditional religious standards) former President Donald Trump, who courted right-wing

Christians. According to one analysis, Trump's judicial appointees were almost universally Christian, and a majority had some kind of affiliation with a religious group, such as a church or other religious foundation.

Trump also appointed three of the six U.S. Supreme Court justices who voted to overturn Roe v. Wade in 2022. Unable to garner the support of the majority of Americans for dictating American culture, Christian nationalists have mounted a legal-political crusade against all who refuse to embrace their religious worldview. The Supreme Court's new conservative majority has steadily eroded the separation of church and state embedded in the Constitution.

Since the overturning of Roe v. Wade, these theocrats have successfully put their disdain and disregard for the life of the pregnant into law in one right-wing Republican-dominated state after another. But this is just the warm-up act.

Speaker of the House Mike Johnson and his fellow crusaders would like to inject their religious doctrine into the veins of every political aspect of federal law and public policy in an effort to establish religious hegemony. Conservative governors and legislators have arrogantly, brazenly, and shamelessly invoked God and religion as the legislative purpose behind such draconian measures.

If we value the freedom to worship in our own way, such arrogant and disingenuous proselytizing has to be combated.

*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.*

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## Pan African Film Festival Offered New Media for Black History Month

The 32nd Pan African Film & Arts Festival, America's largest Black-themed filmfest, took place Feb. 7 – Feb. 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 short films that audiences had an opportunity to see at PAFF as part of the "New Media" screening:

### 'Moments': A Group Hug for Group Therapy for African Americans

The L.A. premiere of writer/director Malachi Rivers' "Moments" shatters stereotypes regarding African Americans in his 9-episode digital series of shorts that are under 13 minutes-long each. According to Dr. Monica T. Williams in *Psychology Today*: "African Americans shy away from psychotherapy as a potential solution to challenges such as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, marriage problems, and parenting issues. As a black psychologist, it is troublesome that so many African Americans are reluctant to make use of psychology's solutions to emotional hurdles."

The well-written, well-directed "Moments" thoughtfully tackles this taboo head on. In Rivers' riveting series, the real-life Dr. Jeff Gardere—a Black mental health practitioner who has a private practice in Manhattan, is an author and TV personality known as "America's psychologist"—portrays the therapist Dr. Winston, who presides over group

therapy sessions with Black participants. In the episode entitled "Nobody Knows," Rivers plays Guy Adams, a closeted gay man who is troubled by having to publicly deny his sexual identity out of fear of being stigmatized. He confides to the healing group that this inner conflict recently came to a head when his partner died, and mourners offered him their condolences for the loss of his "friend." This roils Guy because the deceased actually meant much more to him than that—he was in fact Guy's husband, albeit unacknowledged in public. How can Guy resolve this clash?

"Stretch Marks" takes on a double taboo. In addition to the above "no no" against African Americans seeking counseling, the episode's protagonist is an aspiring artist whose dream of becoming a dancer is thwarted by society's mundane expectations and realities. The archetype of this is the French artiste Paul Gauguin, who forsakes his family and career as a stockbroker to pursue becoming a painter at Tahiti, as depicted in movies such as 1942's "The Moon and Sixpence" starring George Sanders, based on a Somerset Maugham novel. But "Stretch Marks" flips the script, by centering on an African American female struggling *artiste*.

As she relates to her healing group with flashbacks, Elaine Clemmons (portrayed by Sufe Bradshaw, who drolly played the in-charge secretary in HBO's "Veep" series) is a new mother (hence, I suppose, the title Stretch Marks?) who lives in a comfortable, upper middle class home and seems well-provided for by a husband who cares about her. While many would be content with the role of motherhood and material comfort, 30-something Elaine's current position rankles her because it means deferring her lifelong dream of becoming a dancer.

Of course, unlike painters, writers, or some others in the arts, the shelf life for dancers, who must rely upon the youthful vitality of their bodies in order to perform at their peak, is short. Elaine is painfully aware that by the time her newborn babe is grown, she'll likely be too old to become a professional dancer—and thus, unable to fulfill her life's ambition. Hence Elaine's anger and frustration, which is generally reserved for White male wannabe artists in screen, stage and literary depictions. The episode is excellently acted by Bradshaw, and leaves viewers wanting more.

By extolling mental health treatment for African Americans, "Moments" reminds us that the next time somebody makes opposes or belittle counseling, therapy, psychoanalysis, etc., for Blacks, just remind them that one of the world's greatest, most famous psychiatrists was the Afro Caribbean Frantz Fanon, the Martinique genius who wrote

"Black Skin, White Masks and The Wretched of the Earth."

### The Maharlika Warrior: Filipina Superhero Crimefighter Extraordinaire

In addition to "Moments," PAFF's New Media program included the world premiere of Hilarion Banks' "The Maharlika Warrior," which is set in urban USA with a multi-culti cast. The title character (played by Lindsay Castillo) refers to a Filipina myth regarding a female with super powers. To make a long story short, this exciting crime drama about sex trafficking and more puts a feminist and ethnic twist on conventional superhero sagas (although of course, this has been evolving in and out of the Marvel Universe). Those who enjoy movies, graphic novels and comics about crimefighters endowed with extraordinary powers far beyond those of mortal men (and women) are likely to enjoy this action-packed 54-minute film with some special FX. The Southeast Asian roots of "The Maharlika Warrior" from Philippines folklore makes this production unique for American viewers.

### Revenge of the Black Best Friend: Spoofing Stereotypes

Like the Oscar-nommed American Fiction, co-directors Thyron Tommy and Jerome Kruijn's witty "Revenge of the Black Best Friend" satirically challenges and debunks big and little screen stereotypes of Blacks. Olunike Adeliyi plays Dr. Toni Shakur, who has a message for the movie and TV industry against racial tropes and one-dimensional Black characters that is delivered in highly amusing ways. The L.A. premiere of this 22-minute short was also part of PAFF's New Media selection of shorts.

The above PAFF screenings took place at Cinemark Baldwin Hills in Los Angeles, California. Starting Feb. 20, PAFF has a Virtual Cinema Pass through March 31 to see some of the festival's films. For more info see: <https://paff2024.eventive.org/films>. For more info about 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 originally appeared in *HollywoodProgressive.com*.

## EDGE OF SPORTS/Dave Zirin

### The First Athletes to Speak Out Are the Bravest

*To encourage others, we must protect and celebrate the first wave of signatories to the Athletes for Ceasefire statement.*

Several hundred members of the sports world signed up for the new organization Athletes for Ceasefire. Some are well-known, like retired NFL receiver Kenny Stills (who is an organizer of the project), 1968 Olympian John Carlos, WNBA stalwart Layshia Clarendon, and retired NBA player Etan Thomas. Others are Olympic-level runners, cricketers, and soccer players: people whom the typical American sports fan may not know. What unites them is the belief that the total war on the civilian population of Gaza must end and that athletes can play a role in amplifying this message. Their statement reads in part:

"In the wake of an unfolding genocide in Gaza, as described by countless legal scholars, human rights experts and international organizations across the world. We, as athletes, recognize our moral responsibility to utilize our platform for a higher purpose: to save human lives and to raise awareness about this ongoing tragedy. We acknowledge the right of the Palestinian people to live in peace and security. As professional athletes, we underscore our shared humanity, and advocate for a path that respects all human life, regardless of religion or ethnic background. In signing this letter, we continue a long legacy of athletes speaking up for the human rights of all people, such as Olympians John Carlos and Tommie Smith who raised their fists at the 1968 games in part to demand that apartheid South Africa and Rhodesia be held to account. We stand in the proud tradition of 'The Greatest' Muhammad Ali who stood for Palestinian freedom throughout his life both in word and deed. WE STAND ON THE SHOULDERS OF THESE GIANTS IN OUR EFFORTS TO KEEP THIS TRA-

DITION OF ATHLETE OF CONSCIENCE ALIVE."

As impressive as the Athletes for Ceasefire statement is, there is a question about why the number of signatures is in the hundreds, and not in the thousands or tens of thousands. What it comes down to, to paraphrase Daniel Denvir, host of the podcast *The Dig*, is that while criticism of Israel has never been higher, the punishment for speaking out has also never been greater. In other words, according to someone who has been privy to the internal organizing and launch of this organization, the deterrent is fear.

An NBA All-Star said that he wanted to sign, but he received such intense behind-the-scenes pressure that he felt to do so would risk his standing with his team and that his story would overwhelm the message of AFC. Another NBA All-Star said he believes in the cause but feared being labeled an "antisemite." A coach with a sterling reputation said grudgingly that he wanted to but the level of "distraction" that his signing on would create was simply not worth it. One football player with whom I spoke is near the end of his career and thought that joining AFC would push him out of the league sooner rather than later. None of these athletes would go on the record with me other than to allow their reasons to be known.

We can draw three conclusions from this. The first is that there is far more oxygen outside the United States to speak out against the atrocities in Gaza. The United States has a bipartisan commitment to fund these horrors, which means there is no political cover for standing against an increasingly authoritarian political agenda. The second is that

credit must be given to those who have courageously stepped forward and put their names out there as standing against what they are calling—and it is getting impossible to avoid this word—a genocide. The sports unions have not even hinted, unlike other unions, that they would draft their own cease-fire resolutions, which would provide some much-needed political cover.

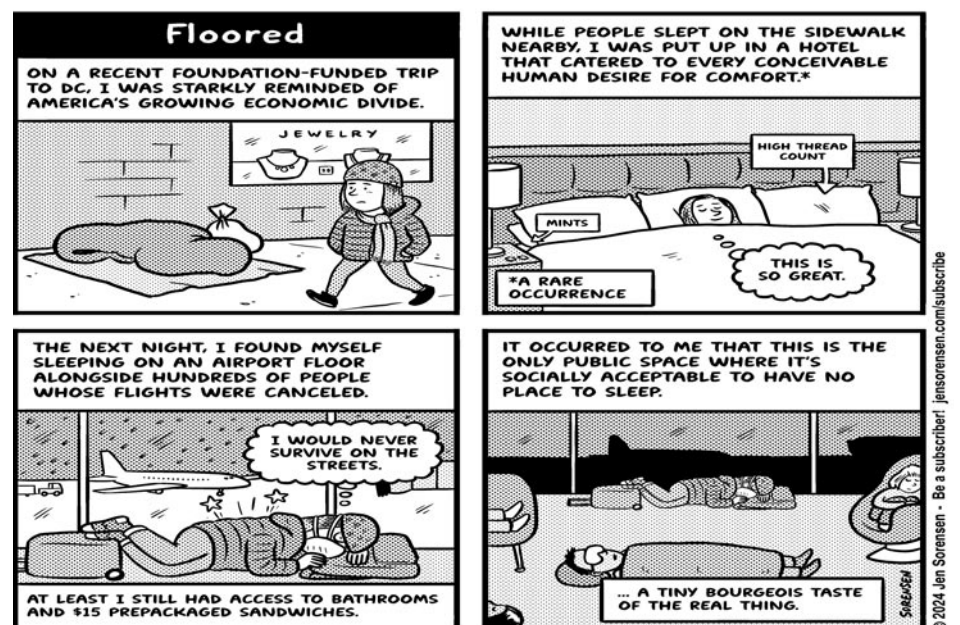
The third reason is the most critical: In the last four years, the politics of the sports world have shifted dramatically. In 2020, after the police killing of George Floyd, people like NFL and NBA commissioners Roger Goodell and Adam Silver publicly praised players for being outspoken on the issues of racial inequity and police violence. They said that they wanted athletes in their leagues to be seen as three-dimensional people with the capacity to raise attention to social ills and not merely entertain: to do more than just "shut up and dribble." Those sentiments now look dated and opportunistic. The only vestiges in the professional sports leagues from those days—just four years ago!—are empty gestures like the NFL's putting the words "End Racism" behind end zones—some which also contain racist logos of Native American mascots.

The backlash we have seen in the

broader US society on a host of issues and the McCarthyite attacks on people standing up for a cease-fire are now baked into the politics of sports. The period from about 2012 to 2020 when athletes talked about issues as in no era since the 1970s is over. In 2024, athletes need to be courageous to speak out, because they could be punished. The moment recalls a quote often attributed to Polish revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg: "Those who do not move, do not notice their chains." Only the athletes who want to speak truths beyond what their corporate and institutional minders want them to say will feel the strain of their chains.

Few people in any field have the courage to be the first wave and credit is due everyone involved in Athletes for Ceasefire, particularly organizer Kenny Stills. The only way to do this painstaking work of organizing is to do it one athlete at a time. The greater the numbers, the more people will be unafraid to speak.

Dave Zirin is the sports editor at *The Nation*. He is the author of 11 books on the politics of sports. He is also the coproducer and writer of the new documentary "Behind the Shield: The Power and Politics of the NFL." Email [edgeofsports@gmail.com](mailto:edgeofsports@gmail.com).



## AMY GOODMAN



While the US has been airdropping food in Gaza, it also has been delivering bombs to Israel to be dropped in Gaza as well.

### Dropping Bombs and Bread on Gaza

Dramatic images of US airdrops of food into the Gaza Strip made headlines in recent days. The US Air Force and the Royal Jordanian Air Force dropped over 70,000 meals in total along the Gaza coastline and in northern Gaza, amounting to a fraction of what is needed on an ongoing basis there. While the US has been airdropping food, it has also been delivering bombs to Israel to be dropped on Gaza as well. The *Washington Post* revealed in March that the Biden administration has conducted more than 100 separate weapons transfers to Israel over the last five months, with thousands of so-called precision guided munitions, bombs and more—while skirting legally-required reports to

Congress.

“It is absurd and hypocritical to publicly profess horror at Netanyahu’s inhumane war,” Vermont Independent Senator Bernie Sanders said on the Senate floor on March 6, referring to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, “While . . . we ship tens of thousands of bombs to his army. It is absurd to criticize Netanyahu’s war in one breath and provide him another \$10 billion to continue that war in the next.” Sanders reportedly met privately with President Biden this week.

Individual senators have significant power to delay legislation, including foreign military aid, but only if a senator actually learns about a proposed arms sale in advance. As the *Washington Post* reported, “in the case of the 100 other transactions, known in government-speak as Foreign Military Sales or FMS, the weapons transfers were processed without any public debate because each fell under a specific dollar amount that requires the executive branch to individually notify Congress.”

Josh Paul knows a lot about US arms sales to Israel. He worked for over 11 years at the State Department, most recently as director in the Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, overseeing international arms deals. He resigned in October, citing the US’s “blind support” for Israel during its assault on Gaza.

“The President continues to facilitate the flow of arms to Israel, despite a change in tone,” Josh Paul said on the *Democracy Now!* news hour. “We have certainly heard the administration call for more humanitar-

ian assistance or at least a temporary cease-fire. But at the same time, it continues to provide the arms that enable Israel to continue its operations.”

On Feb. 8, Biden issued a “National Security Memorandum,” NSM-20, reminding government agencies of their legal requirements regarding these official arms transfers. A new report from Refugees International, titled, “Siege and Starvation: How Israel Obstructs Aid to Gaza,” includes the recommendation,

“Given the widespread indications of systematic Israeli violations of International Humanitarian Law [IHL] (which even the President has characterized as ‘indiscriminate’ and ‘over the top’), the Biden administration should pause further offensive security assistance to Israel pending a thorough review of the credibility of Israel’s adherence to IHL, as mandated by NSM-20.”

Refugees International President Jeremy Konyndyk is a former top USAID official, where he ran the Obama administration’s Office of US Foreign Disaster Assistance and coordinated the Biden Administration’s international COVID response. He said on social media, “Biden admin has had the reports predicting looming famine for two and a half months. Where was the urgency? What did they do to pressure (not plead with) Bibi to drastically ramp up humanitarian access? Why the change in tone only now? And why, still, no use of US leverage?”

Not only is Israel clearly in violation of international humanitarian law, which alone should be enough to stop the flow of arms and ammunition from the US; Israel has

been found to be plausibly responsible for genocide in Gaza, in a preliminary ruling from the International Court of Justice in The Hague. South Africa, which brought the case to the World Court, has asked the court to take additional emergency measures, stating, “The threat of all-out famine has now materialized. The court needs to act now to stop the imminent tragedy.”

Josh Paul is in touch with State Department staffers who still work on arms transfers to Israel. “I’m still hearing from people. . . ‘I feel sick to my stomach of being involved in this,’ and ‘I’m trying to make changes, and it’s just not working.’ I think the internal pressure, the internal disgust, frankly, is still there.”

Josh Paul is now working with Democracy for the Arab World Now, or DAWN. In a statement, he said, “No number of airdropped pallets can come close to the relief that Gaza needs most: an end to Israel’s bombardment . . . conducted with American weapons paid for by American dollars. [T]he US has immense leverage to push Israel to agree to a cease-fire and open wide the gates of Gaza so humanitarian assistance can flow in.”

*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.”*

### This Election Season, Let’s Choose Productive Public Discourse

By BONNIE JEAN FELDKAMP

It’s time. Super Tuesday is over, and America is deep into an election season faced with two very familiar candidates. It’s time to take stock of our collective values and decide how we plan to support those beliefs in our actions. I’m not just talking about how you plan to vote; I’m talking about how you plan to live every day as a member of this community.

Our children are watching.

Are we going to show them how we stand up for the issues that matter to us by understanding what’s at stake speaking for

our community’s most vulnerable populations? Or are we going to reduce this election to sarcastic memes, cheap shots and name-calling that would land any middle schooler in detention?

You can choose to fight with knowledge in a way that fosters productive public discourse with purpose and in search of solutions, or you can fight with contempt that merely reduces any argument to partisan camp trenches where we mudsling and launch zingers that do nothing but fuel our self-righteousness.

Meanwhile, those who need us to speak up continue to suffer.

Your string of expletives will not reinstate SNAP benefits or summer lunch programs for the hungry children in your community.

Finger-wagging and name-calling will not house the disabled veterans who are living on the streets in our cities.

That meme mocking Donald Trump or Joe Biden will not cushion the blow of in-

flation.

Does all of this mean-spirited humor help us cope? Maybe, for a minute. But then what?

We have to make the decision to do better. Don’t share social media posts that mock candidates for their appearance, their age, their stumbles or their manner of speaking. Instead, elevate the reasons their policies are ineffective and then elevate what you believe the solution should be.

Don’t engage in the comments section when someone is hateful. Genuine questions warrant answers. Trolls do not. Deprive bullies of their oxygen, in person and online. You do not have to match anyone’s unkindness. In fact, we need more humans in this world who will be the antidote.

Remember when we watched Donald Trump mock a disabled reporter, regularly reduce women to 1-10 rankings and disparage marginalized people? Many were horrified by this behavior. But then some of these same people turned right around and

mocked Donald Trump. You can’t have it both ways.

I get to choose who I want to be in this world and how I want to behave. If I react to meanness by giving it back to them, then I’ve just allowed someone to dictate who I get to be. I am kind because it’s what I value, not because it’s what I think you deserve as a reward for your behavior. Please, let’s learn from the past. Let’s be smarter and more intentional about our conversations in this election. We can do better, and we must do better.

*Bonnie Jean Feldkamp is a wife, mother and opinion editor at the Louisville Courier-Journal. She is the media director of the National Society of Newspaper Columnists. Find her on social media @WriterBonnie, or email her at Bonnie@WriterBonnie.com. Check out her weekly YouTube videos at www.youtube.com/bonniejeanfeldkamp.*

### Dispatches ...

Continued from page 5

ary, with zero awareness of the organization’s purpose, that the RNC would spend “every single penny” on Trump, that it was the “number one and only” job of the committee to elect Trump, and that it was the committee’s job to pay for her father-in-law’s legal bills. However, a senior Trump campaign adviser insisted to ABC News “absolutely none” of the RNC’s funds will be used to pay Trump’s legal bills. “So who will you believe—Lara Trump, speaking the will of grifter-in-chief Donald Trump, or some lower-level apparatchik attempting damage control after Lara had just severely sabotaged the RNC’s already-hurting fundraising operation? Donald will make the ultimate decisions on where that RNC money is going, and it’s going nowhere but in his own pockets,” Kos concluded.

#### TRUMP’S AFFECTION FOR DICTATORS IS AT HEART OF HIS PLANS FOR AMERICA — AND UKRAINE.

Donald Trump invited Hungarian authoritarian Viktor Orbán to visit Mar-a-Lago (3/8). Trump’s campaign put out images of the event, saying that Orbán and Trump talked about “a wide range of issues,” including border security, Mark Sumner noted at Daily Kos (3/11).

However, it appears the security of most importance to both Trump and Orbán concerns the border that belongs to Russian dictator Vladimir Putin. As the BBC reported on Monday, Orbán explained Trump’s plan to

end Russia’s illegal and unprovoked invasion of Ukraine.

“He will not give a penny in the Ukraine-Russia war,” said Orbán. “That is why the war will end.” In other words, Orbán and Trump are promising to starve Ukraine of any ability to defend itself, ensuring that a democratic nation of nearly 37 million (as of 2023) people falls to an authoritarian dictatorship.

“It is obvious that Ukraine cannot stand on its own feet,” Orbán said on Hungary’s M1 TV. “If the Americans don’t give money and weapons, along with the Europeans, then the war is over. And if the Americans don’t give money, the Europeans alone are unable to finance this war. And then the war is over.” For Orbán, Putin, and Trump, this is a good thing.

Trump has long bragged that he could end the Russian invasion within 24 hours. Trump said as much to CNN’s Kaitlan Collins last May, then repeated the promise when speaking at a town hall last June.

Details of that plan have always been sketchy, but there has long been a suspicion that what Trump meant by “end the war” was forcing Ukraine to surrender. Now this has been confirmed by Orbán.

As the *Washington Post* reported, Trump bragged that Orbán is a “non-controversial” leader. Not because he has the respect and support of all parts of the Hungarian population, but because he has aggressively shattered Hungary’s democratic system and replaced it with one where he’s the unchallenged ruler.

“He’s a non-controversial figure because he says, ‘This is the way it’s going to be,’ and

that’s the end of it,” said Trump.

#### TO REGAIN YOUTH SUPPORT, GROUPS SAY BIDEN MUST EMBRACE ‘FINISH THE JOB’ YOUTH AGENDA.

A quartet of U.S. advocacy groups unveiled the “Finish the Job” Youth Agenda, inspired by the reelection campaign of Democratic President Joe Biden—who is expected to again face former Republican President Donald Trump, Jessica Corbett reported at Common Dreams (3/7).

“In 2020, young people sent Biden to the White House. In 2024, how many young people turn out for Biden will determine if we stave off a second Trump presidency,” said Sunrise Movement political director Michele Weindling in a statement. “Right now, young people are shouting for what we need from Biden to mobilize our generation this November.”

“President Biden must do everything in his power to fight the climate crisis, to end gun violence, to not cater to the right at the cost of immigrants’ lives, and he must call for an immediate and permanent cease-fire in Gaza,” she asserted.

In addition to the climate-focused Sunrise Movement, the coalition is made up of Gen-Z for Change, which works on a variety of issues; March for Our Lives, a gun violence prevention group; and United We Dream Action, a national immigrant network.

Their “bold, progressive” agenda features demands on climate change, criminal justice reform, democracy, economic justice, education, gender and LGBTQ+ equality, gun violence prevention, housing, immigration, and

reproductive justice.

“Our Finish the Job Youth Agenda is a clear reiteration of the issues that matter most to young constituents and a roadmap for President Biden and his administration to follow if they want to earn our support,” said Michelle Ming, political director of United We Dream Action. “With the Youth Agenda, we’re giving Biden our winning playbook.”

Members of the organizations announced the agenda at a press conference on Capitol Hill, where they were joined by Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) and Democratic Reps. Jamaal Bowman (N.Y.), Greg Casar (Texas), Ro Khanna (Calif.), and Summer Lee (Pa.).

#### TRUMP ENDORSES GAZA GENOCIDE: ‘FINISH THE PROBLEM.’

Shortly before winning nearly every GOP primary on Super Tuesday (3/5) and all but locking up the 2024 Republican nomination, former President Donald Trump said in a Fox News interview that he wants Israel to “finish the problem” in Gaza—a clear endorsement of a military campaign that has killed more than 30,000 people in less than five months and sparked one of the worst humanitarian catastrophes in recent history, Jake Johnson noted at Common Dreams (3/6).

Fox host Brian Kilmeade told Trump that voters who have marked “uncommitted” on their primary ballots to register their opposition to President Biden’s support for Israel’s war are “not gonna like you either because you are firmly in Israel’s camp.”

“Yeah,” Trump responded.

*Continued on next page*

# Mike Johnson Asked for ‘Decorum.’ House GOP Ignored Him

By DANA MILBANK

The day before President Biden delivered his State of the Union address, House Speaker Mike Johnson, in a closed-door meeting with his Republican caucus, urged his colleagues to observe “decorum” and not to act like hooligans during the speech.

He might as well have asked them not to breathe.

Just minutes into the president’s address, as Biden was talking about the Trump administration’s failures during the COVID pandemic, Rep. Derrick Van Orden (R-Wis.) bellowed from the back of the chamber: “Lies!”

When Biden spoke about forcing the wealthiest Americans to “pay your fair share in taxes,” Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-Ga.), wearing a red Make America Great Again baseball cap autographed on the bill by Donald Trump, shouted out: “Tell Hunter to pay his taxes!”

And when Biden spoke about the bipartisan border security legislation that Republicans killed at Trump’s behest, the Republican side erupted in boos, jeers and screaming at the commander in chief.

The GOP lawmakers’ invited guests in the gallery joined in the general abuse of the president. Biden mentioned crime —

and a man started screaming about the withdrawal from Afghanistan. Biden spoke about the more than 30,000 Palestinians reported killed in Gaza — and another heckler shouted: “Says who?”

Adding to the Republicans’ tawdry treatment of this once solemn ritual of democracy, George Santos, the New York congressman expelled in December, could be seen cavorting on the floor (where he still has privileges, despite his ouster), wearing a glittery shirt and shoes, receiving well wishes from his former GOP colleagues. And Rep. Troy Nehls (R-Tex.) served as a human billboard throughout the speech, standing in the chamber wearing a T-shirt that showed Trump’s mug shot with the message “Never Surrender.”

Many others in the House majority took Johnson’s call for “decorum” to the other extreme. They were so determined not to react to Biden that they refused to applaud even the most anodyne, patriotic sentiments.

“Let’s remember who we are. We are the United States of America!” Biden cried.

On the Republican side: crickets. He called for federal funds to go only for “American products ... built by American workers, creating good-paying American jobs.”

Again, Republicans sat on their hands. “We all come from somewhere, but we’re all Americans,” Biden offered.

Even this produced almost no applause from Republican lawmakers.

Johnson, in his seat behind Biden, didn’t heed his own instructions. The Louisiana Republican rolled his eyes at Biden, shaking his head, contorting his face into pained expressions and shrinking into his chair.

Many of his rank-and-file Republicans skipped the address entirely or left in the middle: There were 21 empty seats on the Republican side at the start, and 37 at the end, even though several Democrats took over the empty seats on the GOP side. Biden’s opponents exaggerated their boredom, slouching, scrolling their phones and showing their screens to each other. Ralph Norman (R-S.C.) yawned. Majority Whip Tom Emmer (R-Minn.) yawned. Victoria Spartz (R-Ind.) yawned. Marc Molinaro (R-N.Y.) yawned.

If Biden’s opponents were hoping that the address would show him to be tired and feeble, the result was nearly the opposite. Biden was feisty and energetic, often shouting as he took the fight to Trump and the Republicans. He plunged right into his speech without waiting for the customary introduction from Johnson. By contrast, his critics — some somnolent, the others cranky — looked as though they needed a nap.

Biden had his usual stumbles over words, but those expecting the senile old man of Republican fantasies instead saw a guy who couldn’t wait to mix it up with his foes. He made a surprised, delighted look when he spied Greene waiting for him on the center aisle as he walked in, and he kept the pin she gave him with the name of a young woman allegedly killed by an illegal immigrant.

He scolded Republicans for rejecting “the toughest set of border security reforms we’ve ever seen,” and though his opponents jeered Biden’s claims about the bill, the man who negotiated the reforms, Sen. James Lankford (R-Okla.) could be seen in the audience saying “That’s true.”

That’s when Greene began shouting at Biden to say the name of Laken Riley, the woman who had been killed — and Biden

did, angering progressives when he said she had been killed by “an illegal.”

“To her parents, I say, my heart goes out to you,” he said, holding up Greene’s button. “Having lost children myself, I understand.”

Biden went after his “predecessor” no fewer than 13 times, starting with a brutal contrast between Ronald Reagan telling Mikhail Gorbachev to “tear down this wall” and Trump’s recent suggestion that he would tell Vladimir Putin’s regime to “do whatever the hell they want” to NATO members who don’t contribute sufficiently to the alliance.

The president attacked Trump, congressional Republicans or both, for seeking “to bury the truth about Jan. 6,” 2021, for pursuing an abortion ban, for demonizing immigrants as “poison in the blood of our country.” He ridiculed those who opposed the infrastructure bill, saying, “If any of you don’t want that money in your district, just let me know.”

It was a ferocious, and partisan, address. The combative Biden lifted the spirits of Democrats in the chamber, who repeatedly erupted in cheers of “Four more years!” And for Republicans who had apparently believed their own nonsense about Biden’s “dementia,” it caught them off guard.

Biden lingered in the chamber for half an hour after the speech, basking in the adoration of Democratic lawmakers until after 11 p.m. His critics had cleared out long ago. It was past their bedtimes.

*Dana Milbank is a political columnist for the Washington Post, where this appeared. Follow him on Twitter @Milbank. Email dana.milbank@washpost.com*

# McConnell Stepping Down from Senate Leadership to Spend More Time Eroding the Rights of His Family

By ALEXANDRA PETRI

Mitch McConnell will step down from his longtime post as Senate Republican leader in November, he announced on Feb. 28, to spend more time eroding the rights of his family.

“I got into public service hoping to make a difference,” McConnell said in a floor speech. “And I did: a negative difference. Things are objectively worse now, thanks to me. Knowing that, I can retire from this role.”

Looking back on a tenure that saw him chip away at the nation’s political institutions,

obstruct President Barack Obama at every turn, reshape the Supreme Court to strip reproductive rights from women, and fail to convict President Donald Trump after he incited an insurrection that flooded onto the floor of the Senate, McConnell said he was eager to spend more time fraying the fabric of his own home and family circle.

At time of writing, he had already moved his armchair to a very inconvenient location.

“For two decades,” McConnell said, “obstruction has been my passion. Just because I will no longer be Senate minority leader does not mean that I won’t get to keep doing what I love.”

McConnell gestured broadly at the country and said he was eager to turn his destructive gaze from public institutions to private ones — family dinner, board game nights, sitting quietly on the couch reading a book. “These seem sturdy,” he noted, “but so did the Senate when I got there, and now

look at it. As I look at it, you can’t spell Monopoly without N-O.”

In retirement, McConnell eagerly anticipates standing in the middle of pickleball courts with his arms folded while people try to play around him, digging up his neighbors’ gardens and unplugging the pottery wheels of people trying to learn ceramics.

“It won’t be the same without the heady rush of power to devastate millions of human lives,” McConnell sighed, “but it will be nice to be able to keep a hand in, all the same.”

McConnell noted that he had already been offered a number of positions in the private sector for once he finishes his regular term in January 2027: as a disembodied, evil eye presiding over a blighted land; sitting in a lifeguard chair peacefully while people struggle and call for help; or just parked on an expressway at rush hour in the path of emergency vehicles.

But the leader said he would be happy

simply going on neighborhood walks with his loved ones, throwing passing children’s ice creams on to the ground and turning over turtles “the wrong way.”

Despite McConnell’s years of dedicated service catering to Republicans’ worst impulses and making it possible for them to do the bad things they had been trying to do, many in the party responded to news of the departure by spitting in the outgoing leader’s eye and saying “Good riddance.”

McConnell shrugged. “This is all they know how to do anymore. You’re welcome!”

To those concerned about his departure, McConnell said not to worry: “The best part of my legacy? The guarantee that my successors will almost certainly be even worse!”

*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*

Asked whether he is “on board with the way the [Israel Defense Forces] is taking the fight to Gaza,” Trump said, “You’ve gotta finish the problem.”

“You had a horrible invasion. It took place. It would have never happened if I was president, by the way,” said Trump, who went on to claim that Hamas militants attacked Israel because they “have no respect for Biden” and because Israel “got soft.”

Trump dodged when asked whether he would support a cease-fire in Gaza.

Until “Super Tuesday,” Trump had largely been quiet about Israel’s large-scale attack on the Gaza Strip, but as president he was a staunch supporter of the Israeli government.

Trump’s administration recognized Jerusalem as Israel’s capital, moved the American embassy to Jerusalem, and reversed longstanding US policy that deemed Israeli settlements in occupied Palestinian territory “inconsistent with international law” — a shift the Biden administration rolled back in February.

Following Trump’s Fox interview, the former president’s national press secretary Karoline Leavitt told NBC News Trump “did more for Israel than any American president in history.”

As Democratic voters have used state party primaries in recent weeks to voice their objections to Biden’s unconditional support for Israel, the *New York Times* reported (3/1

how the Trump campaign and its allies “plan to exploit that division to their advantage” during the general election.

“One idea under discussion among Trump allies as a way to drive the Palestinian wedge deeper into the Democratic Party,” the *Times* reported, “is to run advertisements in heavily Muslim areas of Michigan that would thank Mr. Biden for ‘standing with Israel.’”

In a column (3/4), The Intercept’s James Risen argued that Trump and “his MAGA Republicans” would “be even worse” on Israel than the Biden administration, which has supported Israel’s Gaza assault militarily and diplomatically while also issuing mild calls for the protection of civilians, delivery of humanitarian aid, and a temporary cease-fire.

“Trump is a big fan of war crimes, especially against Muslims,” wrote Risen, The Intercept’s senior national security correspondent. “During his first term, he intervened on behalf of Special Operations Chief Eddie Gallagher, a Navy SEAL platoon leader convicted of posing for a photo with the body of a dead Iraqi; another SEAL team member told investigators that Gallagher was ‘freaking evil,’ but Trump said at a political rally that he was one of ‘our great fighters.’ Trump also pardoned Blackwater contractors convicted of killing Iraqi civilians in a wild shooting spree in Baghdad’s Nisour Square. There is no chance that he would try to stop Israel from indiscriminately killing Palestinians.”

“Although the Biden administration has bent over backward to support Israel, the

president has said repeatedly in recent weeks that an independent Palestinian state is still possible. What’s more, political unrest within the Democratic Party is starting to have an impact on Biden, forcing changes in the White House’s approach to Israel,” Risen continued. “Trump would never face such pro-Palestinian pressure from within the Republican Party. He and his MAGA cult of Christian nationalists would never force Israel to accept a cease-fire—or a Palestinian state.”

**ECONOMY CREATES 275,000 JOBS IN FEBRUARY. UNEMPLOYMENT EDGES UP TO 3.9%.** The economy continued to create jobs at a rapid pace in February, with employment up by 275,000. However, any concerns about an excessive pace of job growth are alleviated by the fact that the prior two months’ total was revised down by 167,000. This puts the three-month average at 265,000, Dean Baker noted at the Center for Economic and Policy Research (3/8).

The household survey showed a less encouraging picture. The unemployment rate rose 0.2 percentage points to 3.9% as employment actually fell by 184,000 in the household survey, but the rate remained under 4% for the 27th month to keep the longest string of this low unemployment since the late 1960s. The gap between job growth in the establishment survey and employment growth in the household survey over the last year now stands at 1,149,000.

As noted before, other labor market data, such as weekly unemployment claims and the

ADP job numbers, seem far more consistent with the establishment survey. Also, if the household survey proves to be closer to the mark, then productivity is growing far more rapidly than the data now indicate.

**SENATE DEMS CALL ON SCHUMER TO REOPEN WWII-ERA COMMISSION ON ‘WAR PROFITEERING.’** Six senators this week sent a letter to Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer calling for him to “reconstitute the World War II-era Truman Committee to investigate war profiteering and price gouging in the American military industrial complex.”

The senators include Sens. Bernie Sanders (I-VT), Ron Wyden (D-OR), Elizabeth Warren (D-MA), Ed Markey (D-MA), Jeff Merkley (D-OR), and Peter Welch (D-VT). The letter states that the US will spend nearly \$1 trillion on the military this year, including a small portion of which will go to funding the defense of Ukraine, and the money that goes to military contractors must be used efficiently and cost-effectively.

“Almost half that money will go to a handful of hugely profitable defense contractors. [The Department of Defense] accounts for about two-thirds of all federal contracting activity, obligating more money than all U.S. civilian agencies put together,” the letter reads. “As the Government Accountability Office has repeatedly shown, this vast contracting often takes place without adequate safeguards against waste, fraud, and abuse.”

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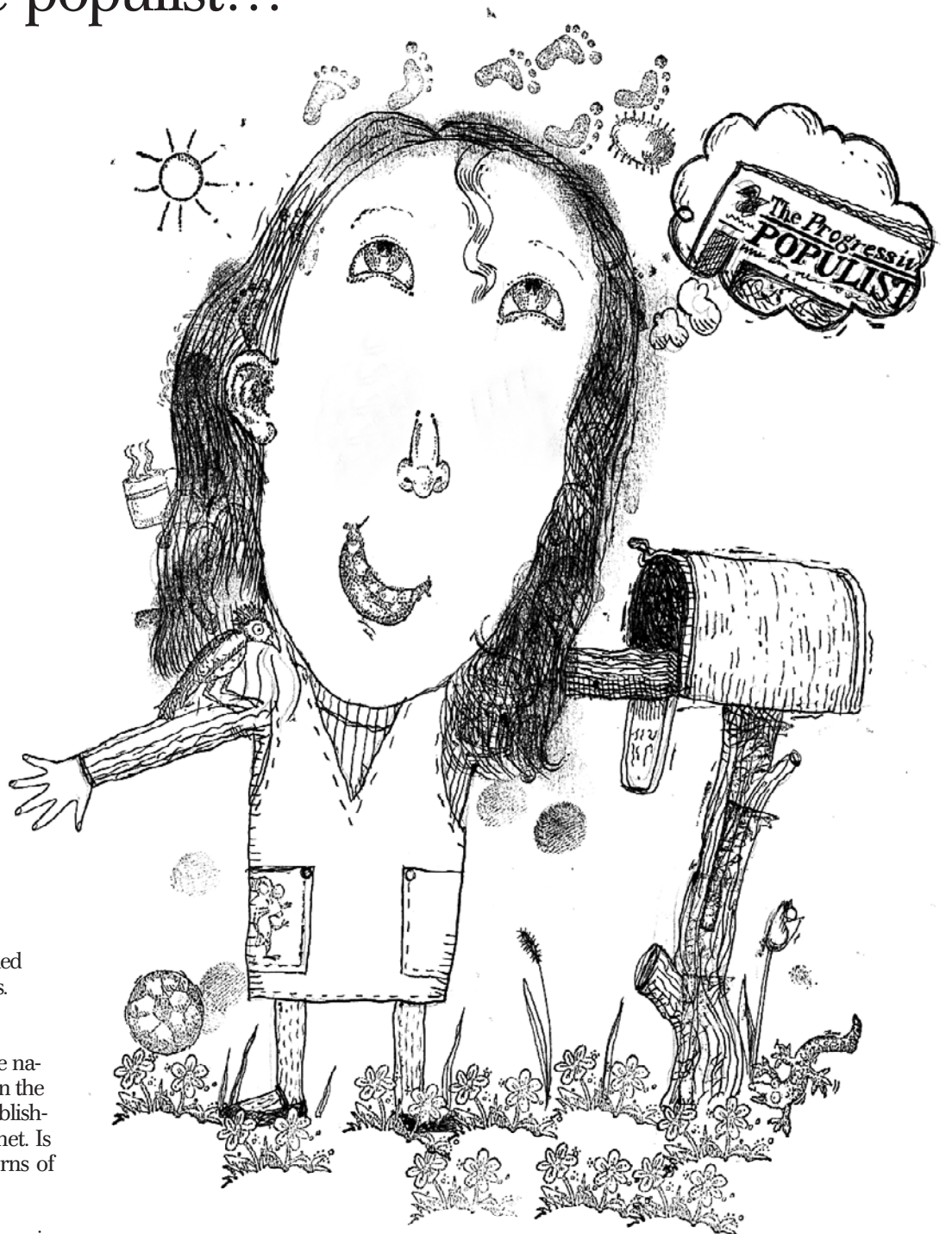
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