



## What's Missing From Railroad Safety Data? Dead Workers and Severed Limbs.

*Thanks to government loopholes, rail companies haven't been scrutinized by the Federal Railroad Administration for scores of alleged worker injuries and at least two deaths.*

By TOPHER SANDERS,  
DAN SCHWARTZ and  
GABRIEL SANDOVAL,  
ProPublica.

On a hot July afternoon in 2018, Gregory West found himself trudging through the mountains of northern Tennessee on what would be the last walk of his life.

The engineer and his conductor had been stuck behind a stalled train that had not budged by the end of their shift, and rail company officials told them to walk out to a road where a vehicle could meet them. It would be an hour's journey up and down steep hills in 88-degree heat. And West, 57, had to lug two large bags of his belongings the entire way. Just as he reached the rendezvous point, he collapsed. The Campbell County medical examiner said West had pneumonia and hypertension, which decreased his oxygen supply before he died. His sister sued the railroad company, CSX, which settled with her for an undisclosed amount.

But none of that is reflected in CSX's worker injury statistics. ProPublica only found out about it while reviewing lawsuits levied against the nation's largest freight carriers in the past 15 years. West's was one of at least 130 worker deaths and other injuries that were alleged to have happened on the job but that railroad companies never reported to regulators.

Among the others, according to the lawsuits, were a CSX conductor who suffered a fatal heart attack after doing physical labor on a subfreezing overnight shift and a contractor who lost three fingers rigging equipment in a Norfolk Southern rail yard.

The Federal Railroad Administration requires companies to report such incidents because knowing about them allows officials to spot broader lapses and hazardous working conditions. The agency's statistics are the main way the public can view the businesses' safety records, for which they must answer to their employees' unions and their shareholders.

But, as ProPublica has previously reported, railroad companies go to extreme lengths to portray themselves as safer than

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# The Progressive POPULIST

A Journal from America's Heartland

## Business Office:

PO Box 487  
Storm Lake, IA 50588  
1-712-732-4991

## Subscription Information:

1-818-286-3104

USPS 016011. Periodicals postage paid at Storm Lake, Iowa 50588. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to The Progressive Populist, PO Box 487, Storm Lake, Iowa 50588-0487.

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Subscriptions are \$45.00 for one year (22 issues). Back issues: \$3.50 prepaid. Foreign, group bulk rates and advertising rates available on request. If you don't want your name shared with other progressive groups in list exchanges, call 800-205-7067 or email populist@usa.net and ask to be "unlisted."

The Progressive Populist (ISSN 1096-5971), entire contents copyrighted 2024, is published twice monthly, with combined issues in July and January, by Ampersand Publishing Company, 220 W. Railroad St., Storm Lake, Iowa 50588.

## AN EDITORIAL

### Are You Better Off Than Trump?

Donald Trump's promoters are now asking "Are you better off today than you were four years ago," when Trump was in office. Seriously?

By almost any objective standard, the US is in much better shape today than it was when Joe Biden took office in January 2021.

Trump inherited a healthy economy from Barack Obama, who led the recovery from the recession George W. Bush left him in 2009. Trump took a 4.5% unemployment rate and rode it for three years until the COVID-19 pandemic hit the US in early 2020. Non-farm employment fell by 1.4 million jobs in March 2020 and a staggering 20.5 million jobs in April, a loss of 22 million jobs that largely erased the gains from a decade of job growth, the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities noted in March. Unemployment was 6.3% in January 2021, the gross domestic product had dropped 3.5% during 2020, grocery shelves were empty as supply chain problems made everything from toilet paper to computer chips hard to find.

The British medical journal *The Lancet* in February 2021 blamed Trump for an error-filled response to the coronavirus pandemic that analysts said contributed to 40% more deaths compared to other wealthy countries.

Trump undermined science at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, he pulled the US out of the World Health Organization, and cast doubt on the public use of masks, among other things.

"Instead of galvanizing the US populace to fight the pandemic, President Trump publicly dismissed its threat (despite privately acknowledging it), discouraged action as infection spread, and eschewed international cooperation."

"His refusal to develop a national strategy worsened shortages of personal protective equipment and diagnostic tests," it added. "President Trump politicized mask-wearing and school reopenings and convened indoor events attended by thousands, where masks were discouraged and physical distancing was impossible."

During his first year, Biden got COVID vaccinations distributed throughout the country, which slowed the spread of the virus and helped people get back to work and school. He also helped clear up the supply chain problems and got Americans back to work.

All those jobs lost during Trump's last year have been recovered under Biden, plus 423,000 manufacturing jobs that have been created since passage of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act in 2021.

Inflation spiked from a 1.4% annualized rate when Biden took office to more than 6%, but it has settled back to 3.2%, much of which is caused by corporate profiteering, which Republicans have shown little interest in checking. And real wages (adjusted for inflation) are up, with particular gains at the low end of the income scale.

Despite Republican claims that crime has run out of control under Biden, a recent FBI report noted that crime actually declined significantly in 2023, continuing a post-pandemic trend.

The fourth-quarter 2023 numbers showed a 13% decline in murder in 2023 from 2022, a 6% decline in reported violent crime and a 4% decline in reported property crime, based on data from around 13,000 law enforcement agencies, policing about 82% of the US population.

NBC News noted that the drop in crime does not appear to be understood by most Americans. A Gallup poll in December found that 77% of Americans believe crime rates are worsening.

And this all happened after Trump failed in his attempt to reject the election results and resisted the transfer of power. Trump and his allies tried to persuade Republican state officials in Arizona, Georgia,

Michigan, Nevada, New Mexico, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin to reject Biden's victories in those states, he was recorded on a phone call trying to bully Georgia state officials into finding 11,780 more ballots to put him ahead of Biden in that key state, and Trump incited an insurrection at the Capitol in an apparent attempt to interrupt the certification of the election on Jan. 6. More than 2,000 "tourists," pushed past police lines to enter the Capitol, in what the Republican National Committee later called "legitimate political discourse." Much vandalism and looting followed, 174 police officers were injured and damages exceeded \$2.7 million. In the past three years, 1,200 of the "tourists" have been charged with federal crimes relating to the attack. As of December 2023, 745 defendants have been found guilty and sentenced. Trump has said they are hostages, whom he would pardon if he makes it back into the White House, after a year in which he has been found liable in New York State courts for sexual assault and civil fraud.

A New York appeals court on March 25 reduced the amount of bail Trump must post to proceed with his appeal of the \$454 million civil fraud judgment imposed on Trump and his business associates, including his sons, for lying about the Trump Organization's assets to qualify for lower interest rates on loans. The court gave Trump 10 days to put up \$175 million, to prevent New York Attorney General Leticia James from seizing his assets during his appeal. Trump also posted \$91.6 million bond in the defamation case he lost to E. Jean Carroll.

Some of our progressive friends were dismayed that James wasn't allowed to seize Trump Tower as her first prize, but she can wait. Unlike the thousands of contractors who were forced to take Trump to court to pay them for their work, only to be forced to settle for cents on the dollar as the unscrupulous developer starved them out, James and the state of New York can carry the case until Trump's appeals are judged groundless.

Trump, who displayed contempt for New York state Judge Arthur Engoron throughout the trial, has claimed he has almost \$500 million in cash, but he accused James and Engoron of seeking "to take the cash away so I can't use it on the campaign." Apparently, he has not heard the old adage, "If you can't pay the fine, don't do the crime." And, with Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg prepared to start prosecuting Trump in his hush money criminal trial on April 15, Trump may be testing the corollary, "If you can't do the time, don't do the crime."

Trump faces trial in April on 34 felony charges that he falsified his company's business records to cover up payments his lawyer made before the 2016 election to porn actress Stormy Daniels and Playboy model Karen McDougal, to keep them quiet about extramarital encounters with Trump years earlier, as well as a Trump Tower doorman who claimed Trump fathered a child out of wedlock. Trump is known to have cheated on all three of his wives, which is not illegal, but falsifying business records to cover it up is illegal in New York, and covering it up for election purposes is a federal crime, for which Trump's former attorney, Michael Cohen, went to prison in 2018. Trump let Cohen take the fall, but Trump's Department of Justice chose not to prosecute the new president. Federal prosecutors said in court filings Trump directed Cohen to make the payments, though they referred to him in court filings as "Individual 1," not by name.

The New York grand jury indicted Trump April 4, 2023, 15 months after Trump returned to Mar-A-Lago, in Florida.

If convicted on the New York charges, Trump could be sentenced to four years in prison, but that would keep him until the federal insurrection and espionage cases and the Georgia election racketeering cases are decided, which could put Trump in prison for the rest of his life, if justice is served well done. —JMC

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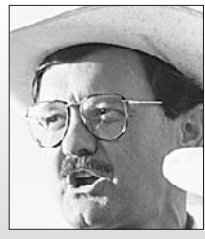
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Cover illustration by Dolores Cullen  
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# JIM HIGHTOWER



Don't tell small-minded right-wing demagogues like Ron DeSantis and Greg Abbott — but Tom Paine was WOKE 250 years ago!

## Tom Paine: What a Guy!

In my view, the greatest of America's "Founding Fathers" was not George Washington or Thomas Jefferson — nor, technically, was he even an American. Rather, he was a British immigrant and itinerate agitator for real democracy, enlightenment and universal human rights.

He was Thomas Paine, a prolific, profound, persuasive and widely popular pamphleteer in the movement for American Independence. With plain language and genuine passion for the cause, Paine's 47-page pamphlet, "Common Sense," was so compelling in its support of the Revolution that it was passed around from person to person — and even read aloud in taverns! But Paine wasn't content with democratic rhetoric; he actually believed in an egalitarian society, and his post-revolution writings (including "The Age of Reason" and "Agrarian Justice") unabashedly demanded that the new hierarchy of US leaders fulfill the promise of democracy.

Even before the War for Independence, Paine called for slaves to be freed and slavery prohibited. After the war, he terrified most of the gentlemen of means who'd signed the Declaration of Independence by insisting that non-landowners be eligible to vote and hold office (John Adams was so appalled by this that he decried "Common Sense" as a "crapulous mess"). But Paine just kept pushing, calling for women's suffrage, progressive taxation, state-funded child care, a guaranteed minimum income, universal public education, strict separation of church and state, and adoption of some of the democratic principles of the Iroquois Nation.

This is Jim Hightower saying, Don't tell small-minded, right-wing demagogues like Ron DeSantis and Greg Abbott — but Thomas Paine was WOKE! Some 250 years before their push to impose autocracy, plutocracy and theocracy over us, this revolutionary founder championed social justice and economic fairness. As one historian noted, "We are today all Paine's children," for he imbued America's destiny with democratic impulse and aspiration.

### Guess What? Americans Want to be Woke!

Well, well, well — look who's waking up and raring to go: Mr. and Ms. WOKE!

We so-called "woke" people have been the target of far-right politicians and front groups that are frantically trying to ban us and our ideas from America's political discourse. In the past few years, such thuggish gubernatorial demagogues as Ron DeSantis have perverted the power of Big Government to attack teachers, librarians, public agencies and even beer. Beer!

Why? Because such people and organizations make educational efforts to reduce bigotry, hatred and exclusiveness in our society. "That's woke," screech the ultra-rightists, demanding that any talk about racism, sexism, gender discrimination or other ugly realities in America must be suppressed.

Like the witch hunters of old, today's pious puritans of ideological conformity have demonized such basic values as diversity and equity, calling them "toxic." DeSantis outlawed any teaching of them in Florida universities, and then he cut sociology from the core curriculum of the state's educational system — essentially cutting out "us," the study of humanity.

If ignorance is bliss, the DeSantis

clique must be ecstatic, for they are eliminating crucial lessons in the art of tolerance, community, sharing, collaboration ... and getting along together. You can have a society that works for the benefit of all — or a DeSantisWorld, where the few rule, and everyone else is forced to conform to their biases.

This is Jim Hightower saying, But wait — the great majority of Americans are rebelling and saying: "We are woke!" Even Republicans flatly rejected DeSantis' presidential campaign that promised to "Floridize" America with anti-WOKE nonsense. And far from wanting to reverse efforts to increase diversity and inclusiveness, a recent poll found that 70% of Americans (including half of Republicans) say our country "needs to do more to increase social justice."

### Sen. Katie Britt Plays a Cruel Political Game to Exploit a Mexican Rape Victim

Poor Katie Britt, the Republican senator from Alabama. She was set up by her party's operatives to do the GOP's televised response to Joe Biden's State of the Union speech.

Sadly, her moment in the national limelight was widely panned, even by Republicans, for her presentation was overwrought and — well, cringey. But the visuals pale to insignificance when you consider that her partisan presentation was based on an intentional, abject lie — exacerbated by her shameful exploitation of a woman who had been brutally raped.

Britt told about a 12-year-old Mexican girl who was the victim of multiple rapes, implying the girl's horror was caused by "Biden's border crisis." Unfortunately for the senator, an alert investigative reporter blew the whistle on her political lie. Yes, the grotesque rapes happened — but 20 years ago, not on Biden's watch. Indeed, Republican George W. Bush was president! Also, her nightmare occurred in Central Mexico, far from the US border, and it had nothing to do with migrants.

Britt knew she was lying as she dramatically concluded that Biden's Latino "invasion" (as Republicans demagogically brand desperate refugees) is "almost entirely preventable." Yes, but guess who helped negotiate a bipartisan bill to end the border crush — then cynically voted to kill the bill because Donald Trump told her to? Katie Britt.

And what about that Mexican woman whose trauma Britt cruelly exploited? She's now working in Mexico for a nonprofit trying to stop human trafficking. Yet, Britt and the GOP didn't even have the grace to tell her they were going to pervert her story for partisan politics. "I thought it was very strange," she said when later informed of Britt's crude re-exploitation of her — adding pointedly that, "The work I do is not a game."

### Why Are We Letting Financial Hucksters Dictate Our Local News?

Too many Americans newspapers have shut down or shriveled to irrelevance, but, luckily, we still have such bastions of local journalism as the Chicago Chronicle and New York News Daily.

But wait ... those aren't real newspapers, aren't local, and aren't even American. They are Russian fake-news outlets, created in recent weeks by Vladimir Putin's propagandists to interfere in our presidential election. They are web publications with names and designs that mimic real US news sites but have no reporters or local newsrooms. Rather, they exist solely to fabricate "news reports" that appear legitimate, getting picked up and re-reported as fact in understaffed, chain-owned newspapers and then promoted on right-wing social media sites.

This is what happens to people and democracy when local journalism is stripped away or hollowed out; no one is on regular watch, allowing charlatans, profiteers and propagandists to dupe unsus-

pecting residents. Not only have hundreds of papers been eliminated, but half of the remaining dailies are now owned by Wall Street predators like SoftBank, the Japanese hedge fund that controls the huge USA Today/Gannett chain. Their interest is not in your town or quality journalism, but in slashing news coverage to jack up their profits. Such absentee owners have eliminated nearly 60% of America's reporters and other newsroom staff in just 20 years.

Let's be clear: Real journalism is labor-driven. No reporters on the ground, no local news. Hello — "news" is the lifeblood of democracy, so why hold it hostage to a

## Plastic Proliferating on the Planet

By FRANK LINGO

My city, Lawrence, Kansas, recently banned single-use plastic bags. The Repugnican-led legislature is trying to pass a law to stop cities from making such ordinances. They want to ban the ban and let plastic bag usage continue. This is an example of what I call anti-environmentalism. It's not enough for them to do nothing anymore, now they take active measures to stop sustainable treatment of our ecosystem.

As bad as Kansas is, Texas has perhaps the very worst environmental record. Inside Climate News just ran a new report from the non-profit Environmental Integrity Project (EIP). The March 14 article summarized the 50 plastic manufacturing complexes built, expanded or proposed since 2012, almost all along the Gulf Coast.

Texas, in its generous and understanding way with the oil industry, has provided \$1.65 billion in tax breaks for the business in the past dozen years, so that those immensely profitable companies could get even richer while Texas schools struggle with shortfalls in teachers and funding.

Louisiana was even more extravagant in their tax giveaways, where \$6.5 billion of discounts went to only three projects. Is it a coincidence that Texas and Louisiana schools spend several thousand dollars less per student than New York and New Jersey every year, according to *U.S. News and World Report*?

If you're anything like me, you might be thinking the world doesn't need more plastic. But the EIP report, entitled "Feeding the Plastics Industrial Complex," says there are plans for 42 more new plastic plants, 24 of them in Texas. That is despite finding that most of the existing petrochemical plants that the report reviewed had committed repeated violations of their pollution permits, without any penalty on their public subsidies.

"I think if companies can't obey the law, they shouldn't be rewarded with taxpayer money," said EIP research manager Alexandra Shaykevich.

Over 99% of plastic is made from fossil fuels, mainly oil. We know the extraction and burning of fossil fuels are a main cause of the climate crisis. Yet here go the petro-

chemical companies doubling down on plastic production, which will keep the demand for oil at record levels.

For ideas on how to revive local news in your town, contact [rebuildlocalnews.org](mailto:rebuildlocalnews.org) — and give news democracy a boost.

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chemical companies doubling down on plastic production, which will keep the demand for oil at record levels.

Unlike Middle Eastern countries like Saudi Arabia and Iran, where you can stick a straw in the sand and draw oil, reserves in the U.S. are much deeper underground. This necessitates hydraulic fracturing, also called fracking, which as the name suggests, involves breaking the strata of the earth with explosives to get at the oil. Fracking has made the land unstable and is implicated in the rash of earthquakes that have become commonplace in states where it is widely practiced. It has also caused contamination with oil of some groundwater supplies that populated areas depend on for their water.

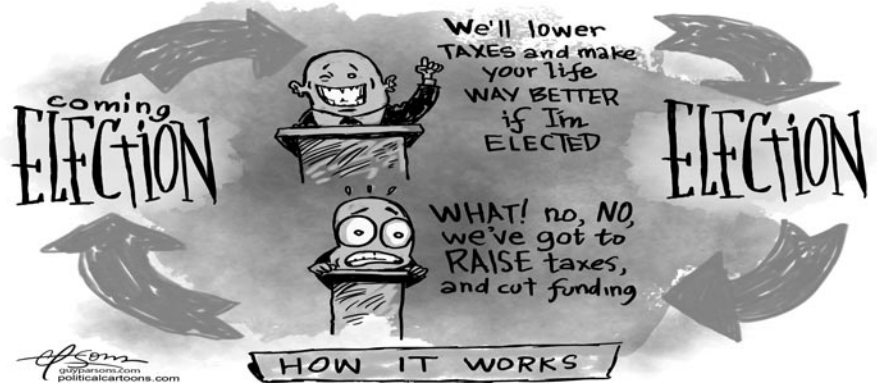
How bad is the plastic problem? A 2020 report by the Pew Charitable Trust and SystemIQ, LTD. estimated that the amount of plastic trash entering the oceans every year will triple by 2040. So that's on top of the Great Pacific Garbage Patch which is twice the size of Texas, and there are other floating plastic aggregations as well. Besides clogging up the oceans and strangling sea creatures, the plastic works its way into our entire ecosystem in the form of microparticles. It is estimated that, on average, each human all over the world consumes about 5 grams of microplastic (the weight of a credit card) every week. I like fiber in my diet but this is ridiculous.

There are plastic substitutes available that are made from a variety of natural plant products that can be composted back into the soil. But we as a species are still stuck in a mindset of extraction and throwaway, rather than reuse and recycle.

Here's a wild idea: How about requiring that every manufacturer of every product be responsible for recycling it when the consumer is done with it? Under 10% of plastic is currently recycled and it's probably less if properly tracked. In an age when recycling is becoming the norm for many products, plastic disposal remains an abomination.

The only way that will change is when we consumers choose our products more ecologically, and also demand that our elected representatives hold the petrochemical companies accountable.

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

# Preserve and Improve Traditional Medicare

Urge readers of *The Progressive Populist* to read the articles written by Wayne O'Leary and Jake Johnson in the 3/1/24 issue. Both articles are concerned about changes to traditional Medicare. After reading these articles, contact your Congress members to express opposition to making Medicare Advantage the default plan when people retire, and other right-wing privatization schemes.

Medicare Advantage plans were and are a right-wing Republican scheme to privatize Medicare (my comment) and they have largely succeeded, since 54% of seniors are now enrolled in them. The for-profit monster we have for medical care in this country should have been slain in the 1930s. Traditional Medicare, enacted in the Johnson administration, has been there for retirees. It was a compromise, however, of 20% private "Gap" insurance, which Republicans demanded. In spite of that, traditional Medicare is a great program, but short-sighted seniors lured by "Advantages" are trading guaranteed medical care for a privatized insurance company-controlled system, where not only must they pay insurance premiums, but they must also pay co-pays, face denial of care and coverage if they are outside the Advantage Plan network. In other words, we are returning to square one.

Once seniors sign up for an Advantage Plan, it is difficult to switch back, because the Gap insurance comes with pre-existing conditions, like being over 65. The co-pay loophole is big enough to allow for-profit medical care to drive a Mack truck through. Government itself has been complicit in this disastrous change. The playing field is skewed in the direction of Medicare Advantage plans. I will never give up traditional Medicare, but I see a time when it may not be an option. Again, I urge readers of *The Progressive Populist* to read the O'Leary and Johnson columns and contact their congressional representatives to oppose the right's efforts to privatize traditional Medicare, and to work to preserve traditional Medicare by supporting measures that level the playing field for traditional Medicare and oppose the default scheme. There are those of us who care deeply about traditional Medicare.

JOHN F. BARKER, *Antigo, Wis.*

### Settle That Debt In One Fell Swoop

Deficits don't matter? Politically, that's correct. But liberals shouldn't believe the debt a Republican boogeyman to be trotted out against Democratic presidents. As with every capital instrument, the debt steals potential wealth from toilers to give to the wealthy. Debt service annually transfers three-quarters of a trillion dollars to the investing class (claiming cover from grandma's \$50 Savings Bond).

Spot the debt a trillion to fight the World Wars. The rest is entirely a creation of the Boomer generation. It began with Reaganomics. Galloping debt served the unbridled

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capitalism that has shoved wealth upward, entrenching plutocracy, with attendant homelessness and insecure retirement. It has been facilitated by a lapsed democracy in which (only) money is speech.

Debt alarmists point out that tax increases and entitlement slashes will both burden the middle class. They assume the debt must be whittled down over time. The proper solution, to the contrary, is to erase the debt in one fell swoop. Every American gets to set aside one million dollars of personal assets. The rest gets shoved into a pile, and \$34 trillion of it paid to America's creditors.

"The Cat in the Hat," a Boomer touchstone, ends with the Cat driving a cleaning machine through the house he has trashed. Radical debt retirement is akin to that magical machine. It is well that Boomers should solve their own debt fiasco. And that will require taking the trillions from folks who have it. (And mostly stuffing it back in the same pockets.)

M. WARNER, *Minneapolis, Minn.*

### Rabid Lady Leads the Red Wave

Judging by U.S. Rep. Marjorie Taylor-Greene's (MTG) behavior at the recent State of the Union address, I fear she has an advanced case of rabies. Someone should get her to a doctor, or perhaps a vet, ASAP. Or, maybe she's always been inappropriate, obnoxious and mean — one of those girls in junior high who hung out in the restroom so she could beat-up or otherwise humiliate any girl who happened to annoy her. Now as a middle-ager, she's a poster-adult for a wicked form of arrested development, and a member of Congress — lucky us, not really.

Forgive my sophisticated analysis: if MTG is the new face of the Republican party, complete with her blood-red MAGA hat, we're all in deep doo doo. Along with her beloved, or at least convenient, leader, The Orange Narcissist, MTG and her ilk could pull this country toward fascism and breathtakingly fast. For those who think I'm being an alarmist, bone-up on world history. The fascist playbook is an old one.

I'm so sick and tired of voting for corporate Democrats, whose party revved up their support of Wall Street at the expense of Main Street decades ago (curse those Clintons), but what's a progressive to do when no progressives are on the ballot? There's a time and place to vote for someone who doesn't have a chance or exercise a protest vote, but now isn't the time for either. Just get a whiff of what the Republican judiciary is shoveling out into our country and imagine how much worse it could get if the Republicans won the White House and both houses of Congress in the upcoming election. It's the stuff of nightmares, American style.

So, I'll do what I've done so many times before. I'll take a clothes pin into the booth of bile, pinch it onto my nose and vote for every Democrat running as I try to keep down the meal churning in my stomach. Yes, it's a weak form of protest but somehow my silly little ritual helps me through it. The tide is still against us so we must ride the wave once again and never, never give up hope.

SUSAN ODEGARD, *Westminster West, Vt.*

### Reflections on a Set of Drawers

It is a tall chest of six drawers that resides in my unused attic room to store seasonal clothing. Other than the steam-bent oak drawer fronts, it is an example of low-cost, early 20th century bedroom furniture. The drawers

are rabbeted rather than dovetailed. There are no center guides nor dust panels between drawers. The only distinctive feature is that each drawer has a lock. All six drawers have a mortised lock. The locks were manufactured by the National Lock Company in Rockford, Ill., in 1904. Rockford had more than 30 wood furniture manufacturers so this lock was widely used. These locks were installed almost as an afterthought since the lock itself was low cost and installation in a factory was a simple task needing little effort.

In contrast, for a homeowner to mortise in a lock without carpentry skills is a challenge. If a parent had even one dresser or nightstand with a lock, how many child tragedies would be avoided? How many children killed or injured by an unsecured firearm would be saved? How many children denied access to prescription drugs would still be alive or without serious injury.

I can think of no single regulation having a significant impact on home safety than to require bedroom furniture with one locking drawer. We require tip over protection on furniture and ranges. This addendum to a drawer wouldn't increase cost since it's proven by my dresser that the manufacturer, who cut out every feature of quality construction, could still afford to install all six drawers with these locks at almost no cost.

PETER ARDITO, *Harvard, Ill.*

### No Tears for Hamas

I have appreciated *The Progressive Populist* for many years. I have followed the news about Israel and Hamas. I know that not all news is reliable, but I do know what terrorism is and I feel you have concerned the paper with too much concern about the evils of infant killings etc. without a corresponding concern of what Israel is trying to do to protect themselves from terrorism. Hamas has violated previous agreements repeatedly and will not now release hostages. After 17 years of teaching hate to the population — and building tunnels — they should not be surprised about the ravages of the war they created. And neither am I.

BOB CASSIDY, *Ojai, Calif*

### Opus Dei in D.C.

I don't get it. I simply don't get it. You know it, your journalists know it. I'm a dolt and even I know it. Why are you all so afraid of it? The wrath of the Pope, the Bishops, the Roman Curia, American Catholics? Even the extraordinary Katrina Vandenberg must know it. All those great authors in *The Progressive Populist* on the subject of the Supreme Court have no fear of exposing and castigating the extremely reactionary Evangelical Protestant Right. Trump did not come up with those three ultra right judges on the Supreme Court. Leonard Leo did: the powerful D.C. head of Opus Dei. That's the extremely reactionary, secretive fascist society of the Catholic Church imposing its dogma on Americans. I once read that Alito and Thomas are members. Are there now three more? Dig and ye shall find.

Baffled in Westport.  
VINCENT LUTI, *Westport, Mass.*

**Editor's Note:** Being in the Catholic organization Opus Dei might get them on the bishop's mobile phone contacts list, but being members of the right-wing Federalist Society, of which Leo is a leader, is what got those mooks on the Supreme Court.



## A Study in Tax Dodging

By DON ROLLINS

Nearly a year after its season finale, devoted fans of the HBO series "Succession" can be excused if they're still chugging full-body detox shakes three times a day. No multiseason show in the history of American television — fiction or non — has so extolled wanton capitalism, and with so much vitriol.

Take or leave its toxic plotlines and characters, "Succession" has at least tweaked viewers' interest in today's mega-corporate culture. Only real life billionaire CEOs can confirm whether "Succession" has much to with life among today's insanely wealthy; but that's not likely given for the last half-decade some of them have been dodging taxes by means the show's toxic patriarch would be awed.

Such are the findings of a recent report describing how

dozens of top executives outearned their businesses' federal taxes paid for the years 2018-2022. According to the study done by the Americans for Tax Fairness (ATF), and Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy (ITEP), that's because those businesses, 1) Massaged tax liabilities through use of loopholes, tax breaks and overall lax federal oversight; 2) Passed part of the savings onto happy shareholders and investors, and 3) Funneled extra millions in cash, stock options and incentives to their most aggressive bosses.

The tab for slighting the federal coffers for that period came to \$275 billion — all in a few years' work for the 342 corporate giants with, as ITEP's senior fellow Matt Gardner described it "... a roomful of lawyers and accountants whose job it is to redefine taxable income, to move income around on paper in a way you hope will avoid taxes."

As one might expect, Elon Musk's Tesla was the overall baddest of the bad actors. The company scored \$4.4 billion in profits, yet utilized offshore accounts and slack sales periods to virtually come out tax neutral. Meanwhile

Musk banked a cool \$2.28 billion in highly valuable stock options. (The rest of the very large pack includes some by now familiar repeat offenders: Ford, Bank of America, Netflix, Duke Energy and AT&T among them. The boilerplates and shell companies change, but not the tactics.)

The seeds for this particular spree of wealth hoarding were sown in 2017, with the Trump administration's Tax Cuts and Jobs Act (2017). The key provision was a dramatic slash in the starting corporate rate, from 35% to 21%. President Biden has stopped the onslaught by imposing a 15% basement on corporate income, but any further progress lies in the balance come November.

The ATF/ITEP study confirms the ease with which commercial and other corporate enterprises can operate in their own best interests. We could hit the remote when "Succession" reached new bottoms. Not so, reality.

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

# Who Passes the Dishwasher Test?

Ever since it started to look like we'd have a couple of lame choices for President in 2024, I've been trying to think of ways to get voters excited enough in November to start up their cars and drive to the polls to vote. Fox News has a pretty good strategy adapted from the zombie apocalypse movies: Tell lies in an excited tone of voice, make people believe the bad guys are here, now, right this minute and convince them that the crisis can be averted only by voting.



Imagine you've fixed a great meal for a favorite diner... You're pushing yourselves back from the table... Who offers to do the dishes and lets you sit?

(me) and you're looking for a way to decide between the orange guy and the skinny one. You've looked at the issues—borders, Israel, NATO, local food—and you've decided nobody has any good ideas to send you to the polls on a chilly November day. It's time for the trial.

Imagine you've fixed a great meal for a favorite diner. Pot roast. You're famous blue-ribbon chili. Or, if you're vegan, a marvelous lentil bolognese. Wow. That's eating. Maybe with a lovely chocolate mousse dessert.

OK. You're pushing yourselves back from the table, you and your diner both exhausted but giddy with delight over the culinary triumph, and you're ready to waddle over to the sofa and plop down but wait, there are the dishes, the pots, the pans, the deadly plastic containers... here's where the test comes in, and since we're in the land of imagination we can again become

gender neutral...

Does s/he reach for your hand, dear cook, and say, "That was magnificent... I'll do the dishes... you just sit" or doesn't s/he?

And do you, dear cook, blink back the tears and enjoy the moment? Or do you pitch in?

While you contemplate your own reaction to this interesting scenario, let me forestall the obvious complaint. You, I hear you saying, have an automatic dishwasher. You, I hear you saying, have reduced need for assistance.

I respond: You're missing the point. Having an automatic dishwasher is like relying on A.I. to write your college entrance essay. The automatic dishwasher is only a tool. Someone needs to load it, to see that it does its job, lest the result be only that the dishes must be re-loaded...or worse, cleaned by hand. In short, a person that loads a dishwasher properly is a person you can trust to get through any national or international crisis.

In fact, owning the automatic dishwasher is a chance for the guest to show off a certain skill, maybe a skill of the engineering sort, and suited to today's cyber-challenges. A dishwasher must be loaded so that every surface receives a generous amount of soapy spray and then a generous amount of what industry calls sparkling ultra rinse. It must be loaded, in short, so that the dishes come out as clean as dishes that have been laboriously washed old-style, by hand.

I think you see my point. Not only is

there a responsibility to carefully handle the precious dishes and glassware, perhaps even grandmother's delicate stemmed wine-glasses, but there is an obligation to get the job finished with glasses, plates, pots and pans (and deadly plastic storage items) ready to be returned to the shelf ready for the next event.

The guest earns extra points for stacking the most items most efficiently into the dishwasher baskets, so that an entire day's worth of dirty dishes can be cleaned at bedtime and unloaded in the morning. Hosts may also give extra points for carrying the compost out to the compost pile and sweeping the kitchen while we scan the channels for a good program on mountain climbing or whales.

Well, I think you see my point and I hope the value of the test is clear now. You have two choices. Which candidate would make the best, most careful and reliable dishwashing partner? Who is most capable of doing the job to your standards and without unnecessary drama? Uh huh. You know the answer. You're ready, now, to get out and work for him, and that's the only way we'll have a tolerable outcome in November.

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

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## DISPATCHES

**DONATION TO TRUMP'S RNC IS A DONATION TO HIS LAWYERS BEFORE IT'S A DONATION TO HIS PARTY.** Former President Donald Trump's new fund-raising agreement with the Republican National Committee directs a portion of donations to the political account he has used to pay his legal bills before any money goes to the party itself, the *New York Times* reported (3/21).

The order in which entities will receive funds from big donors through what is known as the Trump 47 Committee was disclosed in the fine print of an invitation to a big dinner in April in Palm Beach, Fla., where top donors are asked to contribute up to \$814,600 per person to attend.

The invitation shows that the first \$6,600 donated will go to Trump's campaign. The next \$5,000 will go to his Save America PAC, which paid more than \$50 million in legal and investigation-related bills for Trump in 2023. The \$5,000 amount is the maximum that federal rules say can be contributed to Save America by an individual.

After that, the RNC gets the rest of the donation, followed by dozens of state parties.

In practice, what that means is that even modestly large contributors — anything above \$6,600 — will fund the account that Trump has used to defray legal costs. And the fund-raising agreement came as Save America, which has averaged roughly \$5 million a month in legal payments for Trump and witnesses in his cases, is on course to run low on funds as the spring ends.

"Given their respective financial situations, the former president's campaign and the Republican National Committee look like two guys on a park bench, fighting over an apple," Charles Pierce noted at *Esquire.com* (3/22). "But as a demonstration of how thoroughly the party has capitulated to its swamp monster, it's hard to beat the fact that the priority in its fundraising is to keep the party's nominee out of jail, and hardly anyone mentions that this whole situation is flatly bizarre. Of course, this is all made possible because we are in the brave new world of campaign finance that arose when *Citizens United* legalized influence peddling."

### TRUMP LAWSUIT AGAINST ABC, STEPHANOPOULOS IS RISKY.

Donald J. Trump filed a defamation lawsuit against ABC News (3/19), arguing that anchor George Stephanopoulos harmed his reputation by saying multiple times on-air that Trump had been found liable for raping the writer E. Jean Carroll. Stephanopoulos is also named as a co-defendant in the case.

The controversy, to the extent that one exists, began (3/10), when US Rep. Nancy Mace (R-S.C.) appeared on ABC's *This Week* and faced a difficult line of inquiry: Stephanopoulos asked the congresswoman how she reconciles her support for rape victims with her support for Trump.

"You endorsed Donald Trump for president. Judges and two separate juries have found him liable for rape and for defaming the victim of that rape. How do you square your endorsement of Donald Trump with the testimony that we just saw?" Stephanopoulos asked Mace.

The ABC host was, of course, referring to E. Jean Carroll's case, in which Trump was held liable for sexual abuse. The jury did not find the defendant liable for "rape" as defined in the applicable state law, though the judge in the case later concluded that the former president, for all intents and purposes, "raped" her, as many people commonly understand the word "rape."

Mace, who has spoken publicly about being raped as a teenager, condemned the questions, but Trump is going a step further with his civil suit, claiming that the anchor's line of inquiry with Mace was "false, intentional, malicious and designed to cause harm."

Steve Benen noted at *MaddowBlog* (3/19) that Trump has been unusually litigious when it came to independent news organizations. His campaign filed suit against CNN, for example, and it didn't turn out well. Trump also sued the *New York Times*, which also proved pointless. His suit against social media giants was also dismissed.

In this case, Benen noted, many Republican voters have no idea Trump was recently held liable for sexual abuse. His new civil suit might help change that.

"Legal experts can speak with more authority than I can about the case's prospects — though given recent history, the former president and his followers should probably keep their expectations low — but I wonder if Team Trump appreciates the political risk it's taking," Benen noted.

For one thing, there's not much of an upside for a presidential candidate to effectively argue, "I was held liable for sexual assault, not rape, even if a judge said there's little meaningful difference between the two given the details of the case."

### SENATE MAP IS TOUGH FOR DEMS, BUT THEY CAN BEAT TED CRUZ AND RICK SCOTT.

Senate Democrats are facing yet another cycle where the battleground map favors Republicans—this time by a lot. Several Democrats are up for reelection in red states like Ohio and Montana. Democrats also need to hold battleground seats in Arizona, Nevada and Pennsylvania. And with Sen. Joe Manchin's impending retirement, West Virginia will almost certainly flip to Republicans, meaning the contest for control of the Senate effectively starts at 50-50 and could very well be decided by which party wins the White

House and the vice president's tie-breaking vote, Kerry Eleveld noted at *Daily Kos* (3/25).

Yet, in an interview with *Daily Kos*, Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee spokesperson Tommy Garcia projected optimism about matching up Democrats' battle-tested incumbents against the Republican agenda to, for instance, pass a national abortion ban and strip millions of health care coverage by repealing the Affordable Care Act.

"The strength of our Senate Democratic candidates—who are backed by a broad, unique coalition of voters, the Republican party's flawed recruits, and their toxic agenda on the defining issues of the 2024 election will all lead the GOP's Senate campaigns to defeat," Garcia said.

Democrats are poised to make a play in Texas and Florida against two of the most reviled Republican senators nationwide: Ted Cruz and Rick Scott.

"In both Texas and Florida, Republicans have unpopular and unlikable incumbents who have turned off voters of every political persuasion," Garcia said. Holding the seats Democrats have is paramount, but Garcia added that Democrats are working to "take advantage of the good offensive opportunities we have in Texas and Florida."

Both Republicans have proven electoral weaknesses: Cruz held onto his seat in 2018 by just 2 points, and Scott has never won a general election by more than 1.2 points, his margin of victory in his first bid for governor back in 2010. It's been all downhill from there. In 2018, Scott secured his Senate seat by less than half a point, and he remains deeply unpopular, with approval and favorability ratings hovering around 35% among Florida voters.

Cruz's Democratic challenger, Rep. Colin Allred, a former NFL linebacker and civil rights attorney, has come on strong. Allred was first elected in 2018, ousting incumbent Republican Pete Sessions from his seat in the 32nd Congressional District, which was nearly 10 points more Republican

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## FROM HARROP



The YIMBY movement has gained steam as a solution to the shortage of 'affordable' housing. It is a blunt tool, however, and bad politics.

## 'Build Anything Anywhere' Threatens Communities

YIMBY sounds nice. YIMBY stands for "Yes in My Backyard." It's a positive-sounding rejoinder to NIMBY, "Not in My Backyard." The NIMBY label is being used to stigmatize defenders of zoning laws, with the goal of bulldozing the rules.

Needless to say, real estate developers

are all for YIMBY — though not necessarily where they themselves live.

The YIMBY movement has gained steam as a solution to the alleged shortage of "affordable" housing, a vaguely defined concept. Its backers now comprise a diverse group combining the left and the right for not always the same reasons. It is a blunt tool, however, and bad politics.

Zoning is intended to serve local needs and desires. The best examples consider geography, history and existing infrastructure. But states are now bullying towns to just build, build, build. Look, America is a big place. We don't all have to stuff ourselves into a handful of urban corridors.

This is not a defense of all zoning laws. There are good arguments for easing regulations to let homeowners build accessory apartments, often sweetly referred to as "granny flats," or to rent an apartment over the garage. Duplex (two-family) homes can be a nice addition to a neighborhood of single-family houses.

And in many places, a case can be made for allowing taller structures near rail stations. That kind of building happened naturally around Dallas' 93-mile commuter rail line. But at the time of it the lines' construction, many of the stations were surrounded by open land.

Montana Gov. Greg Gianforte got a bunch of YIMBY hugs when he pushed through a law forbidding local governments to enact zoning laws. (Anything goes? I don't know.) A photo on Bloomberg News showed a sign heralding a future 82-house development outside Culbertson, Montana. The sign was surrounded by empty land to a distant horizon. Montana isn't Connecticut.

New York Gov. Kathy Hochul's plan to force building in already congested suburbs is being jeered for good reasons. The townspeople don't want high rises to obliterate their familiar downtowns.

The argument for trading quality of life for cheaper housing is a loser. Hey, if you really want to build more housing in Manhattan, why not erect towers on all that wasted land in Central Park? Imagine how much cheaper housing would become in Paris if they leveled all those six-story Belle Epoque buildings and erected apartment blocks in their place.

A battle rages in San Francisco over plans to put a 24-story apartment building at the foot of Telegraph Hill, whose steep streets and quaint cottages grace a jillion postcards. A group backing it, YIMBY San Francisco, represents developers claiming their dedication to affordable housing. But

only a fraction of that project's units would be "affordable" — and 10 of them would go to people earning up to 120% of the area's median income. So much for "granny flats."

Towns in densely populated Eastern Massachusetts are up in arms over the state's MBTA Communities Act. It imposes strict demands to build multifamily housing in towns served by transit.

In a letter of protest sent to Gov. Maura Healey, the Select Board of Wrentham argued that they were not against adding to the housing supply but that the bill would force the town to increase its population by as much as 13% without any state funding. Wrentham doesn't even have municipal sewage.

The Wrentham selectmen stated well the threat they see in the housing requirement — that it "will lead to the destruction of the small-town New England charm we've come to love."

"Yes in My Backyard" so often means "Yes in *Your* Backyard." But No. We don't have to roll over for developers.

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

## What's the Matter with Me?

By ART CULLEN

People have been telling us country bumpkins for a long time what's wrong with us. After awhile, you begin to believe it.

"What's the matter with Kansas?" William Allen White of the *Emporia Gazette* famously asked as William Jennings Bryan and the populists challenged the railroads and White's mercantile class. White became the sage of the prairie and friend of Teddy Roosevelt by telling the rural riffraff to let the folks in Emporia, Topeka, New York and Washington determine their interests.

"What's the matter with Kansas?" Thomas Frank asked by title of his 2004 book that pondered why these rural folks vote against their seeming self-interest.

Lately, the authors of a book called "White Rural Rage" suggest that we, especially us men, are an imminent threat to democracy. (What about Gov. Kim Reynolds, city boys?) Paul Waldman was a columnist for the *Washington Post*, Thomas Schaller was a columnist for the *Baltimore Sun*. They argue that our festering irrational rage will vault Donald Trump back into power. Then, you have Paul Krugman, columnist for the *New York Times*, musing that the rural voter is a mystery.

Trump is our fault. We're racist.

Okay, I was born and grew up in Storm Lake, Iowa, White and rural. Hog central. I know what I have seen ba-

sically since the Reagan Revolution — half as many family farms, the elimination of the independent pork producer, the union busted, wages half as much in real terms.

The Coast to Coast store left downtown Lake Avenue after Walmart moved in. Where Walmart isn't in smaller towns, Dollar General is.

Storm Lake is better off than the rest of rural Iowa. We're growing, thanks to immigration. That's not so in two-thirds of Iowa. They tore down the school in Fonda and the main street is about to fall down in Pomeroy.

It must be us who did this to us. Our racism and what have you, despite the fact that Iowa twice voted for Barack Obama. Manufacturing coincidentally tanked after Wall Street declared us dead in 2008. River towns emptied out and the voters left behind swung to Trump.

How could that happen? How could people vote for former US Rep. Steve King?

Trump said he would drain the swamp — the elite, the power structure, the people who sneer at us hayseeds. "I am your retribution." They think we are ignorant. King was right when he said that wealth flows from the land, and that we were getting screwed. He went too far in his comments on race, especially. He couldn't shut up. White Republican voters in rural Northwest Iowa, spurred by the corporate establishment, got rid of him in a primary. Rep. Randy Feenstra more politely represents the money that's always run things.

Sinclair Broadcasting owns the airwaves. The bar has Fox News on the TV. Facebook fills in the misinformation gaps. One of our oldest voices of moderation, the *Centerville lowegian*, shut down, along with so many other weekly

newspapers. You are led to believe that somebody stole the farm and the Mexican stole your job, and nobody is there to say otherwise.

The Democrats don't bother along the back roads. They think rural people are too stupid and wrapped up in cultural grievance to notice. The more they think that way, the more they enhance Trump's chances.

Trump's chances are pretty decent, the polls say.

A sure way to win is to assume that people in Buena Vista County cannot possibly know what is in their interest. Deplorable. What brilliant politics to tell me that I must be an idiot because I am a rural White man who believes that the farm bill has become a welfare vehicle for agri-industry. How ingenious to ignore Latinos in meatpacking towns as if they do not exist.

There are three or four chemical companies, meatpackers, book publishers and news outlets that control the food you eat and the messages that are stuffed down your throat. They want you to believe that somebody in Nemaha is a threat to democracy but Goldman Sachs and the Koch Network are benign business interests. The thing about growing up rural and stupid like us is that you depend on your instincts and senses, especially your nose, to know when you're being served up a plate of bull garnished with sophistry.

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

## Meet the 'Barons' who 'corrupt' your dinner table

By ALAN GUEBERT

The first economist, Scotland's Adam Smith, had it right almost 250 years ago when, as writer Eric Schlosser notes in the foreword of an important new book by Iowan Austin Frerick, that "...merchants and manufacturers were 'an order of men, whose interest is never exactly the same with that of the public.'"

Few groups know this better than American farmers and ranchers who have seen the most vital sectors of their food-producing business—like meatpacking, grain merchandising, and seed technology—overtaken by today's ever-growing, ever-grabbing "merchants and manufacturers."

Frerick, like Smith, gets it right from the start in the callout title of his new book, "Barons: Money, Power, and the Corruption of America's Food Industry."

(Full disclosure: Frerick is a valued colleague and friend. "Barons" includes a handful of references to previous Farm and Food Files.)

In it, Frerick digs deeply into the rise of seven of these powerful, largely unknown baronial food families to tell how each came to dominate their respective sectors and how they now wield their accrued market power to make everything—from their neighbors to the environment to you—pay

for it.

He begins with the compelling story of Jeff and Deb Hansen, two of the most unlikely hog farmers you've never heard of. Both were Iowa farm kids who, after marriage, began a hog enterprise with three sows. Their drive, skill, and innovations soon led them to expand. Then expand again. Then really expand.

Now their company, Iowa Select Farms, Frerick writes, "employs more than 7,400 people ... and brings about five million hogs to market annually."

Iowa Select became a cornerstone for the CAFO, or concentrated animal feeding operations, takeover of Iowa's — then the nation's — hog sector. Since 1992, Iowa's CAFO-based hog population statewide has increased by "more than 50% while the number of hog farms has declined by over 80%."

That rise delivered the Hansens a private jet (whose tail is reportedly emblazoned with the humble brag, "When Pigs Fly"), multiple homes, and kingmaker status in Iowa's agbiz-dominated state government.

Their home state, however, hasn't fared as well. Pigs, for example, now outnumber Iowans seven to one and produce the "manure equivalent to the waste of nearly 84 million people," or "more than the population of California, Texas, and Illinois combined."

Some "farmers," huh?

Wait until you read about dairy barons, Sue and Mike McCloskey, whose cows pro-

duce 4 million school cartons of milk each day and 430,000 gallons—or a staggering 16 times more—manure.

Or the "faceless" Reimann family of Germany, whose Luxembourg-based JAB Holdings is now the "world's second largest purveyor of coffee" through brands like Peet's, Caribou, Krispy Kreme, Panera Bread, and others too numerous to name. What is known, however, is that JAB entered the coffee-slinging business just 12 years ago and is now a global, if unknown, baron.

Other barons include the Cargill-McMillan family, the world's most dominant grain merchandising company; "The Berry Barons," J. Miles and Garland Reiter, who own Driscoll's through which they control "about one-third of the US berry market" while not "actually growing any berries" at all; the Brazilian "Slaughter Barons," Joesley and Wesley Batista of JBS infamy; and the Walton family whose domination of American grocery retailing continues to grow.

Frerick's skill as both a serious academic and gifted storyteller keeps the pages turning as his colorful cast of characters build empires with everyday dinner items like pork chops, milk, coffee, and strawberries while few Americans even know who they are.

And even fewer know the ruinous impacts their rise in market power has had on rural America's environment, economy, and people.

Frerick, a Fellow at Yale University,

knows and his Barons warns us that these modern "merchants and manufacturers," just like their 18th century counterparts, are nothing more than naked mercantilists.

*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*



# Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s Farce – And Our Tragedy

By JOE CONASON

When a neophyte named Edward Moore Kennedy first ran for the Senate in 1962 at barely 30 years old, his primary opponent delivered a debate quip that still echoes.

“If your name were Edward Moore,” cracked Ed McCormack, then Massachusetts attorney general, “your candidacy would be a joke.” Ted Kennedy won that primary, ascended to the Senate, and then spent a lifetime winning over skeptics with hard work and liberal commitment.

But that harsh zinger could score a bullseye on a different target now: Uncle Teddy's errant nephew Robert Francis Kennedy Jr., the grifting anti-vax lawyer and conspiracy monger whose campaign for president of the United States should be a joke – and certainly would be if his name were merely Robert Francis.

The difference is that RFK Jr., seeking public office for the first time, isn't 30. He is 70, a senior citizen, with a long and checkered record whose bright spots are overshadowed by menacing darkness. Far from upholding the values his family represents

or the legacy of his martyred father and uncle, Bobby Jr. is an opportunist whose ambition, greed, dishonesty and arrogance have led him far astray.

There was a time many years ago when, as an environmental lawyer, Kennedy did useful work – usually under the tutelage of wiser heads – after he emerged from the drug addiction that followed his father's murder. At one point, I even wrote an admiring magazine profile of him.

But not too many years later, Bobby began the deceptive anti-vaccine campaign that has marked his moral and intellectual decline ever since. Having authored articles claiming childhood vaccines cause autism, he clung to their refuted arguments and falsified data long after the magazines were forced to withdraw them. He insists those lies are true to this day – and the anti-vax propaganda from which he profits is leaving millions of American kids vulnerable to disease.

How would his late uncle John F. Kennedy, whose memory he so often invokes in his current campaign, react to what Bobby has done? In 1961, President Kennedy worried that resistance to the polio vaccine, which was still rather new, meant millions of schoolchildren might contract that deadly and crippling virus.

At a press conference in April 1961, the young president said: “I hope that the renewed drive this spring and summer to pro-

vide vaccination for all Americans, and particularly those who are young, will have the wholehearted support of every parent in America.”

The following year, JFK pushed through the Vaccination Assistance Act, which financed immunization drives in every state for polio, diphtheria, pertussis and tetanus. That massive campaign established the federal government as the central authority in establishing and coordinating immunization policy for the nation – a role Robert Kennedy Jr. has persistently sought to undermine or even abolish, at potentially enormous cost.

Bobby's betrayal of his family goes further with every step he takes in this campaign, and in every direction. JFK and RFK were both known for surrounding themselves with advisers whose intelligence and experience drew admiration; Bobby is drawn to intellectually null sycophants and boobs, including a large contingent of crooks like Steve Bannon and Roger Stone, as well as the anti-vax scammers, some of whom are outright fascists. These are people his father and uncle would have privately mocked and publicly shunned.

Even worse, Bobby has become a shill for Russian propaganda and an opponent of American military aid to Ukraine's besieged democracy. We don't have to wonder what his uncle would have said, because history tells us.

In his first inaugural address, JFK uttered this indelible sentence: “Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty.” Liberty doesn't mean surrendering to Vladimir Putin and abandoning our allies.

Lately, Bobby has been sucking up to the Libertarian Party, whose platform would tear down all the achievements of his father and both of his uncles in civil rights, education, health care, environmental protection, food security and a score of essential programs. He wants their ballot line, and he is willing to promote their destructive ideology for his own benefit.

In this campaign, he has reversed the old epigram about history and its personages. In the first act, he presents a farce – and in the second act, should he help to elect Donald Trump, he will bring forth a tragedy.

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

## MORE FOR THEM, LESS FOR US

*Tesla, Ford, Netflix, and T-Mobile are among scores of profitable U.S. firms that pay their top executives more than they pay in federal taxes.*

By SARAH ANDERSON, WILLIAM RICE and ZACHARY TASHMAN

In his State of the Union address, President Biden called out “massive executive pay” and vowed to “make big corporations and the very wealthy finally pay their share” of taxes.

Corporate tax dodging and CEO pay have gotten so out of control that many major U.S. companies are paying their top executives more than they're paying Uncle Sam.

Tesla is perhaps the most dramatic example. Over the period 2018-2022, the electric car maker raked in \$4.4 billion in profits but paid no federal income taxes.

Meanwhile, Tesla CEO Elon Musk became one of the world's richest men.

When it comes to fleecing taxpayers while overpaying executives, Tesla is hardly alone. A new report we co-authored for the Institute for Policy Studies and Americans for Tax Fairness analyzes executive pay data for some of the country's most notorious corporate tax dodgers.

What did we find? In addition to Tesla, 34 other large and profitable U.S. firms – including household names like Ford, Netflix, and T-Mobile – paid less in federal income taxes between 2018 and 2022 than they paid their top five executives.

Another 29 profitable corporations paid their top executives more than they paid Uncle Sam in at least two of the five years of the study period.

One company on our list stands out for the infamous role its executives played in the 2008 financial crisis: American International Group. Back then, the insurance giant ignited a firestorm by pocketing a \$180 billion taxpayer bailout and then announcing plans to hand out \$165 million in bonuses to the very same executives responsible for pushing the company – and the nation – to the brink of collapse.

Today, AIG is playing the same greedy game of overpaying its top brass and stick-

ing taxpayers with the bill. Between 2018 and 2022, the company paid its top five executives more than it paid in federal income taxes, despite collecting \$17.7 billion in U.S. profits. In 2022, CEO Peter Zaffino alone made \$75 million.

Lavish executive compensation packages and skimpy corporate tax payments are not unrelated. Executives have a huge personal incentive to hire armies of lobbyists to push for corporate tax cuts because the windfalls from these cuts often wind up in their own pockets.

The 2017 Republican tax law slashed the corporate tax rate from 35% to 21% and failed to close loopholes that whittle down IRS bills even further. Many large, profitable corporations ended up paying no federal taxes at all.

Corporations took the savings from those tax cuts and spent a record-breaking \$1 trillion on stock buybacks, a financial maneuver that artificially inflates the value of executives' stock-based pay.

Wealthy executives became even wealthier while the nation lost billions of dollars in corporate revenue that could have been used to lower costs and improve services for ordinary people. Until this self-reinforcing cycle is broken, we'll have a corporate tax and compensation system that

works for top executives – and no one else.

What can we do to break this cycle? Congress can tackle the entwined problems of inadequate corporate tax payments and excess executive pay on several fronts. Raising the corporate tax rate to 28% (just halfway back to Obama-era levels) would generate \$1.3 trillion in new revenue over the next decade.

Congress must also close loopholes and eliminate wasteful tax breaks, for instance by removing the incentives for American firms to shift profits and production offshore.

Policymakers also have a wealth of tools to curb excessive executive pay, from tax and contracting reforms to stronger regulations to rein in stock buybacks and banker bonuses.

We know we need change when corporations are rewarding a handful of top executives more than they are contributing to the cost of public services needed for our economy to thrive.

*Sarah Anderson directs the Global Economy Project and co-edits Inequality.org at the Institute for Policy Studies. William Rice is a senior writer and Zachary Tashman is a Senior Research and Policy Associate at Americans for Tax Fairness. This op-ed was distributed by OtherWords.org.*

## Hoax That Launched a Thousand Lies

By JOHN YOUNG

Hearing Donald Trump prosecute the Big Lie and Republicans parrot it reminds me of another masterwork in group duplicity.

Back when the George W. Bush White House hewed to shifting fallacious pretexts for invading Iraq, a friend remarked:

“They have to meet every morning to keep their stories straight.”

False comparison, I know: There's nothing intricate and strategic about Trump and his Big Lie chorus. The MAGA cult doesn't need even semi-plausible theories to say what it says, just parrot what the Orange One says.

We must marvel, nonetheless, at the scope of this abomination. We aren't just witnessing a web of lies. We are seeing something as vast and hard to grasp as the whole human genome.

Recently it became evident that one of the key components of the Big Lie was no longer defended by the key purveyor of it.

The film “2,000 Mules” has been cited over and over again by Republican policymakers who tightened red-state voting restrictions.

In particular, the movie falsely made ballot drop boxes to be the means by which Democrats “stole” the election.

This resulted in GOP crackdowns on numbers of drop boxes and limits on their availability.

“2,000 Mules,” produced by GOP activist (and Trump pardon recipient) Dinesh D'Souza, offers “proof” that Democrats were “vote harvesting.”

It says that cell phone geolocation data and video footage show people voting multiple times in the 2020 election – enough illegal votes in key states to swing the election.

It featured comments from an unnamed whistleblower to back up the claims. Not surprisingly, law enforcement officials wanted to know more.

It turns out that it's easier to produce a conspiracy-laden film for people who want to believe “Trump was right” than to convince law enforcement.

In 2021, the Georgia Bureau of Investigation had a simple question of organization behind the film, Texas-based True the Vote: Can we talk to this whistleblower?

Uh, uh, well, uh, we'll get back to you. The group stonewalled Arizona investigators in similar fashion.

Now, four years after the “steal,” *Washington Post* columnist Phillip Bump, who gave D'Souza ample opportunities to back up the film's claims, has pronounced

“Mules” to be based on a hoax.

Bump's assertion coincides with a stunning development: Faced with a court order by the Georgia investigators to turn over any solid evidence about vote harvesting, True the Vote said it didn't have any.

These bogus claims were used by Trump in May of 2021 when he cited “millions of votes on camera” showed the “stuffing of ballot boxes.”

No, “they” didn't.

So, this is why it's harder to vote in Texas, Georgia and other states governed by Republicans. Pure bovine excrement had been used to frame ballot drop boxes as silent conspirators in Trump's defeat.

Nothing has ever added up in the whole “Stop the Steal” movement. How could Trump have been screwed out of a second term when Republicans by and large had a pretty good 2020 election?

If Trump was cheated in swing states, why not other Republicans like Wisconsin Sen. Ron Johnson and a host of members of Congress who contested the 2020 election? Yes, contested their own victories.

“2,000 Mules” goes down in the annals of lead balloons like the Dominion Voting Systems hoax that cost Fox News \$787 million for defamation. Stay tuned for a similar suit by Smartmatic.

Donald Trump decided prior to his defeat that he was going to lie about it. Evidence be damned.

What's particularly sinister is that long after Donald Trump is no longer on the scene, the Big Lie will live on in vote-suppression policies that never would have been contemplated without the lie he concocted in ignominious defeat.

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## Cover Story..

Continued from page one

they really are — retaliating against workers who report defects and silencing those who get injured. Officials with the FRA have said there is not much they can do about the forces — like the financial implications of appearing to admit liability and a culture that faults managers when employees get hurt on their watch — that can drive companies to quash injury reporting.

This tranche of missing injuries and deaths, however, exposes the clearest failure by regulators to hold companies accountable.

Much of the problem stems from the FRA's porous reporting policies, which ProPublica found provide opportunities for companies to hide work-related injuries and deaths. Officials say they have spent the past five years working on revisions, which they plan to unveil this year. They said disclosing the details now would be a breach of the rulemaking process, but they mentioned that their changes could address issues raised by ProPublica's reporting.

ProPublica's findings show the powerful rail companies have long benefited from loopholes.

Though agency officials say they are aware of conflicts of interest that steer railroad companies toward keeping worker injuries quiet, FRA policies give the businesses broad latitude to determine whether injuries and even on-the-job deaths are work-related — and, thus, whether they need to be reported.

One reason companies give for opting out of reporting: Rail company officials believe a worker is lying, an argument the companies have made in court, and one juries and judges have sometimes rejected.

The agency also doesn't require railroad companies to report certain injuries and deaths of contractors who are crushed or maimed by trains. Those incidents are supposed to be reported to a different agency by the contractor's employer, which doesn't tie them to the railroad's record or allow them to be easily studied for possible safety reforms.

Empowered to levy fines up to \$10,000 against companies that willfully fail to report injuries, and even to disqualify managers who do so, FRA officials say they will not be investigating the scores of unreported cases ProPublica provided them in a database — cases they confirmed were nowhere to be found in their records.

The bulk of the cases ProPublica found, including the deaths, happened more than five years ago. The FRA says it does not have the power to punish railroads for unreported injuries after that much time or even edit the safety record to reflect them. It attributes that to a law that applies to all federal regulators.

And though 11 of the alleged injuries ProPublica raised are newer — in two unreported cases, workers said they were fired after being hurt — officials said those won't be reviewed either. They view lawsuits, which ProPublica used to find the cases, as "unreliable" sources of information.

The FRA is satisfied with its standard process for unearthing hidden injuries, an audit done of each rail company every two years. As part of these four-month deep dives, regulators say they pore through internal company documents to find injuries that were deemed unreportable, then review medical records and interview employees to determine whether the injury should, in fact, have been reported.

Officials didn't have an explanation for how audits missed the two deaths ProPublica found and said they should have been submitted to the FRA based on the information reporters provided. "Despite our best efforts, regrettably there are cases of failures to report or to accurately capture all covered events," the agency said in a statement, adding that "any gaps or voids in reporting are of concern and will prompt us to redouble our efforts," that it expects companies to "faithfully abide" by the requirements and that it strives to continuously improve its data collection and validation.

Each of the railroads denied that they failed to report injuries, largely claiming that the cases either didn't meet the reporting

guidelines, as CSX argued about West's death, or that the company didn't believe the worker's injury happened at work. "Those cases where CSX determined the events were not reportable are fully supported by the facts and evidence gathered by CSX through its thorough investigations of each incident," the company said in a statement, adding that it was proud of its "best in class" reporting process and that it complies with FRA's audits.

The Association of American Railroads, the industry's lobbying arm, denied that underreporting is widespread and called ProPublica's findings isolated incidents. The association pointed to the most recent injury statistics — the ones ProPublica has found are incomplete — to show the rails are the safest they have ever been.

But union leader Jared Cassity said ProPublica's findings are further evidence that companies' safety records do not capture the full range of dangers allowed to persist on the rails. "The system is rigged, especially when it comes to injuries," said Cassity, the alternate national legislative director for the International Association of Sheet Metal, Air, Rail and Transportation Workers, or SMART.

"You see what they want you to see," he said.

To find unreported injuries and deaths, ProPublica reviewed more than 5,000 federal lawsuits levied against the nation's six largest freight railroad companies, the so-called Class 1s, from 2009 to 2022. For each complaint that mentioned a worker injury or death and had a detailed enough description of what happened, ProPublica consulted a 300-page FRA guidebook to determine which cases appeared to fit reporting requirements. Then, journalists combed through the agency's online railroad injury database to see whether the incidents had been reported and, if not, asked the agency to double check its files.

Clear patterns emerged in cases that weren't reported.

Unlike trauma deaths or amputations, the vast majority of unreported injuries were open to easier arguments that they were not work-related — sprained ankles, torn rotator cuffs, tweaked backs, strained tendons. One man said he had been in a port-a-potty when a track hoe struck it; another said he was hurt when the railroad's transport vehicle crashed. One said he slipped along the ballast, the gravel that surrounds train tracks; another said he jumped from a train to avoid a collision.

Broadly speaking, railroads must tell the government about any on-the-job injury that requires medical care beyond diagnostic procedures like X-rays, that requires an employee to miss a day of work, or that lands an employee on light duty.

But rail officials have long found ways to argue that these less-visible soft-tissue injuries, unlike gaping wounds, could have happened off duty or for reasons not related to the work employees were doing.

"The guide gives us the right to make our best guess on a case, and then [the FRA has] to prove us otherwise," said Tuesday Sweatt, CSX's then-senior manager of accident reporting and compliance, in a legal deposition in 2018.

BNSF engineer Scotty Bragg was operating a train near Hardy, Arkansas, on Nov. 17, 2021, when he said he encountered rough track and "experienced significant jostling" in a cab that didn't have seatbelts. He said he injured his neck, back and spine, requiring surgery. A company official said in a deposition that a review of locomotive footage led officials to decide that Bragg hadn't encountered rough track and wasn't injured at work.

It was a familiar argument used against hurt workers. ProPublica has reported on cases in which companies presented video evidence that did not hold up to scrutiny in court, failing to convince juries that an employee was wrong or lying. At least two of these cases resulted in multimillion-dollar payouts to the workers. Despite the company's denial of Bragg's injuries, it did agree to settle his case. BNSF's response did not address any of the unreported cases ProPublica sent the company in a spreadsheet along with an interview request. In a statement, BNSF said it takes its reporting obligations seriously and touted its safety

record, which over the last decade, "produced the lowest number of injuries in our railroad's history."

The FRA allows companies to decide whether an injury was job-related or not, even when an employee dies at work.

In the case of West, the engineer who died in the mountains, the company said that because he suffered from a "personal condition," his death didn't have to be reported. In court, the company said West "suffered from multiple maladies and physical conditions, and as a result, it was not foreseeable" that a "one-half mile walk would cause or contribute to his death."

The FRA said that even if companies don't file reports, they must phone in all on-the-job deaths to the U.S. Coast Guard's National Response Center, no matter the cause. But it is unclear what happens once the agency is contacted; these calls don't become a part of an official injury record and it's unclear what trend analysis, if any, is done with them.

CSX conductor Danny Byrom, 37, was working an overnight shift in an Illinois yard on Jan. 27, 2019, while the temperature was around 20 degrees. He bent over to remove a heavy piece of equipment. Afterward, he collapsed and died of cardiac arrest.

When asked about the case, FRA officials said it should have been reported because there was "probably a causal connection" between his work-related exertion and his death. CSX told ProPublica the company believes Byrom's death wasn't reportable because he suffered from a "personal condition." His family's lawsuit against the company is ongoing.

Agency officials said nontrauma deaths that appear to be natural aren't likely to immediately spur a full investigation.

The omissions of these kinds of deaths from companies' safety records — and the lack of any kind of investigation by the FRA — troubles Cassity, the union leader, because the deaths appeared to be related to work tasks. "You're being forced to do it, and you die in the performance of it. ... The fact they don't consider that is ... it's unconscionable."

The FRA should investigate all on-the-job deaths, he said, and determine itself whether they were work-related.

Such reporting would help the agency identify and eliminate hazards for workers, said David Michaels, former head of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, which oversees injury and death investigations in most industries outside the rails.

"You certainly want events that occur at work to be reported for the agency to consider whether or not they deserve further investigation, and that will include heart attacks and asthma," said Michaels, who is now a professor at George Washington University. "And by aggregating information from these investigations, it allows researchers to go in and use the data to better understand what's going on in these workplaces."

Had West and Byrom worked at a bank, or a restaurant, or some other American workplace, OSHA would have considered their deaths reportable, Michaels said.

But ProPublica found the plight of workers who are injured by trains — but who are not staff members of rail companies — may be even worse.

Kenneth Ivy was working for Riceland Foods at the company's Jonesboro, Arkansas, rail yard in November 2013 when he said he noticed a Union Pacific freight car had been placed on a slope without its brakes applied. He said he attempted to apply the brakes and they wouldn't work. The freight car rolled over Ivy, crushing part of his left arm and both his legs, which had to be amputated.

Because Ivy didn't work for the railroad and the accident didn't happen on Union Pacific land, government policies dictated that Union Pacific didn't have to report it to the FRA. Instead, Riceland Foods reported it to OSHA. So now Union Pacific's safety record doesn't reflect the fact that its freight car grievously injured someone, nor did the regulator with expertise in rail safety investigate whether the brakes were faulty, nor could the agency use the incident to track similar injuries or learn whether there

are any systemic hazards.

Union Pacific, which denied in court that the brakes were defective, said the worker tripped when he attempted to apply them to the moving freight car. The company noted to ProPublica that it was Riceland Foods that moved the rail car and Riceland Foods that was responsible for the switch operations. While that company settled with the injured worker, so did Union Pacific.

Though rail companies must report when contractors are hurt on their land, ProPublica found they have dodged that reporting requirement, too.

Contractor James Wheeler was rigging down a boom of heavy equipment in Norfolk Southern's rail yard when a fellow contractor's mistake resulted in Wheeler having three fingers on his right hand amputated. Norfolk never reported it, despite the fact that the incident happened on its land. The company did not comment on the case, but said it reviewed all of the unreported cases found by ProPublica and wound up reporting one of them to the FRA, "which was based on information added to a case months after the initial report was made internally. That update was made immediately."

FRA officials said they believed the incident should have been reported, but because the injury happened in 2016, they told ProPublica that nothing further had to be done. The FRA said the five-year limit was a reasonable time frame.

The agency says it focuses its efforts on newer injuries and that its audits are rigorous and successful. Last year, the process caught Union Pacific managers hiding nearly 100 injuries that should have been reported.

"UP documentation clearly showed these incidents were reportable injuries," the agency said. The company disciplined those involved, the FRA said, but the agency's investigation is still open because a key witness in the case has filed an OSHA complaint against Union Pacific and won't speak to the FRA until given clearance by his attorney. An agency spokesperson said the FRA expects to issue violations but as of now no fines have been levied. "Allegations that managers are incentivized to hide or ignore injured employees are false," UP told ProPublica in a statement. The company also told ProPublica that its own audit process had found the "incorrectly classified" injuries and that the company had corrected them.

Agency officials said that most of the time, when they catch unreported injuries, they simply ask officials to reconcile the matter. The agency doesn't separately track fines it gives for injury reporting violations, instead lumping together all the fines it levies against railroads for all kinds of reporting failures. ProPublica added up these kinds of fines levied against all Class 1 companies in 2022, the most recent year of data available. For the companies, which had \$108 billion in combined revenue that year, the penalties added up to \$30,011.

The agency told ProPublica it knows the penalties are too paltry to prevent the companies or their officials from attempting to hide injuries. Only Congress could increase the fines, a spokesperson said. "The proposed Railway Safety Act would allow for a substantial increase in the maximum civil penalty amount," the spokesperson said. That bill, which received bipartisan support when it was introduced on the heels of last year's catastrophic derailment that unleashed hazardous chemicals on East Palestine, Ohio, has since stalled in Congress.

Cassity said the FRA's audit process allows railroads too much notice before the government arrives on site to check records. "It just just doesn't go far enough," he said, adding that he believes companies purposefully don't fill out certain paperwork so they can hide injuries from the FRA and that there is little the agency can do to combat the practice.

He suggested that one way to get the fullest accounting of injuries would be for the FRA to devise a system where the reports come directly from employees. "Right now, the only way to get the facts is through a carrier that, quite frankly, is not playing

*Continued on next page*



# The Aspiring Fascist's 'Bloodbath' Comment, in the Context of the Last Nine Years

By DICK POLMAN

During Trump University professor Donald Trump's weekend lecture in Fascist 101, he said something so egregious, something so reeking in criminality, something so steeped in cesspool stench, that it actually got major play in the mainstream media. While ostensibly babbling about the car industry, about how he's gonna save it if he's restored to power, this is what fell from his pie hole:

"Now, if I don't get elected, it's going to be a bloodbath for the whole — that's gonna be the least of it. It's going to be a bloodbath for the country. That'll be the least of it."

Naturally, his obsequious apologists insisted March 17 that Leader was only talking about the car industry, and therefore that anyone daring to criticize Leader was taking his "bloodbath" warning totally out of context. Senator Bill Cassidy of Louisiana duly bowed to Leader on *Meet the Press*: "You could also look at the definition of bloodbath and it could be an economic disaster."

Senator Mike Rounds of South Dakota did the same on CNN: "With regards to the autoworkers, he is showing them or he's telling them what has been an economic downturn for them."

It should be obvious to anyone with a functioning brain that he wasn't just talking about a car industry bloodbath — ("that's gonna be the least of it ... That'll be the least of it"). The domestic terrorist who has already been indicted for fomenting a violent insurrection against the democratic process is now dog-whistling his rabble to do it again at year's end if he loses again.

I suppose we could cut Trump a break on context and agree that he was just talking about the car industry ... if not for the fact that he has always fetishized violence (urging his fans to "knock the crap" out of protesters; hoping that cops would "shoot them in the legs"); that he salutes the hundreds of criminals who've been convicted in courts of law for the bloodbath of Jan. 6, 2021, and vows to pardon them (his rally announcer on March 16: "Please rise for the horribly and unfairly treated January 6

hostages"); that he borrows Hitler's rhetoric (referring to his critics as "vermin"); that he dehumanizes migrants by calling them "animals" (he says "they're not people"); that he vows to jail his opponents (Liz Cheney, he said March 17, "should be prosecuted for what she has done to our country"); that he thinks Gen. Mark Milley, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, deserves the death penalty; that he thinks shoplifters should be shot on sight; that he mocked Nancy Pelosi's husband after his skull was smashed by a hammer-wielding MAGA.

I could cite many more, but that paragraph was already too long.

Ruth Ben-Ghiat, an NYU professor who specializes in decoding "strongman" rhetoric, said in a recent interview that "authoritarians always want to do two things — they want to change the way that people see violence, making it into something necessary and patriotic and even morally righteous, and they want to change the way people see their targets. And so they use dehumanizing language. And former President Trump is doing both. He's been using

his rallies since 2015 to shift the idea of violence into something positive."

That's the proper context for assessing what he said on Saturday night, March 16. It's the context of the last nine years.

Ben-Ghiat said that Trump wants people "to be less sensitive about violence, either committing it themselves or tolerating it. (That's) the reason he's using this dehumanizing rhetoric now, to prepare people ... All of this is part of a campaign of, you could call it mass reeducation of Americans to want forms of authoritarian rule ... This is very dangerous rhetoric with a very precise fascist history."

Alas, she said, "people did not take the various Hitlers and Mussolinis seriously until it was too late."

If you catch my drift.

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

## Robert Francis Kennedy Sr. — Glimpses of the Anti-Trump

By GENE NICHOL

Fifty-six years ago, March 16, 1968, Robert F. Kennedy (Sr.) announced his candidacy for the presidency. Speaking from the same room his murdered brother had eight years earlier, Kennedy said:

"I run to seek new policies — to end the bloodshed in Vietnam and in our cities, to close the gaps between Black and White, between rich and poor, between young and old, in this country and around the world."

This was the existentially wounded RFK, not the younger pugilistic figure of the McCarthy and Teamster hearings, or his brother's campaign and cabinet. The candidate whose life by then reflected the Aeschylus lines he often repeated — "pain, which cannot forget, falls drop by drop upon the heart until, in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom, through the awful grace of God." The awful, tormenting grace of God.

No other major presidential candidate in my lifetime, or before, would launch a crusade focusing, foundationally, on "the in-

excusable and ugly deprivation that causes children to starve in Mississippi, Black citizens to riot in Watts, young Indians to commit suicide on reservations because they lack all hope, and proud and able-bodied families to wait out their lives in empty idleness in eastern Kentucky."

He could not "stand aside from the contest that will decide our nation and our children's future."

In my old age, I'm modestly obsessed with four episodes of the last months of Robert Kennedy's life, most of which echo in his announcement speech. His famed trip to the Mississippi Delta in April 1967; his subsequent February 13-14 visits to Eastern Kentucky; his 1968 meetings with Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers in Delano California; and his haunting speeches April 4 and 5 in Indianapolis and Cleveland following the assassination of Dr. King. They mark a politics unseen in America. Their lessons are even more essential in a darkened Trump era than when they were issued.

Beginning in Cleveland, Mississippi, Amzie Moore and a skeptical Marian Wright (Edelman) escorted Kennedy into what Charles Evers called "the worst places I've ever seen." Witnessing third world starvation, he would "touch the children's cheeks, as if they were his own," Evers said. In one house, Kennedy entered without press or

politicians, he tearfully "knelt down trying for perhaps five minutes to get a response from a child." Edelman said that was the moment she knew Kennedy was real.

In eastern Kentucky he saw "proud lands and proud men who had rallied to the nation's flag at every danger" stripped of dignity and hope; their children "ravaged by worms and parasites"; their communities "a ruin of strip mines and stinking creeks." In Delano, Kennedy was inspired and enlightened by Chavez. Delores Huerta said: "Robert didn't come and tell us what was good for us, he asked what do you want and how can I help? That's why we loved him."

Kennedy's greatest address, an impromptu announcement of Dr. King's assassination to a mostly Black audience in strife-torn Indianapolis, was delivered despite local authorities' demand that it be cancelled. David Margolik wrote Kennedy "was 'the only White man who had the credibility and courage to go into the Black community and talk about King'." He spoke, amazingly, of Aeschylus, and his murdered brother, asking a stunned audience to reject "bitterness, hatred and revenge." And to commit, with him, "to what the Greeks wrote long ago, to tame the savageness of man, and make gentle the life of this world".

The next day in Cleveland Ohio, he would decry "the mindless menace of violence in America which again stains our

land and every one of our lives." Too often," he said, "we honor swagger and bluster and the wielders of force." For "when you teach that those who differ from you threaten your freedom or your job or your family," you learn to "confront others not as fellow citizens, but as enemies, to be subjugated and mastered."

Elie Wiesel wrote Kennedy had "discovered another dimension of injustice, pain and human folly." He sought to "show his solidarity with victims everywhere, the poor the sick, the hopeless."

Kennedy saw an unfolding, long-brutalized, multi-racial democracy and sought, in King's words, to make it "real." He believed that he who rejects the stranger, rejects America. Rather than courting violence, he sought "to tame the savageness of man." When faced with danger and division, as we are, he asked us "to bind up the wounds among us and to become, in our own hearts, brothers and countryman one more."

1968. 2024.

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## Cover Story...

Continued from previous page

fairly," he said. "And so you've got to get it from the source."

Such a system would require significant procedural and operational changes, FRA officials said, and there is no guarantee all employees would abide by them.

But agency officials said they can entertain these and other big changes during the upcoming public comment period for their proposed rules, which have not been updated since 2010. During this period, railroad companies and labor groups are expected to provide their perspectives and could mount legal efforts to change the proposals. According to the agency, any new

rules will receive final approval from its chief safety officer.

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# Building America, Fighting Greed

By DAVID MCCALL

The widowed single mom attacked grocery shopping with the doggedness of a Marine on a mission.

To provide for her family in the face of corporate price-gouging, she bought off-brand items and selected eggs for protein instead of higher-costing meat. She even worked multiple jobs to keep the family solvent.

And despite the challenges she faced, she never complained, recalled Denny Mitchell, a longtime United Steelworkers (USW) activist who's filled with admiration for the way the woman raised her family.

Ordinary working people like Mitchell's friend continue to build America with humble heroism, even as the greedy rich try to cheat them not only at the checkout line but everywhere from the workplace to the halls of power.

"It's a fight. It's always a fight," observed Mitchell, noting that Kellogg's CEO Gary Pilnick underscored the arrogance of the 1% when he flippantly suggested a few weeks ago that struggling families eat cereal for dinner.

Pilnick, who pockets millions in salary and incentive compensation, runs a corporation largely responsible for the rampant price-gouging in the nation's grocery stores.

Kellogg's jacked up prices by more than 14% over the past couple of years while announcing plans to shower shareholders with stock buybacks and dividends.

Other food-makers joined in the ex-

ploitation, raising prices, reducing the amount of product in their packaging or switching to cheaper, lower-quality ingredients that enable them to pad their bottom lines on unwitting consumers' backs.

US Sen. Bob Casey of Pennsylvania released a report in December assailing numerous companies for "shrinking products to super-size profits." Among many other examples, Casey revealed that General Mills quietly shaved 1.2 ounces from boxes of Cocoa Puffs in 2021 while Conagra started skimping on ingredients in its Smart Balance spread in 2022, "resulting in a watery product that sparked consumer backlash."

Even Cookie Monster resents the unscrupulous sleight of hand. "Me cookies are getting smaller," the lovable Muppet groused in early March in a hugely popular social media post shaming greedy food companies.

Mitchell said his friend, the single mom, worked so hard to provide nutritious meals that her kids never went without or even realized that she struggled.

Still, her sacrifices fuel his contempt today for millionaires and billionaires eager to fleece the working Americans who kept the nation functioning all through the pandemic.

"Let's get a little bit more out of them," said Mitchell, a retired member of USW Local 135L in Tonawanda, N.Y., summing up the mindset of the rich. "It's a constant squeeze."

Yet it isn't enough for the wealthy to take ever-larger portions of Americans' paychecks. They also plot alongside right-wing politicians to inflict more pain on workers with no income at all.

West Virginia's corporate friendly, Republican-controlled Senate just passed a bill that would not only reduce unemployment

benefits—supported by employer contributions—but impose the deepest cuts on those struggling the longest.

They'd rather force people into dead-end jobs than support them during the search for family-sustaining employment. That helps corporations exploit low-wage work forces while putting families on a course for poverty.

Fortunately, pro-worker lawmakers in Nevada stymied proposed cuts in their state's unemployment compensation program this week after publicly embarrassing the bill's Republican supporters for coddling the rich at the expense of working people.

"We fight over nickels and dimes and pennies in this place when it comes to poverty, and we give money away like it's a free-for-all when it comes to the most wealthy," declared Democratic Sen. Machaela Cavanaugh, who led opposition to the measure.

A coalition of workers and their allies last year defeated proposed unemployment benefit cuts in Arizona, where Republicans float the idea from time to time, either because they either fail to recognize the potential impact or don't care, said Vikki Marshall, president of the Steelworkers Organization of Active Retirees (SOAR) chapter in Tucson.

"We want to make sure our children are eating," she said, noting the cuts would have devastated single-income families. "We want to make sure they go to school with something in their stomachs and clothes on their backs."

"This is the only avenue they have. Nobody knocks on the door saying, 'I want to give you some money to tide you over,'" said Marshall, one of the union activists who oppose measures like these across the

country.

Unions provide workers with a path forward.

Even as it exploited consumers, for example, Kellogg's also attempted to deny its manufacturing workers a decent living. So in 2021, about 1,400 union members at four cereal plants staged a 77-day strike that forced the company to provide raises, pension increases and other enhancements.

"It was a tough strike. They didn't want to give anything. They wanted to take, take and take," Dave McLimans, a member of SOAR's Pennsylvania executive board, said of Kellogg's management.

Ultimately, "solidarity, sticking together," won the day for the striking workers, added McLimans, who showed his support by joining the picket line at Kellogg's Lancaster County plant.

Inspired by that victory, and other worker wins, more and more Americans seek to join unions to secure not only the higher wages and better benefits but the safer working conditions and voice on the job that collective action provides.

The surge in union drives makes sense to McLimans, who took part in the USW's successful 105-day strike against Lukens Steel in 1991 and 1992.

McLimans credits the USW with paving the way for his middle-class life and secure retirement. And he knows that unions still serve as the only true bulwark for workers fighting corporate greed today.

"There comes a time when enough is enough," he said. "It's time we all come together and start kicking and screaming. We need to keep the pressure on."

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

## A Working Class Susceptible to Trump Needs Much More From Biden

**Standing on a picket line, as Biden did with the UAW, is important. But that cannot be the limit of efforts to make the economy work better for working people.**

By LES LEOPOLD

Like it or not, it's political Groundhog Day. The Biden/Trump looped tape is rolling, and the contest will again center on the Blue Wall states of Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin. Working-class voters will be key.

In 2020, Joe Biden squeaked through while receiving just 36.2% of the White working-class vote, according to research for my book, "Wall Street's War on Workers." That's down from Obama's 40%, and Bill Clinton's 50%. It's sad that the party of Franklin D. Roosevelt — the party of the working class — now attracts so few working-class voters. There also is troubling evidence that the Biden campaign is losing ground with Black and Hispanic working-class voters.

That's the reality. But how can Biden change it in 2024?

For starters, he shouldn't be bragging about a booming economy. For many working-class folks who get bounced from job to job, the so-called Biden boom doesn't feel all that glorious. What Biden and nearly all elected officials fail to grasp is that American workers are suffering through waves of mass layoffs, more than 30 million losing their jobs over the last 30 years. That includes 260,000 in the booming high-tech industry last year alone, with another 50,000 discharged so far this year.

Biden made a start in his State of the Union address by highlighting how his administration helped the United Autoworkers (UAW) keep open the Belvidere, Illinois, Stellantis facility, saving over 1,000 jobs and perhaps adding thousands more battery manufacturing jobs in the future. But the UAW's effective strike against Stellantis

was the savior, not the Biden administration.

The President should take a page from Donald Trump to directly intervene to stop a mass layoff and take all the credit for it. In 2016-17, Trump pressured the Carrier Air Conditioning to keep 800 jobs in Indiana rather than moving them to Mexico. Polling shows that 60% of all voters said that the Carrier deal gave them a more favorable view of Trump. Only 9% said it made them view Trump less favorably.

There are many jobs for Biden to save right now in the Blue Wall states.

### Stock buybacks kill jobs in Michigan and Pennsylvania

UPS has 500,000 employees (360,000 of whom are members of the Teamsters Union) and revenues of more than \$90 billion. Nevertheless, this wealthy company has announced it is laying off 206 workers in New Stanton, Pennsylvania, and another 162 in Livonia, Michigan.

The current administration should demand that UPS and other large corporations refrain from compulsory layoffs. Instead, large companies looking to reduce head count should use voluntary layoffs, offering sufficient funds so that workers are willing to leave. No one should be forced out.

Biden could point out that UPS has plenty of money to fund voluntary layoffs, given that in 2023 it put \$3 billion into stock buybacks. He could explain that those UPS stock repurchases artificially raised the price of its shares, enriching its largest stock owners, including big financial firms like Vanguard, BlackRock, JPMorgan Chase, and Charles Schwab. He could make it clear that those Michigan and Pennsylvania layoffs are helping to finance these stock buybacks.

This president could also play his biggest "trump" card: In 2022, UPS, along with Federal Express and Polar Air Cargo, shared a \$2.24 billion federal contract. Surely, UPS would understand if it were pointed out that it's a bad look to take government money with one hand, and then do billions in stock buybacks with the other while also laying off workers.

Greg Hayes, the CEO of United Technologies, Carrier's parent company, understood this potential threat from Trump very well. As he put it, "I was born at night, but

it wasn't last night. I also know that 10 percent of our revenue comes from the U.S. government."

Each year, about \$700 billion in federal contracts goes to corporations, thousands of them. They should be told, no more stock buybacks, no more compulsory layoffs.

But won't this cripple corporations? Not a chance. In Germany, the union IG Metall convinced Siemens Energy not to shut down six facilities and lay off 3,000 workers. Instead, the company agreed to voluntary layoffs and to put other products in the six facilities that were initially scheduled to close. No workers were forced out, and no plants were shut down.

The point is that large corporations have enormous flexibility to rearrange their production lines and services. Private equity companies which own many different businesses can easily do the same if they consider their workers as important as their shareholders.

### Private Equity Kills Jobs in Menasha, Wisconsin

Atlas Holdings, founded in 2002, is a sprawling private equity firm with fingers in many pies. It plucks out \$11 billion annually from 26 different business lines, employing approximately 50,000 people in industries ranging from aluminum processing, building materials, construction services, food manufacturing, packaging, paper, power generation... and on and on.

In 2020, Atlas Holdings acquired the assets of LSC Communications. It then spun off LSC's book production business as the Lakeside Book Company. In June 2024, Lakeside will shut down its Menasha, Wisconsin, facility putting 339 workers out of work.

Private equity companies like Atlas Holdings make a killing by cutting costs. As Forbes Magazine makes perfectly clear, cutting costs means job loss: "All too often when private equity professionals tout their cost cutting strategies, they do not mention that cost cutting means firing people and taking away their livelihoods."

What could the Biden administration do? They could call out Atlas Holdings publicly. It's possible Atlas would not want too bright a light to shine on its vast empire. Maybe they've taken on too much debt,

which has led to the demise of many companies acquired by private equity companies. Or maybe, like Carrier, they'd greatly prefer a state or federal subsidy to keep the Menasha facility open.

The bully pulpit of the presidency is powerful. Biden should use it right now to send a powerful signal to these Wisconsin workers, and workers everywhere, that his administration is willing to fight for them.

Standing on a picket line, as Biden did with the UAW, is important. Infrastructure bills that create new jobs in the coming years are even more important. But most important of all is saving a job in the here and now. That's what a good economy means to the victims of mass layoffs.

### There ought to be a law.

Biden should also make clear that in his second term he will sign a bill to dramatically curtail stock buybacks, a major cause of mass layoffs and income inequality. In 1982, before stock buybacks were deregulated, only 2% of corporate profits were used for stock repurchase. Today, it's nearly 70%.

He should also rename the 2017 Republican "Tax Cut and Jobs Act" the "Stock Buyback Bonanza Bill." By cutting the top corporate tax rate from 35% to 21%, the 2017 tax cut would massively stimulate investments in long-term growth, its supporters said. Instead, corporate stock buybacks increased by 52.6%, while new capital investment grew by only 8.8%, according to *Forbes*. At least half of the entire tax cut flowed directly into the pockets of wealthy investors, the primary beneficiaries of these stock buybacks.

Biden should also demand that the Democratic platform this year call for a dramatic reduction of stock buybacks. This would signal to working people of all shades and colors that the Democrats are willing to take on Wall Street to save jobs.

Then again, Wall Street won't be happy.

Unfortunately, many Democrats still want it both ways, claiming that economic growth is good for corporations and workers, that more jobs are being created than ever before at higher levels of pay, and that's a win-win for everyone.

But for the tens of thousands forced out of their jobs each month during the current

*Continued on next page*

## MARY SANCHEZ



Sen. Katie Britt lit up the social media, and not in a good way, with her debut in the spotlight responding to President Biden's State of the Union speech.

### Sen. Katie Britt is Not Ready For Prime Time – At Least Not Yet

Let's take a seat around the kitchen table of Alabama Sen. Katie Britt. After all, she just invited the nation to do so.

Britt asked us to peer into her life as a mother of two and a wife, who also happens to be among the youngest women serving in Congress.

Unrolling her image as a "just-like-you" persona to American women was the goal of her unfortunate GOP reply to President Joe Biden's State of the Union speech.

The bland beige kitchen setting, the ridiculous rise-and-fall cadence of her words and the wide-eyed stares into the camera have already been widely pilloried.

Social media lit up before Britt concluded. Prompts were given to weigh in on who could spoof her best on SNL. Heidi Gardner should do it, hands down.

Even Republicans groused about choosing Britt.

The GOP hasn't erred in seeing Britt

as a bridge to younger, female, suburban voters. Her age alone, 42, is a link.

She will get beyond this snippet, a blip really, in her political career. She has a long track record as a Senate staffer and a Senate chief of staff.

She's an attorney, serving on the Senate Appropriations, Rules and Banking, Housing and Urban Development committees.

But she needs to free herself of the handlers who wrote that script. The words, the claims, the screeds about what fears keep American mothers up at night aren't as she stated. And she knows it.

Britt mouthed the words of a consultant. Appealing to younger women voters, those who aren't already far right and deeply baked into the MAGA fan base, calls for a different approach. An honest one, not these words by Britt: "I worry my own children may not even get a shot at living their American Dreams."

Seriously? You're a U.S. Senator, married to a former NFL player turned lobbyist. Your children were born with the golden tickets of college-educated parents with steady incomes and social capital.

That kitchen may be starkly bland in décor, but it's a safe bet that the fridge is well stocked, that it will always be, and that Britt's children will have their college paid for, by their parents or through scholarships earned with the help of attending solid K-12 schools.

She should speak to families with far less access to good schools. They'll school you on why most people never leave the class they were born into.

Hint: Patterns of social mobility are not affected by whoever is currently our president. The statistics are deeply entrenched and involve systemic issues of educational quality, housing patterns, and the cost of higher education.

Britt then trod the "American Dream"

commentary a bit further, reaching for undocumented immigrants and the humanitarian crisis of asylum seekers at the southern border.

What a strange segue. The American Dream is a common frame for the aspirations of the very migrants that Britt proceeded to paint as a marauding horde, out to steal the security of the nation and yes, to violate virginal young women.

She spoke of a young girl whom she met at the border who'd been trafficked and raped by cartels, no doubt a true story.

Then she switched to talking about sexual assaults of women in the U.S., citing one high profile recent case – that of 22-year-old nursing student Laken Riley, involving an undocumented immigrant who has been charged with her murder.

"That could have been my daughter. It could've been yours," she said.

Women do fear crime; everyone does. But what are they most likely to be impacted by – stolen cars, home robberies, gun violence, sexual assaults?

Britt should ask her GOP brethren about their opposition to gun laws and regulations that would keep women safe from people convicted of domestic violence. This is how most women are attacked, in violent assaults, sexual or not.

They're hurt, even killed, by men who once claimed to love them. The perpetrators are men with ready access to firearms despite an order of protection and even prior convictions.

Here's another bit from Britt's speech: "From fentanyl poisonings to horrific murders...there are empty chairs tonight at kitchen tables just like this one because of President Biden's senseless border policies."

American mothers should worry about overdoses and fentanyl. Stopping fentanyl from entering the country is necessary, but the responsible and first parental response should be closer to that kitchen table where

Britt spends time with her family.

Why are teenagers seeking drugs like Percocet, or trying club drugs like ecstasy, both of which can be laced?

Britt should ask questions about and demand for better access to mental health services, including tough conversations with insurance companies unwilling to pay for such treatment.

What's so disappointing is that the GOP, at least for this one night, squandered the role a younger female member of their congressional delegation could play for the party.

Britt is not a Marjorie Taylor Greene, R-GA. She has decorum, presence and intelligence.

She's displayed the type of level-headed female leader that both parties should be developing.

Women tend to enter politics to resolve an issue that's closely affected their own family or that of someone close to them.

Men tend to enter for power. Former President Donald Trump is an example of the latter, on steroids.

What might be most unfortunate for Britt's future is that she is said to be on a list of possible Trump vice presidential running mates.

Let's hope her odd State of the Union response bombed the tryout.

Maybe, the handlers will leave her alone so she can regain and hone her strengths as a senator who is able to speak sensibly, to reach across the aisle, and debate with truths, not hyperbole.

It's a lower wattage spotlight, but it's how real progress for American families will happen.

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## Man of Steel

### President Biden's blockage of the proposed purchase of U.S. Steel by Japan's Nippon Steel is unprecedented and magnificently pro-union.

By ROBERT KUTTNER

You'd think it would be hard for Joe Biden to top his full-on embrace of the UAW and their stunningly successful strike against the Big Three automakers. But Biden has just done it by declaring that he opposes the takeover by Japan's Nippon Steel of US Steel.

The US needs to "maintain strong American steel companies powered by American steel workers," Biden declared, adding: "US Steel has been an iconic American steel company for more than a century, and it is vital for it to remain an American steel company that is domestically owned and operated."

This move doubles down on Biden's commitment to rebuild domestic industry and rejection of corporate-driven "free trade" and his alliance with the labor movement. There is a process for government

evaluation of proposed foreign takeovers of American companies on national-security grounds. A review is conducted by an interagency Committee on Foreign Investment in the US (CFIUS). The final decision whether to allow a deal to proceed is made by the president.

CFIUS had begun a review of the Nippon-US Steel takeover, but Biden short-circuited the process—not on the basis of narrowly defined military concerns but on industrial-policy and labor grounds. While both companies have mounted PR and lobbying campaigns to rescue their deal, Biden's statement effectively kills it.

What if Japan complains to the (increasingly moribund) World Trade Organization? Well, Japan exports about two million cars to the U.S. annually but finds ways to limit US auto exports to Japan to about 25,000. So bring it on.

Biden's stunning move is entirely legitimate. For one thing, a leading Japanese steelmaker was buying an American producer against a background of steelmaking overcapacity worldwide and in Japan. So the deal might well lead to reduced US steel production and jobs.

Also, US Steel, especially under its current CEO David Burritt, has a dismal labor record. And there was an alternative suitor to Nippon, Cleveland-Cliffs (known as Cliffs), a company whose whole business strategy is based on close alliance with its union, the

United Steelworkers.

Biden's effective killing of the Nippon deal reopens the possibility of acquisition of US Steel by Cliffs, in collaboration with the Steelworkers. Veterans of the four-decade struggle to revive a domestic, unionized steel industry told me they never thought they would live to see this day.

Biden's rejection of the Nippon deal reflected weeks of campaigning by both the USW and Cliffs. The action had the support of his top advisers, but the impulse came personally from Biden.

In the proposed Nippon-US Steel deal, there is also a grotesque personal conflict of interest on the part of CEO Burritt. US Steel's performance has been lackluster. Burritt is lousy at making steel. Before takeover bids began in 2023, US Steel stock had been trading at around \$22 a share. The Nippon buyout is valued at \$55 a share. That translates to a windfall \$70 million payday for Burritt in stock options, at the expense of the company and its workers.

Cliffs' initial offer for US Steel translated to about \$40 a share, but in the bidding war with Nippon, Cliffs raised that to \$54, just a dollar a share below Nippon's winning bid. Since the effective collapse of the Nippon deal, Cliffs CEO Lourenco Goncalves has been cagey about what he might offer now. But his bid can't go too low, since US Steel has had other suitors,

including ArcelorMittal, the world's second-largest steelmaker.

Burritt, who is 69 and ready to retire, is said to be spitting mad that the combined efforts of Cliffs, the Steelworkers, and President Biden killed his payday. Burritt may well resist a sale to Cliffs out of sheer spite. But here is where good old shareholder capitalism comes to the rescue.

Informed observers expect that Cliffs' eventual offer will be between \$35 and \$40 a share. US Steel stock is currently trading at around \$39, reflecting that view.

That's a lot better than \$22 a share—a handsome gain for shareholders. If Burritt refused to sell out of spite, he'd be open to all manner of shareholder suits. As a consolation prize, Burritt himself would walk away with at least \$30 million, even at the reduced takeover price.

Of course, an acquisition of US Steel by Cliffs would be a gain not just for shareholders but for stakeholders—union workers, their families and communities. It's been a long time since we've seen this brand of capitalism.

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



### Leopold...

Continued from previous page

economic boom, the old union song's challenge probably rings truer:

"Which side are you on, boys? Which side are you on?"

Les Leopold is the executive director of the Labor Institute and author of "Wall Street's War on Worker s: How Mass Layoffs and Greed Are Destroying the Working Class and What to Do About It" (2024). Read more of his work at [substack.com/@lesleopold1](https://substack.com/@lesleopold1). This appeared at *Common Dreams*. Follow him on Twitter: [@les\\_leopold](https://twitter.com/les_leopold).

# What Americans and the Media are Missing About the TikTok Crisis

*It's time for "truth in labeling" laws like the processed food industry complies with to apply to social media. The life — and democracy — that gets saved could be your own...*

By THOM HARTMANN

While I agree with the bipartisan House and White House consensus that having TikTok owned by a company that, by law, must share its information with the Chinese Communist Party is a national security threat, there's a larger part of the issue — which includes a danger to Americans also presented by both Facebook and Xitter — that nobody is seriously discussing.

As I detailed at length in my 2022 book "The Hidden History of Big Brother: How the Death of Privacy and the Rise of Surveillance Threaten Us and Our Democracy," that's the "secret algorithm" that determines what content and which "influencers" and even regular users get promoted or ignored, and to whom that content is pushed.

That algorithm has been proven to be, in many cases for each of the various social media sites, highly toxic, pushing people into conspiracy theories, Nazism and White supremacy, and destroying the self-esteem of young people and children. It has often caused death, both from radicalization (El Paso and Buffalo shooters), actual genocide, and suicide.

We've faced a similar problem before, that was also killing Americans every year (as is social media today). And we successfully did something about it.

Imagine somebody invented a set of "secret" food additives that would cause you to crave more and more of whatever they were added to, making people who ate them to constantly gain weight until they were in the midst of an obesity crisis, living on the verge of death from stroke, heart attack, dementia, and diabetes.

Wouldn't it be reasonable to at least inform people that those additives were in the food they're eating? Particularly if they were causing thousands of deaths every year, and so

destroying the self-esteem of their now-obese consumers that their levels of social isolation and suicide rates both increased?

Turns out we've already been through this, and — just like today's social media industry — the processed and fast food industries launched a multimillion dollar, nearly 30-year lobbying campaign to prevent anybody from knowing what or how much of those specific additives were in their products.

In other words, these companies' executives knew that their products were destructive — would, in fact, kill or destroy the lives of millions of Americans over the coming decades — but did their best to hide that from both the American people and any regulatory agency that might have oversight.

Finally, though, LBJ and a Democratic Congress forced through transparency labeling rules that were later expanded and tightened by the FDA under both the Nixon and Reagan administrations.

Salt, sugar, and fat were that "deadly triad" of additives that make food addictive, which the processed and fast food industries fought so hard — and spent hundreds of millions in lobbying — to conceal from consumers.

Since the late 1960s, when LBJ signed the first labeling laws into existence, both America — and now every other developed country in the world — both inform people of the dangers of those additives and require processed food manufacturers to list those three specific ingredients on their labels.

So, why the hell aren't we doing the same thing with the "secret sauce" algorithms of the social media industry? After all, like the processed food companies in the 1960s, they're harming Americans — and harming democracy — while hiding from us and regulatory agencies the details of the mechanism (the "ingredients") with which they're doing it.

Yes, it does matter who owns the companies, the current subject of Congressional debate and lots of hand-wringing.

Between Elon Musk's statements reflecting bizarre misogyny, antisemitism, and racism, and Mark Zuckerberg's alleged obsession with profits above lives or democracy (and his secret meetings with Trump), both platforms have allegedly bent their users toward toxic conspiracy theories and hatred of racial, religious, and gender groups.

TikTok actively suppresses "negative" information about China, particularly anything touching on democracy, Hong Kong independence, the imprisonment of the Uyghurs, and the Tiananmen Square revolt. Even YouTube regularly pushes people looking for mere Republican con-

templated down into Qanon and Nazi rabbit holes.

But the weapon they use isn't their power as owners to control moderation or ban users. There are allegations of such efforts from whistleblowers, but the real power ByteDance, Meta, and X Holdings wield is contained in the computer code called an algorithm that drives their services.

And all three companies fiercely defend their right to keep those algorithms secret, just like the junk food industry did between the 1940s (when the "deadly triad" was first publicly identified) and the 1960s when Congress and the FDA finally took action to force transparency.

While the field of research into the way social media may cause political radicalization is fairly new, serious scientific examinations of how watching porn can alter behavior go back decades. Turns out, they're pretty much the same in several ways.

While much of the research, particularly that suggesting that porn viewing leads to antisocial behavior out in the world, is controversial and still the subject of scientific debate, one finding is relatively uncontroversial: that over time, most heavy users of porn will seek out more and more extreme content to get the same satisfaction.

As Norman Doidge, MD, wrote in his book "The Brain That Changes Itself":

"When pornographers boast that they are pushing the envelope by introducing new, harder themes, what they don't say is that they must, because their customers are building up a tolerance to the content."

Humans are novelty-seeking machines. Give us a little buzz — be it with a shot of heroin or cocaine, a sugary drink, or an exhilarating new experience — and curiosity can quickly become a craving. Over time, it takes more and more to give us the same buzz, a process that we generally liken to addiction but applies to all sorts of things, from processed foods to violence in video games and movies to opioids.

In every case, the neurochemical process that draws us initially to these things — novelty-seeking behavior mediated by bursts of "happy chemicals" like dopamine in the brain — is the same: a system originally wired into our hunter-gatherer brains to increase our chances of survival.

The excitement of the hunt — as much as our hunger — drew us out into the dangerous world of jungle, forest, or savanna to find food. And highly concentrated nutrients — like a tree full of honey — gave us an even bigger buzz, guaranteeing we'd search for more.

It's also how social media works, and the social media companies know it.

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## Keep Talking About President Biden's Age

*Why he should exploit, for political purposes, his wisdom and experience.*

By KATRINA VANDEN HEUVEL

In his State of the Union address, President Biden pushed for a plan to curb sky-high executive compensation, announced more humanitarian aid for Gaza, and mentioned artificial intelligence for the first time ever in the annual speech. But the substance of Biden's address wasn't what got people's attention. It was the fact that he was able to successfully deliver it, despite persistent concerns over his age.

Of course, his advocates were pleased with his energetic performance. As Representative Jerry Nadler said to the president immediately afterward, "Nobody's gonna talk about cognitive impairment now!" (Biden's response—"I kinda wish sometimes I was cognitively impaired"—was quick enough to underscore Nadler's point.)

Perhaps even more telling was the response from the right. Unable to justify another round of "Sleepy Joe" accusations, President Trump accused Biden of being hopped up on drugs. Fox News went for the same line of attack.

You don't claim your opponent is juicing if you're winning.

This all comes after months—years, even—of increasingly vocal concerns about Biden's fitness for the job. As of early March, 73% of voters thought Biden was "just too old" to be effective—including 61% of people who supported him in 2020. And while Biden may have benefited from the soft bigotry of low expectations—"Can you believe the president spoke for an hour straight?"—his invigorated remarks still constituted a desperately-needed win.

Now that Biden has proven himself,

some will say we should stop talking about his age. But rather than cease the conversation entirely, we finally have the opportunity to change it.

The reductive discourse about whether Biden is too old dismisses the valuable leadership qualities that can come from age: wisdom, experience, and perspective. And it diminishes the invaluable contributions that Americans over 80 are making—to politics, to culture, and to public life.

We have a stereotypical view of our presidents, and our leaders in general, as spry and strong, Kennedy-in-Camelot types. But the qualities that are actually best suited to leadership are subtler—and often present themselves more frequently in the elderly.

For one, older people panic less: Because the nerve cells that cause our "fight-or-flight" reactions fade over time, later-in-life leaders tend to be less emotionally volatile. And in a study that compared older leaders to their younger counterparts, the elder ones were rated better at building trust, nurturing their teammates, and bringing clarity to complicated situations.

These qualities ring true for Biden. Yes, he's old. Anyone can see that. He's tripped up over words and names, stairs and sandbags. But he also has empathy for Americans' struggles, developed over a lifetime of hardship. And while his administration's foreign policy may reflect an outdated Washington consensus, his domestic policy agenda is (mostly) compassionate and wise. He pushes the wealthy to pay their fair share in order to grow the middle class. He vocally supports organized labor, and became the first president in history to walk a picket line.

This is the message Democrats can send on Biden's age. Not that he isn't aging, but that his age is working in his favor. To amend the famous Ronald Reagan quip, Biden should exploit, for political purposes, his wisdom and experience.

After all, Americans embrace many elderly leaders—and we're better off for it.

Gloria Steinem, who turns 90 this month, continues to organize for women's rights—and her endorsement means more than ever. Bernie Sanders, 82, speaks with a cogency and moral clarity that surpasses the vast majority of his younger congressional colleagues. Howard Hiatt, who passed away in March at the age of 98, transformed health policy well into his 80s. At 94, former president Jimmy Carter offered to conduct a diplomatic visit to North Korea on behalf of the Trump administration. Former secretary of defense William J. Perry, one of the world's most knowledgeable experts on nuclear weapons, continues to sound the alarm at 96.

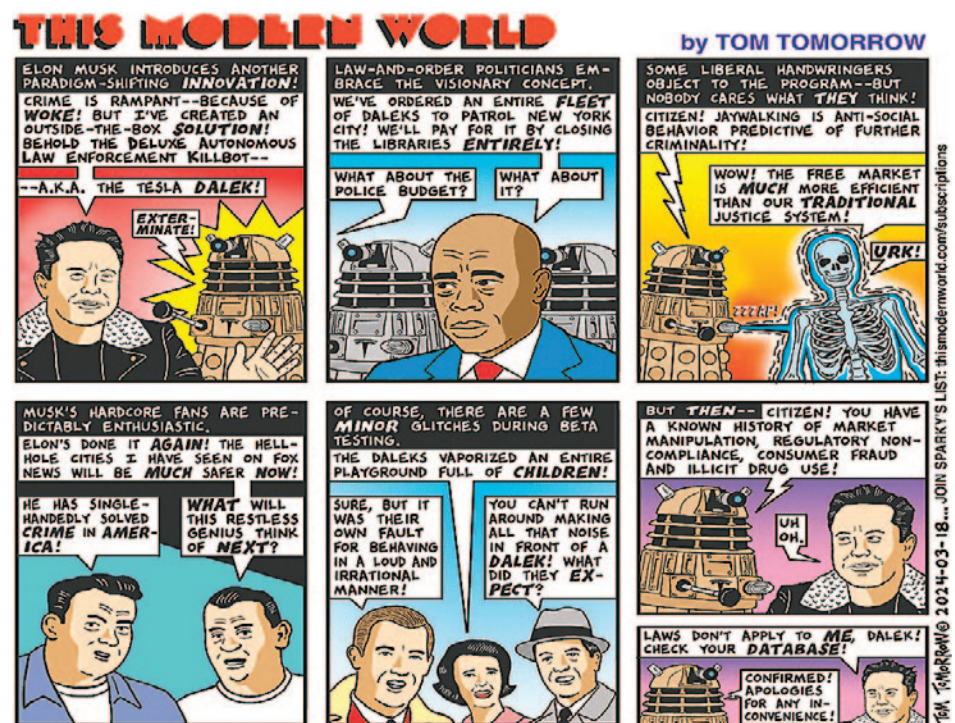
Then there are the artists who offer their most inspirational works in the final acts of their lives. Toni Morrison published beautiful, political books and essays throughout her 80s. Eighty-two-year-old Bob Dylan launched a world tour in 2021—and not only is he still going, he's teaming up with 90-year-old Willie Nelson

for 25 shows this summer. Martin Scorsese, 81, just became the most-nominated living director at the Academy Awards for a film that presented all kinds of challenges to his creative sensibilities and his physical endurance.

So no, it's not that age is just a number. It's that great leaders—and great Americans of all stripes—use their age to their advantage.

To be sure, it can be uncomfortable to watch a leader struggle through a speech, or stumble over a step. But this is a socialized reaction, and not an inherently useful one. Our leaders should be all kinds of people, with all kinds of abilities. Older people may not fit our traditional vision of what a leader should be—and maybe, just maybe, that's a good thing.

*Katrina vanden Heuvel is editorial director and publisher of The Nation. She served as editor of the magazine from 1995 to 2019. Follow @KatrinaNation.*



# Trump Plans to Make His Massive Tax Cuts for the Rich and Corporations Permanent

*The 2024 election will help decide whether the U.S. extends provisions of the Trump tax cuts, which allow the wealthy to steal from the public.*

By SONALI KOLHATKAR

There are many issues on the line this election year but one that gets little attention is former President Donald Trump's 2017 tax reform law that cut taxes on the wealthiest Americans and corporations.

The Tax Cuts and Jobs Act permanently reduced the tax rate for big corporations from an already-low 35% to a ridiculously minuscule 21%. It also lowered tax rates for the wealthiest people from nearly 40% to 37%. Several provisions of that law are set to expire in 2025, making this November's Congressional and Presidential elections particularly critical to issues of economic fairness and justice.

A few months after Trump signed the bill, he boasted, "We have the biggest tax cut in history, bigger than the Reagan tax cut. Bigger than any tax cut." It became a common refrain for him when touting his achievements. But, Trump, who was known for breaking all records on lying to the public while in office, conflated many different

facts to come up with a positive-sounding falsehood in a nation already primed by the likes of Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton to view taxation as anathema. Trump's tax cuts as a whole were the eighth largest in history. But his corporate tax cut was in fact the single largest reduction ever in that category.

Wealthy corporations have for years lobbied for and won so many carve-outs and loopholes to the U.S. tax system, and hidden so much money in offshore tax havens that their pre-2017 effective tax rates were already far lower than the official rates. Then, Trump lowered them even more. Imagine telling the American public that you are responsible specifically for the biggest tax cuts to the biggest corporations in U.S. history. It wasn't a good look. And so, he lied, saying that he signed history's biggest tax cut overall.

In the simplest terms, taxes are a way to pool collective resources so we can have the things we all need for safety and security. Progressive taxation is when wealthier individuals (and corporations) are taxed at higher-than-average rates because the richer one is, the less excess money one needs beyond one's basic necessities. Progressive taxation ensures that wealth inequality doesn't spiral out of control and helps ensure money that's being sucked upwards gets redistributed downward. When wealthy elites pay fewer taxes, they are effectively stealing from the public.

Since the cuts have been in place, many studies have attempted to assess their impact on the U.S. economy. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities concluded in a March 2024 report that "[t]ogether with the 2001 and 2003 tax cuts enacted under President George W. Bush (most of which were made permanent in 2012), [Trump's] law has severely eroded our country's revenue base."

Trump's law accelerated the draining of

our collective revenues to fund the things we need. Even the fiscally conservative Peter G. Peterson Foundation concluded that, as a result of Trump's law, "The United States collects fewer revenues from corporations, relative to the size of the economy, than most other advanced countries."

Trump's tax cuts were quite literally regressive, rewarding the already rich. A 2021 ProPublica report found that just one last-minute provision to the bill demanded by Senator Ron Johnson (R-Wis.) for so-called pass-through corporations benefited a handful of the wealthiest people in the nation: "just 82 ultrawealthy households collectively walked away with more than \$1 billion in total savings, an analysis of confidential tax records shows." It only cost about \$20 million in bribes to Johnson (i.e., donations to the Senator's reelection campaign) to enact this windfall.

It's no wonder that the rich were thrilled with Trump's presidency and that his virulent White supremacy and fascist leanings were not deal breakers.

It's also unsurprising that wealthy elites are backing a second term for Trump. They want an extension of those tax bill provisions that are expiring in 2025, and perhaps an even bigger tax cut, if they can get it. If those provisions are left to expire, people making more than \$400,000 a year—the top 2% of earners—will see an increase in taxation in 2025.

This is a demographic that is already prone to tax cheating given the IRS's recent announcement that 125,000 Americans making between \$400,000 and \$1 million a year have simply refused to file taxes since 2017.

If the GOP wins control of the Senate and the House of Representatives this fall, and if Trump beats President Joe Biden, those cuts will become permanent. A GOP sweep in November will also usher in a new

wave of threats to people of color, LGBTQ people, especially transgender communities, labor rights, and reproductive justice, as well as an escalation to the already-dire Israeli genocide in Gaza that Biden is fueling. It's hard to believe but many Americans seem to have forgotten the horrors of 2016 to 2020.

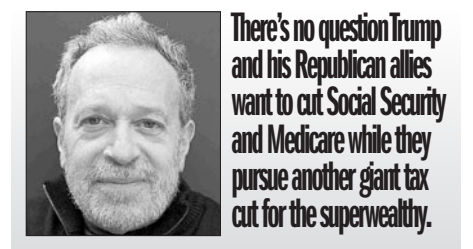
But, at its heart, this election will be about money, for it will take a lot of money to fund the GOP's reelection campaigns in order for moneyed forces to ensure they retain control of more money—democracy, justice, and equity be damned.

For Trump, this is even more important given his legal challenges. He's relying on small-dollar donations from his base to cover his mounting legal fees and has had to post a \$91 million bond to cover the fines he faces from a defamation lawsuit by E. Jean Carroll. The more desperate Trump gets in his bid to secure the White House, the more willing he and his party will be to sell the nation to the highest bidder. And, he will lie to the public by conflating tax cuts for the rich with tax cuts for all.

We ought to think of tax cuts in terms of public revenue theft. When the wealthy win lower taxes, they are stealing money from the American public as a whole. As per the U.S. Senate Budget Committee, permanently extending Trump's tax cuts will result in a loss of \$3.5 trillion in revenues through the year 2033. That's highway robbery.

*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. She is the racial justice and civil liberties editor at Yes! Magazine and she is a writing fellow for the Economy for All project at the Independent Media Institute, which produced this article, which appeared at InTheseTimes.com.*

## ROBERT REICH



# Trump Wants to Destroy Social Security, But Biden Plan Would Improve and Expand It

*Biden wants to save Social Security by having the super-rich — who have become far richer over the past several decades — pay more Social Security taxes. Let's be clear about what's at stake in this election.*

During a typically rambling and incoherent interview in mid-March, Trump admitted he would cut Social Security and Medicare if reelected. "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."

Trump has tried to walk back the remarks, saying that when he used the word "cutting" he didn't actually mean "cutting" and that Social Security has a lot of waste. (In fact, Social Security is well managed, and theft or fraud is rare.)

But there's no question Trump and his Republican allies want to cut Social Security and Medicare.

Here's why. At the heart of their eco-

nomical agenda — at least the portion they're sharing with their super-wealthy backers — is another giant tax cut for the super-wealthy and big corporations.

The problem is that this tax cut would cause the federal budget deficit to explode — as did their last tax cut for the wealthy — unless Social Security and Medicare are cut. (Remember that as president, Trump repeatedly included cuts to Social Security and Medicare in his official budget proposals.)

This is why Trumpers have been ramping up calls for cuts in Social Security (or raising the age of eligibility, which is the same thing).

Recently, Daily Wire founder and professional bloviator Ben Shapiro — oblivious to the fact that millions of Americans do hard work that takes a toll on their bodies — urged that the retirement age be raised. "No one in the United States should be retiring at 65 years old. Frankly, I think retirement itself is a stupid idea unless you have some sort of health problem." Turning Points USA founder Charlie Kirk echoed Shapiro: "I'm not a fan of retirement. I don't think retirement is biblical."

I want to be clear with you about Social Security. (I was once a trustee of the Social Security Trust Fund, so I know about this issue.)

Even without another Trump Republican tax cut for the rich, America still faces a pending problem financing Social Security. (Medicare is less problematic because the rise in health care costs has slowed, probably due to the Affordable Care Act.)

That's because the American population is aging, with a rising ratio of retirees receiving Social Security benefits to workers paying into Social Security.

The Congressional Budget Office expects that over the next 20 years, spending on Social Security and Medicare will rise by about 3 percentage points of GDP.

In their annual report, the trustees of the Social Security Trust Fund said that Social Security will be able to pay full benefits for another decade but thereafter faces a significant funding shortfall. Unless something changes, after 2034 it will be able to pay only about 80% of scheduled benefits.

But this pending problem in no way requires cuts to Social Security benefits or increases in the retirement age.

In sharp contrast to Trump, Biden cor-

rectly asserts in his new budget that Social Security (and Medicare) can remain solvent by raising taxes on high incomes rather than by cutting benefits.

The problem isn't that the giant baby-boom generation is sucking up too many Social Security benefits. The Social Security trustees anticipated the boom in boomer retirements. This is why Social Security was amended back in 1983, to gradually increase the age for collecting full retirement benefits from 65 to 67. That change is helping finance the retirements of boomers (like me).

So what did the trustees fail to anticipate in 1983 when they raised the retirement age for collecting full benefits? Answer: the degree of income inequality in 21st century America.

Put simply, a big part of the American working population is earning less than the Social Security trustees (including me) anticipated decades ago — and therefore paying less in Social Security payroll tax.

Had the pay of American workers kept up with what had been the trend decades ago — and kept up with their own increasing productivity — their Social Security payroll tax payments would have been enough to keep the program flush.

At the same time, a much larger chunk of the nation's total income is going to the top than was expected decades ago.

Here's the thing: Income subject to the payroll tax is capped. Not a single dollar of earnings in excess of the cap is subject to Social Security payroll taxes. This year's cap is \$168,600.

Which means, for example, that Jeff Bezos finished paying all his Social Security

payroll taxes due this year at around seven minutes into Jan. 1.

The Social Security cap is adjusted every year for inflation, but the adjustment is tiny compared to what's happened to incomes at the top.

As the rich have become far richer, more and more of the total income earned by Americans has become concentrated at the top. Therefore, more and more total income escapes the Social Security payroll tax.

The obvious solution to Social Security's funding shortfall, therefore, is to lift the cap on income subject to the Social Security payroll tax, so the super-rich pay more in Social Security taxes.

To make sure it's the super-rich — and not the upper-middle class — who pay, it makes sense to eliminate the cap altogether on earnings in excess of, say, \$400,000.

As it happens, Biden's plan does exactly this.

So there you have it: Trump and his regressive mouthpieces want to cut Social Security so they can give another giant tax cut to the super-rich.

Biden wants to save Social Security by having the super-rich — who have become far richer over the past several decades — pay more Social Security taxes.

The contrast couldn't be more obvious or more important. Please help get the word out.

*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.*



## JESSE JACKSON



Since COVID, children have been testing lower in math and reading tests. Closure of schools had an enduring effect, which shows how we rely on schools.

### Schools are a Measure of the Health of Our Democracy

Educating our children is our essential duty – for their futures, their families, their communities and our country. For all the furious debate about schools, what’s clear is that we have to do better.

Since COVID, children have been testing lower in national math and reading tests. That’s true across the board – top performing students show about the same declines as those with lower scores. The closure of schools during COVID and the increased absences from schools since have had an enduring effect.

That underlines how much we rely on

schools to educate our children. Parents play a major role, particularly in the first years of life. Whether there are books in the house, whether children are read to makes a difference. How well children do depends dramatically on how well their parents and community are faring. Higher income parents with more flexible hours and deeper pockets offer their children many experiences. Parents juggling three or four jobs, pressing to make ends meet, in communities suffering from insecure housing and mean streets, find it much harder.

Our modern commercial culture doesn’t help. Social media offers infinite distraction and ever shorter attention spans. Pictures replace words. The young grow up in an amoral commercial ad culture that glamorizes consumption – buying, not investing, debt not saving. The right-wing “war on woke” seeks to ban books that too few children read while ignoring the salacious 24/7 commercial culture that forms and deforms their values.

We rely on schools to salvage the next generation. We expect them to teach not just reading and writing, but discipline, attention, physical exercise, health, and basic morality. Television and social media barrage the young with things to buy. We want schools to instruct them in how to budget and how to save.

For children born shackled in poverty, we expect schools to make up for their circumstance, to provide them with an equal opportunity.

We know how to create good public

schools. The public schools in many of our suburbs are superb – with good teachers, creative curricula, after-school and extracurricular activities, excellent facilities, college prep courses and more.

But we have chosen not to provide that experience to every child. America’s public schools are more diverse than ever. A 2022 federal study reported that 46% of public school students are White, 28% are Hispanic, 15% are Black, 6% Asian, 4% multiracial and 1% American Indian.

Yet public schools are still tragically segregated – by race and by class. In 2021, about 60% of Black and Hispanic public school students attended schools where three-fourths or more of the students were students of color. And these racially segregated schools are generally high-poverty schools. This reflects housing segregation and school districting designed to exclude, not include. Thirteen thousand schools that are predominately of one race are located within 10 miles of a school that is mostly of another race.

This segregation by race and income is reinforced by what Jonathan Kozol called a “savage inequality” in funding. A 2019 study by EdBuild reported that schools in predominantly non-White districts received roughly \$2,200 per student less than schools in majority White districts. Unimaginably, many schools in poor neighborhoods still have lead in pipes and paint, threatening the very minds they are supposed to be stimulating.

One alternative – charter schools – has

proved an illusion. Marred by mismanagement, corruption, and high rates of closings and failures, they’ve produced results that are about the same as the public schools that they scorn, while too often sapping funds from the public schools.

If schools are to ensure that every child has a chance to learn and to succeed, then what we need to do is clear. We can take poor students to good schools. Where they exist, voluntary busing programs have made a difference. Or we can take the good schools to the poor students – investing far more in the schools that serve lower wage communities. That would include modern, safe facilities, higher teacher pay to attract good teachers, more teachers per student to offer greater attention, pre-school, after-school and summer opportunities to extend learning and more.

Schools are a measure of the health of our democracy. They are key to the promise of equal opportunity to all. If they are separate and unequal, offering a banquet for the affluent and scraps for the less well off, that only reinforces the savage inequality that already threatens our democracy. The road to reform is long. If we are to keep the promise of equal opportunity, we have many miles yet to go.

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

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

### Hartmann...

*Continued from page 12*

A study titled “Down the (White) Rabbit Hole: The Extreme Right and Online Recommender Systems” found:

“A process is observable whereby users accessing an ER [Extreme Rightwing] YouTube video are likely to be recommended further ER content, leading to immersion in an ideological bubble in just a few short clicks.”

Real-world confirmation was easy for Zeynep Tufekci, a reporter who chronicled her experience in the *New York Times*. Noting that she didn’t normally watch right-wing extremist content on YouTube, she said that she needed to confirm “a few Trump quotes” during the 2016 election, so she watched several of his speeches on that site.

“Soon I noticed something peculiar,” Tufekci wrote. “YouTube started to recommend and ‘autoplay’ videos for me that featured White supremacist rants, Holocaust denials, and other disturbing content.”

Curious, she created a few new YouTube accounts under fake names and began looking at videos on subjects from Hillary Clinton to Bernie Sanders to seemingly nonpolitical topics like vegetarianism.

Right across the board, she found that “videos on vegetarianism led to videos on veganism” and “videos about jogging led to videos about running ultramarathons.” YouTube just kept cranking up the ante, morphing her Hillary and Bernie watching into conspiracy screeds about 9/11 and other worries of the extreme left.

“It seems as if you are never ‘hard core’ enough for YouTube’s recommendation algorithm,” she wrote. “It promotes, recommends, and disseminates videos in a manner that appears to constantly up the stakes. Given its billion or so users, YouTube may be one of the most powerful radicalizing instruments of the 21st century.”

Algorithms put together by other social media platforms appear to do the same thing, and they’re all proprietary, need-to-know trade secrets and not available for oversight even to government agencies. The fairly well-known example is Facebook’s algorithm leading users to such radical content that they would end up voting for Donald Trump and then invade the US Capitol and seriously injure more than 140 police officers, many ending up in the hospital, with four ultimately dead.

In every case, the algorithm’s goal is to “increase engagement” so that the social media company can sell more ads at a higher price. It’s all about the money, and the money is in the billions.

Facebook’s algorithm, according to CNBC, even placed paid ads for assault weapons next to content filled with inflammatory lies and misinformation about the November 2020 election, a fact that wasn’t lost on 23 members of Congress who grilled Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg about it in early 2021.

As a society, we generally try to regulate things that provoke this kind of destructive, brain-seizing response.

Pharmaceuticals and alcohol are tightly regulated, as is gambling, because addiction to them has dire societal consequences. We required warnings on cigarettes and processed food products so people can understand the threats and consequences. And we regulate sex and violence in mainstream media because of their “contagion effects.”

As mentioned, when Congress discovered that processed food manufacturers were using research on addiction to determine how much salt, sugar, and fat to put into their products to produce repeated and increasing consumption – leading to a nationwide obesity, health, and death crisis – they mandated transparency. Food labels now disclose the content of processed food products, including the amount of each of these “addictive” substances.

In a starkly opposite situation, as Facebook whistleblower Frances Haugen told an MIT conference on the impact of social media on society, Meta/Facebook continues to conceal its algorithm from public or even academic or government scrutiny. The result, she says, is that:

“[N]o one gets to see behind the curtain, and they don’t know what questions to ask. So, what is an acceptable and reasonable level of rigor for keeping kids off these platforms, and what data would [the platforms] need to publish to understand whether they are meeting the duty of care?”

Because of Meta’s secrecy, nobody knows the answer. The same, of course, is also true of all the other social media platforms and, arguably, even the search engine companies.

As Public Citizen notes:

“In the race to amass monopoly power in their respective markets, these corporations have developed predatory business practices that harvest user data for profit and facilitated discrimination by race, religion, national origin, age, and gender. Facebook and Google have wielded unprecedented influence over our democratic process. ...

“Increased investments in Washington have allowed these monopolists to harm consumers, workers, and other businesses alike, with relatively little accountability to

date. A report Public Citizen released in 2019 (covering up to the 2018 election cycle) detailed how Big Tech corporations have blanketed Capitol Hill with lobbyists and lavished members of Congress with campaign contributions.”

Since American history’s most corrupt Supreme Court justice, Clarence Thomas – after taking millions in gifts, homes, and vacations from a politically active conservative with business before the Court – became the tie-breaking vote in Citizens United allowing massive corporations and the morbidly rich to legally bribe judges and members of Congress, Public Citizen points out:

“Big Tech has eclipsed yesterday’s big lobbying spenders, Big Oil and Big Tobacco. In 2020, Amazon and Facebook spent nearly twice as much as Exxon and Philip Morris on lobbying. ... Big Tech’s lobbyists are not just numerous, they are also among the most influential in Washington. Among the 10 lobbyists who were the biggest contributors to the 2020 election cycle, half lobby on behalf of at least one of the four Big Tech companies.”

Given how badly six billionaire-owned Republicans on the Supreme Court have corrupted our political system, it’ll be a big lift to reduce the damage social media companies daily do to our mental health, our children’s lives, and America’s political systems in their pursuit of billions in monthly profits.

Nonetheless, a good start toward regulating Big Brother-style social media com-

panies would be to do the same as we do with the processed food companies: require them to publish their algorithms, both in source code and with a plain English explanation, so both consumers and Congress, at the very least, can learn how we’re being manipulated and radicalized for their profit and political gain.

While the debate over the ownership of TikTok by a company beholden to the Chinese Communist Party is both important and legitimate, a far more important debate that’s almost completely ignored – in large part because of millions in lobbying money being spent by the social media industry – are the algorithms that give these platforms the power to hook and radicalize us.

As the mom-led battle against Big Tobacco’s efforts to market to our children successfully showed in the 1990s, an educated and outraged populace can sometimes overcome the millions spent by giant corporations and their CEOs to bribe politicians.

Let your member of Congress know it’s time for “truth in labeling” laws like the processed food industry complies with to apply to social media algorithms. The life – and democracy – that gets saved could be your own.

*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).*

### Physician, Heal Our Health Care

By KEN WINKES

Who better than a doctor to diagnose an illness?

Dr. John Geyman, Chairman of the Department of Family Medicine at the University of Washington from 1976-1990, has been doing just that for over half a century.

For much of that time, Dr. Geyman applied his diagnostic skills to one ailment that often makes a physician’s zeal to heal so frustrating: The healthcare system itself is sick. Too often, it is our for-profit healthcare system that inflicts the greatest harm.

In more than a dozen clearly written books and pamphlets that closely examine the ways we deliver health care— from private insurance to Medicare and Medicaid, to the Affordable Care Act—he has repeatedly

identified the system’s many shortcomings.

That it is broken is not news. Even after the introduction of the ACA with its subsidies that sweetened the profit pot for private insurers, healthcare in the United States remains expensive and inefficient. In 2024 more than 26 million Americans are still uninsured.

Why is fixing it so hard? After all, according to a recent Gallup poll, more than half of Americans believe our government should guarantee the right to healthcare. Why do the wishes and the will of the people matter so little?

In his most recent two books Dr. Geyman strays from the field of medicine to find the answer.

“Are We the United States of America?” and “Corporate Power and Oligarchy” were published in 2022 and 2024. Reading them together, their kinship is apparent, and though neither book explicitly concerns our nation’s healthcare system, it’s no stretch to see that the divisions in our society and the heavy hand of corporate power both stand in the

*Continued on next page*

## Our Bodies, Our Minds: The Big Bubble

Today's hot stock: healthcare. Other market bubbles have burst. Remember the trajectory of real estate? But healthcare? Maybe not. This bubble might continue to soar.

As with other bubbles, the money pours in. "Healthcare" has segued from the nonprofit model of 60 years ago into the capitalized market of today. Nursing homes, physician practices, hospitals, hospices ... all are market-driven, with investors, including hedge-funds, eager to claim a share. Even the facilities once upon a time under the aegis of a venerable nonprofit, often a religious body, have come under the for-profit umbrella. The "sisters" have joined with Wall Street. Hospices, started as a cadre of volunteers, have kept the name "hospice" while they morph into the "product" of a larger venture. That is no surprise: there is money to be made from the dying, as well as the sick.

Consider a few statistics. The United States will spend a projected \$4.7 trillion — or 18% of the national economy — on healthcare in 2023 — the highest in the world. Hospital expenditures grew 2.2% to \$1,355.0 billion. Spending for services provided at freestanding nursing care facilities and continuing care retirement communities in 2022: \$191.3 billion. Pharmacy benefit managers — the intermediaries between the manufacturers, wholesalers, insurers, and

pharmacies, was a \$498.47 billion industry in 2022 — an industry that has blocked regulations to lower the costs of drugs. So long as the population grows, and ages, the demographics promise steady growth.

Where does the money go? It is not making us healthier. The money is being squeezed up, to reward the financial wizards behind this mega-system. CEO salaries of insurance honchos have soared. The three highest-paid executives run Molina Healthcare (total compensation last year \$22.1 million, with a CEO to average worker pay ratio of 278:1; CVS Health (total compensation last year \$21.3 million, CEO pay ratio 380:1, and CIGNA (\$20.0 million, ratio 277:1). Executives at nonprofit hospitals earn respectably high salaries, often seven figures, and physicians take home six-figure salaries; but the real money lies with the money-manipulators.

Those financial wunderkinds have a mission: profits. Organizations buy practices, hospitals, hospices, et al, to "streamline" them to wring more profits. The notion of making an organization more efficient is not arcane. It entails cutting and downgrading staff. Hospitals will have fewer nurses per patient, nursing homes fewer aides per patient. It entails substituting less-expensive nurse practitioners for physicians, aides for registered nurses. The term is no longer "your doctor," but "your healthcare provider," as though the provider is a vendor selling cars. It entails ratcheting back benefits, marked by the court battle over Obamacare's provision of "free" preventive care.

Insurers know that if they can put the cost of preventive care onto patients (who will probably defer, or refuse that care), they will pay out less. The more an insurer can "limit" a "limited formulary," the greater the profits. Ditto for restricted networks. The federal government is analyzing the Medicare Advantage plans, overseen by private insurers: not surpris-

ingly, those plans deliver lower benefits than "traditional" Medicare policies overseen by Uncle Sam. Finally, the wonderkinds can simply raise the costs to us, the premium-holders, and patients — another way to bolster profits.

Sometimes streamlining will hurt patients. CVS just paid a \$1.5 million fine to the state of Ohio for "understaffing" at its pharmacies, leading to 27 "safety cases. Hospitals that understaff risk the "near miss" errors that may precipitate patient-disasters. To families who think that "understaffing" harmed a patient, law firms promise litigation.

The government could fight the corporate zeal to understaff, both in numbers of personnel and expertise. Currently, nursing homes have low levels of required staffing. In Texas, for instance, the facility ratio for every 24-hour period is one licensed nursing staff person for each 20 residents or a minimum of four licensed-care hours per resident day. In Michigan the afternoon shift must have one staff for every 12 residents. Yet when the government has sought to require more staff, the facilities have not bolstered salaries, but argued for exemptions: "We can't fill the slots."

The wizards who produce the computer I write on, the car I drive, the nifty appliances strewn around my house have earned their reward. So have the scientists behind the wonder-drugs. Those producers add "value." As for the hedge fund investors, perhaps their funds fuel the fledgling companies. Perhaps they merit millions. They do bear a risk after all: the bubble in non fungible tokens and cryptocurrency did not continue to soar.

The Big Money masterminds behind corporate health care, though, see "our bodies, our minds" as just another profit-center. We serve them; they don't serve us.

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

## Memory Can Be a Fleeting Thing for the Elderly

By SAM URETSKY

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, "Pelmanism" isn't a word. After all, if it were a word it would be in the OED, but if it isn't a word then it never was, so there's no embarrassment in not remembering it. For the record, "Pelmanism" referred to a series of methods for memory improvement, mostly by playing the Match Game, also known as Concentration, with a deck of cards. It was popular in the first half of the 20th century and was available as a series of books at \$1 each, which will sound like a lot of money for anyone old enough to remember that a paperback book sold for 25¢ each, and even recall what a ¢ meant, since there are no keys for it on a keyboard. Still, we're going to deal with a presidential election which may focus on which candidate has the better memory.

Some memory loss is normal with age. The TV show "Are You Smarter Than a 5th Grader?" ran for a long time on Fox, then was syndicated, and was ranked as one of the best game shows ever. There are versions of it all over the Internet. As for recalling facts or techniques, JAMA Internal

Medicine Patient Page, March 4, 2024, featured a discussion, "I Am Worried About Memory Loss—What Should I Know?" The answer is mostly: relax. "Some thinking skills, like knowledge and wisdom, improve with age. Changes in memory, thinking, and reasoning are common with aging. Having trouble remembering someone's name or misplacing items can be a normal part of getting older. See your doctor if your memory loss affects your ability to do your normal daily activities. Examples include trouble remembering details of recent events or conversations, difficulty thinking of common words, getting lost in familiar places, or having problems doing something you used to be able to do with ease. See your doctor if someone close to you has concerns about your memory."

If there is something that you haven't thought about for years, or something that you haven't thought about at all, like where you put your keys, that's normal. But when forgetfulness becomes common, some people will think of dementia, specifically dementia of the Alzheimer's type, and it is the most common form of dementia. In "Dementia. The Primary Care Companion" *The Journal of Clinical Psychiatry*, 3, 93-109. 2001; 3(3): 93-109) the aggressive behaviors of Alzheimer's dementia include screaming, cursing, hitting, biting, kicking, scratching and grabbing. One dentist, whose practice includes many Alzheimer's victims, was bitten so severely that she had to sus-

pend practicing for several months. Mr. Trump has a history of grabbing, and boasting about it. There is no cure for Alzheimer's dementia, and only recently have there been drugs which can slow the progression.

Significantly, Cornell University's Media Relation's Officer provided a report: "Cornell expert says Trump's frequent phonemic paraphasia 'are signs of early dementia.'" The expert is Harry Segal, a senior lecturer in the Psychology Department at Cornell University and in the Psychiatry Department at Weill Cornell Medicine. Dr. Segal begins, "In the 2024 election, both party candidates have been accused by the other of having psychological deficits. This weaponizing of clinical concepts is no doubt confusing to voters and journalists. A careful consideration of these claims can demystify their use as 'opposition research.'" (<https://news.cornell.edu/media-relations/tip-sheets/cornell-expert-says-trumps-frequent-phonemic-paraphasia-are-signs-early>)

A number of qualified clinicians have commented on Mr. Trump's lying, which is not merely habitual but pathological. But, Dr. Segal wrote, "Recently, several clinicians have noted the ways he has begun to mistake words, lose his train of thought, confuse Biden with Obama, particularly during long rallies held in the evening. There are examples of phonemic paraphasia — swapping parts of words for others that sound similar; these are signs of early dementia,

even though they are intermittent." For example, when a sound substitution or rearrangement is made, but the stated word still resembles the intended word. During a recent speech, Donald Trump couldn't string a sentence together when he said, "We're a nation that just recently heard that Saudi Arabia and Russia will re-feh-ur ah ..." (Sic). President Biden occasionally says the wrong word — slip of the tongue or whatever, but Mr. Trump seemed as if his brain was collapsing.

Famously, President Biden has a long history of verbal gaffes. Giving a press conference after Justice Department special counsel Robert Hur published a report on Feb. 8 exonerating the president over his retention of classified Obama-era documents and described the President as an "elderly man with a poor memory," Biden confused the president of Egypt with the president of Mexico.

The United States' older adult population can be divided into three life-stage subgroups: the young-old (approximately 65 to 74), the middle-old (ages 75 to 84), and the old-old (over age 85). The two potential candidates are in the same subgroup, with the current President less obese, and no history of the violent actions that accompany the most common form of dementia.

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## Winkes...

*Continued from previous page*

way of the healthcare reform Americans need and deserve.

In "Are We the United States of America?" Dr. Geyman shares his fear that we are not. The splintering is so obvious we don't need red and blue electoral maps to tell us. In straightforward words and easy-to-comprehend charts, the good doctor tells us why and how it has happened. Seven of the first short chapters document the divisions that are tearing us apart: the demographic changes, the economic inequality that increased even more during the COVID years, more instability and less security in the workplace, the flood of disinformation, and underlying it all as both cause and effect, the elevation of corporate profiteering over the common good and the political polarization that has ensued.

Reading "Are We the United States of America?", it's hard to escape the lesson that, uncontrolled by government regulation or private morality, unbridled self-interest has overwhelmed our sense of community and the common good. Though Dr. Geyman does not say it this way, greed is the disease that is killing us.

If there were any doubt of that diagno-

sis, "Corporate Power and Oligarchy" lays it to rest. Again, in clear prose, graphs and charts, Dr. Geyman shows what has happened over the last 40 years. In that period, for just one instance, (between 1980 and 2016) the share of income received by the bottom 50% declined from 20 to 13 percent, by itself a sure-fire formula to promote social discontent.

How did it happen? In that period, corporations grew larger and more consolidated. Rampant monopoly returned to the marketplace. The growth of private equity was astonishing. Between 2000 and 2020 private equity's assets ballooned from under one trillion to more than seven trillion dollars. Each development placed more power in fewer and fewer hands, smoothing the path to corporate capture of government and to outright oligarchy.

The *Citizens United* decision in 2010 further cemented the tie between money and power. If money is speech, and in Mitt Romney's words, "corporations are people," those with the most money will always have the loudest voice.

In an oligarchy, the will of the people means little. We have a jerry-rigged healthcare system because it's profitable for the few. And we have voter suppression and gerrymandering because a functioning democracy

is oligarchy's arch enemy.

It's impossible to treat a disease if we don't identify it. Call "Corporate Power and Oligarchy" Dr. Geyman's final diagnosis of the acute illness raging in our body politic.

If we don't get capitalism under control; if we don't resuscitate our dying concern for community and the common good, our nation's prognosis is very grim.

Note: In the spirit of full disclosure, I know Dr. John Geyman and admire him

greatly. Now in his 90s, he is a remarkable man who has lived a remarkable life.

"Are We the United States of America?" by John Geyman, 207 pages, Copernicus Healthcare, 2022.

"Corporate Power and Oligarchy" by John Geyman, 244 pages, Copernicus Healthcare, 2024.

*Ken Winkes is a retired teacher and high school principal living in Conway, Wash.*



# WAYNE O'LEARY

## Reflections on the New American Pastime

While Super Bowl LVIII is still fresh in mind, this may be an apt time to examine America's new national sport and its impact on national life and culture.

To begin with, professional football is now the national game. Years ago, the late comedian George Carlin half-seriously explained why: It was a game, he said, attuned to America's position as the world's number one superpower, a game replete with military allusions and jargon (the "bomb," the "blitz"). Baseball, our former national game, Carlin speculated, was too leisurely, too pastoral, too placid for a frenetic urban society, especially one whose defense budget had become larger than the overall budgets of most countries and whose populace was increasingly armed to the teeth.

The Super Bowl itself has replaced the World Series as a defining American event. When I was a youngster in school — here, I'm dating myself — lessons were interrupted so the class could listen to the Series together on the teacher's radio. (Games were commonly played on weekday afternoons, though never at night.) Usually, it was Dodgers versus Yankees, and everyone picked a rooting side.

Baseball is a sport that remains family oriented. The local ball park is still where

parents take the kids for an outing, as my father took me years ago — usually for a relatively few dollars, although our regional major league franchise, the Boston Red Sox, has started charging a small fortune. Bigtime football is different, a venue where adults gather to eat and drink, or (in the case of the Super Bowl) hold parties and do business.

Except for fanatical backers of the teams involved, who apparently mortgage their homes to buy absurdly over-priced tickets and travel to the game, Super Bowl attendees are largely the rich and famous. The former, who fly in on private planes, are there to make contacts and deals in their private boxes; the latter, the Taylor Swifts of the world, are there mostly to be seen and advance their careers. The National Football League (NFL) and the broadcasting networks love these extraneous aspects of the big game; they're good for business and TV ratings.

The Super Bowl is really a cultural happening, not an athletic contest. Most of the millions tuning in at home tend not to be knowledgeable about the nuances of the sport; rather, they are casual fans or not fans at all. Witness the emergence of the Super Bowl party, only tangentially related to football, an institution now on a par with the annual Christmas party. More people appear to be focused on the extravagant, hyped-up halftime show than with happenings on the field. Judging by media attention, the single biggest Super Bowl attraction is the "competition" between the slickly produced commercials shown during interminable TV time-outs.

Then, there's gambling on the game, formerly considered socially and morally destructive, but suddenly endorsed by the strait-laced NFL itself. Thanks to the US Supreme Court — in 2018, it struck down a federal law banning sports betting outside

of Nevada — gambling has become common most everywhere sports are played and especially on Super Bowl Sunday.

Las Vegas, gaming capital of America, recently acquired an NFL franchise of its own; it was the natural venue for this year's festivities. If I were to guess, I'd say more people followed the outcome of Kansas City versus San Francisco for reasons of betting (an estimated \$1.5 billion was legally wagered) than for anything else. This logically flowed from the league's lucrative promotional tie-in with the sleazy gambling industry.

At bottom, professional football and the Super Bowl are mostly about business and not about sport. The pro game has become one of the biggest financial enterprises in America, and it's run by our billionaire class, the same people who presently direct most aspects of national life and not just the economy. Their money controls our politics, our institutions of government, our media (this paper excepted, of course), and lately our healthcare system. Why not sports?

The evolution of the NFL is illustrative. As Robert W. Peterson's splendid little history ("Pigskin: The Early Years of Pro Football") recounts, the league's founding fathers in the 1920s and 1930s (George Halas, Curly Lambeau, Art Rooney, et al.) were not businessmen but sportsmen — owner-coaches, players, or former players, who loved the game for its own sake and operated it on the proverbial shoestring. Its first president was the immortal Jim Thorpe, still an active player.

Things have changed since then. At present, according to the website ProFootballNetwork.com, 30 of the 32 NFL teams are owned by billionaire business investors, virtually none of them former athletes and few with a sports background. Only a handful regard their teams as their primary businesses; they view them as secondary

financial investments that could just as easily be widget factories.

These owners buy and sell their franchises, move them at will, and express few community ties or loyalties except when, like the Buffalo Bills' ownership, exacting public subsidies from pliant politicians (in this case, New York's Democratic Governor Kathy Hochul) to finance their new, state-of-the-art, multipurposed stadiums. The main agenda topic at their upcoming annual meeting will be whether to accept private-equity firms as future team owners.

There's always been one exception to this dreary recitation: the publicly owned Green Bay (Wisc.) Packers. One of the original NFL clubs, the Packers are the league's remaining small-market team and the only one not exclusively owned by wealthy individuals, families or limited partnerships. It was established as a nonprofit entity in 1923, with stock initially sold in small amounts to 500 members of the local community. During the Depression, the franchise was literally saved by the contributions of townspeople, making it a true community enterprise. Today, its stock is collectively held by roughly 500,000 Packer fans across the US, none of whom can own more than 200,000 shares, or 4% of the team.

In the 1980s, the billionaire's club that is the NFL decreed that, the Packers excepted (their ownership structure was grandfathered), nothing like this would ever happen again; it now requires every team to be owned by a single owner or small group of owners (no more than 32), one of whom must hold at least a 30% share. There's no crying in baseball, and, evidently, there will be no socialism in football.

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

## Solomonic Justice in Georgia

By JOEL D. JOSEPH

Solomonic Justice is based on rulings of King Solomon who ruled ancient Israel 3,000 years ago. The basic principle of Solomonic Justice is that in any court case, both parties usually have a valid claim. In the United States and Great Britain, the courts most often make a winner-take-all decision giving one party a total victory. In Israel, the Supreme Court attempts to find a middle ground, giving each party a partial victory.

That is exactly what Judge Scott McAfee did in his Atlanta, Georgia, ruling in the case against former President Donald Trump. Trump's attorney filed a motion to dismiss the case, based on a possible conflict of interest involving District Attorney Fani Willis and her former lover, Nathan Wade.

Willis hired Wade to be an assistant prosecutor in the case. He was paid \$650,000 for working on the case and went on luxurious trips with Ms. Willis. However,

rather than dismissing the case, Judge McAfee gave District Attorney Willis the choice of firing Wade or, in effect, firing herself. Nathan Wade did the right thing and resigned.

Judge McAfee wrote, "Our highest courts consistently remind us that prosecutors are held to a unique and exacting professional standard in light of their public responsibility and their power. Every newly minted prosecutor should be instilled with the notion that she seeks justice over convictions and that she may strike hard blows but never foul ones."

McAfee concluded that Ms. Willis did not have an actual conflict of interest, but that she gave the appearance of a conflict of interest and impropriety. "Without sufficient evidence that the District Attorney acquired a personal stake in the prosecution, or that her financial arrangements had any impact on the case, the Defendant's claims of an actual conflict must be denied. This finding is by no means an indication that the Court condones this tremendous lapse in judgment or the unprofessional manner of the District Attorney's testimony during the evidentiary hearing. Rather, it is the undersigned's opin-

ion that Georgia law does not permit the finding of an actual conflict for simply making bad choices even repeatedly and it is the trial court's duty to confine itself to the relevant issues and applicable law properly brought before it. Other forums or sources of authority such as the General Assembly, the Georgia State Ethics Commission, the State Bar of Georgia, the Fulton County Board of Commissioners, or the voters of Fulton County may offer feedback on any unanswered questions that linger. But those are not the issues determinative to the Defendants motions alleging an actual conflict."

Judge McAfee continued, "Finding insufficient evidence of an actual conflict of interest does not end the inquiry. Our appellate courts have endorsed the application of an appearance of impropriety standard to state prosecutors, even without any explicit finding of an actual conflict."

Judge McAfee concluded that the prosecution of this case cannot proceed until the State selects one of two options. The District Attorney may choose to step aside, along with the whole of her office, and refer the prosecution to the Prosecuting Attorneys Council for reassignment. Alternatively,

Nathan Wade has withdrawn, allowing the District Attorney, the Defendants, and the public to move forward without his presence or remuneration distracting from and potentially compromising the merits of this case.

McAfee accorded both sides justice. While he slapped down district attorney Willis's behavior, he ruled that there was no basis for dismissing the case against Donald J. Trump. This is the essence of Solomonic Justice. Both sides can walk away feeling that they were the victors. Both sides had strong points to make and Judge McAfee accorded them real, fair and impartial justice. And the American people will have justice as well: The trial of Donald J. Trump will proceed in Atlanta, Georgia.

**Editor's Note:** *After this was written, Trump and some of his codefendants announced they would appeal the ruling to the Georgia Court of Appeals.*

*Joel D. Joseph is a lawyer, economist and author of "Solomonic Justice: How the Israeli Supreme Court has Become a Beacon of Justice in the Middle East."*  
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## We Can Break the Cycle of Poverty, Mental Illness and Prison

*I spent 9 years in prison when what I really needed was mental health care. Now I organize poor and low-income people like me across to demand more from our system.*

By MATTHEW ROSING

During my time in prison, I lived in hell. I witnessed horrific abuse, suffered from a critical lack of mental health care, and was treated as less than human. Guards even taunted inmates that we could-

n't change the system because our right to vote would be stripped away when we got out.

Well, they were wrong about that last part.

I learned when I got out that I'd been lied to — I still have my power to vote. Now I'm organizing with and for people like me who get caught up in the cycle of poverty, mental illness, and incarceration that run so closely together in this country. Where I once felt powerless, I feel differently now.

I grew up in what could have been any other normal, single parent, working class household. But as I became a young adult, I began to develop what I would later learn is called schizoaffective disorder, bi-polar type.

When I was 20, I was misdiagnosed and received inappropriate treatment, leading to sleepless manic episodes, frightening hallucinations, and other problems. Angry, stressed out, and in worsening mental health, I struggled to keep a job.

Desperate for money, I began stealing and committing other crimes. I ended up

serving nine years in prison.

My story isn't uncommon. The National Alliance on Mental Illness reports that in 2020, nearly 53 million adults — 21% of the U.S. adult population — reported mental health issues. For incarcerated people, the numbers are even higher.

A whopping 64% of all people in U.S. jails, 54% of those in state prisons, and 45% of people in federal prisons have reported mental health illnesses, the American Psychological Association details. And according to the Centers for Disease Control, people living in poverty are far more likely to experience stressors to their mental health than those living above the poverty line.

All of this — the national mental health crisis, poverty, and a prison system that's a dumping ground for poor people with untreated mental health disorders — can be alleviated by common sense public policy. And that policy can be won by organizing the 140 million poor and low-income Americans.

My own experience offers a glimpse of

what a better approach could look like.

During my last time in prison, I was held without bail for nearly 15 months until a judge ruled me not guilty by reason of insanity and connected me to state resources.

For the first time in my life, my mental health was taken seriously. They diagnosed me and gave me effective medication. I was able to get onto SSI (Supplemental Security Income) and live a life relatively free from the past ravages of my disease.

But it shouldn't take spending nearly a decade in prison for someone to get the help they need. We need to expand programs like these, including making sure comprehensive health care is a basic human right, and make them accessible to everyone.

And to do that, we need to exercise our vote. Nationally, there are 85 million poor and low-income eligible voters, according to the Poor People's Campaign. That's enough to sway the election in every state.

My home state of Pennsylvania, for example, has 3.3 million poor and low-income

*Continued on next page*



# UN and EU Slam Israel for Imposing on Palestinians ‘Levels of Food Insecurity never Recorded Anywhere in the World’

By JUAN COLE

ANN ARBOR – The European Union’s Vice-President of the European Commission, Josep Borell and the European Commissioner for Crisis management Janez Lenarčič, issued a statement March 18 on the findings of a UN-backed report that found that Israel’s total war on Gaza has put the remaining Palestinian population in imminent risk of starving to death.

They said of the just-released Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) assessment, “This is unprecedented. No IPC analysis has ever recorded such levels of food insecurity anywhere in the world.” [Emphasis added.]

They continued, “Life-threatening levels of acute malnutrition have risen at an alarming rate since the last report, and we are already witnessing with horror the death of children due to starvation. Hunger cannot be used as a weapon of war. What we are seeing is not a natural hazard, but a man-made disaster, and it is our moral duty to stop it.”

Borell said in Brussels, “In Gaza, we are no longer on the brink of famine, we are in a state of famine, affecting thousands of people.” He added, “This is unacceptable. Starvation is used as a weapon of war. Israel is provoking famine.”

Sometimes, a telling detail outweighs a statistic. Something like 25,000 babies have been born in Gaza since the Israeli campaign

began.

According to reporters on the scene, many of their mothers are too malnourished to produce milk for them. Imagine the anguish and the guilt.

There is no powdered milk in the market. Most of the available water is full of bacteria, which kills newborns by giving them diarrhea and dehydrating them. One mother said that her two-month-old is like a two-week-old because of malnutrition.

The IPC review [pdf] found that 100% of the Palestinians in Gaza face food insecurity as a result of Israel’s war strategy. But matters have gone beyond the level of food insecurity in some parts of the Gaza Strip, for instance in the north.

The report says, “Famine is now projected and imminent in the North Gaza and Gaza Governorates and is expected to become manifest from mid-March 2024 to May 2024.”

We’re in mid-March. Something like 300,000 people remain in these two governorates.

People there are now suffering acute malnutrition.

Acute malnutrition, the World Health Organization (WHO) explains, shows up in four broad ways: “wasting, stunting, underweight, and micronutrient deficiencies.” These conditions make people horrifyingly skinny, reducing their limbs to the dimension of sticks. Physicians measure limbs according to mid-upper arm circumference

(MUAC), which tells them about the degree of Global Acute Malnutrition (GAM).

In Gaza’s children from a half-year old to 4.9 years in age, 1% were considered to be suffering from Global Acute Malnutrition according to their MUAC in September, 2023. By January it had risen to 6-9%. By February, it was 12%-16%. It has been just about doubling. So by the end of March you’re looking at at least 24%-26% of infants and toddlers and young children suffering from Global Acute Malnutrition so severely that their upper-arm circumference is tiny. But what if the numbers aren’t just doubling?

We don’t have the raw data to nail it down, but we probably aren’t seeing more than two deaths per 10,000 per day yet from malnutrition, according to the IPC. But that would be 60 people starving to death per day in north Gaza, or 1,800 a month.

The Israelis only let in half as many aid trucks in February as they had in January. That is a recipe for an exponential, not just serial increase in hunger. We could be going to half or more of north Gaza’s children suffering this extreme malnutrition. Of course, it isn’t just children, but children are half the Palestinian population in the Gaza Strip.

The IPC expects a big spike in deaths from starvation beginning as early as now through May.

The worst level of malnutrition is Phase 5, which has two stages, famine and catastrophe. The report found that fully 70% of the

population of north Gaza is now in Phase 5-Catastrophe. That is 200,000 people.

An Israeli ground offensive in Rafah will push more 500,000 people into Phase 5-Catastrophe. If just two per 10,000 of them died daily of starvation as a result, that would be 100 per day or 3,000 a month, on top of the ones in the north. That is nearly 5,000 people a month dead of malnutrition, and that is if it stays at the rate of two per 10,000 per day. It won’t.

The IPC concludes, “The persistent attacks on hospitals, health posts, ambulances, water services, civilian telecoms services, and IDP sites must cease. Attacks against health care workers must cease. Civilians and civilian infrastructure must be protected, as required under International Humanitarian Law. (Already stipulated in the December 2023 FRC report.”

The authors note that the only proven way to avert famine is to deliver food to those threatened by it. Moreover, they point out that unless people are in fair health, they can’t take in the nutrition, so health care has to be restored as well.

*Juan Cole is the founder and chief editor of Informed Comment. He is Richard P. Mitchell Professor of History at the University of Michigan. He is author of, among many other books, “Muhammad: Prophet of Peace amid the Clash of Empires” and “Engaging the Muslim World.” He blogs at juancole.com; follow him at @jricole or the Informed Comment Facebook Page*

## Mexico Poised to Elect First Woman President

By KENT PATERSON

Unless the world turns upside down, it’s almost certain that a woman will be elected president this year for the first time in Mexico.

Vying for the top job are 62-year-old Claudia Sheinbaum, former Mexico City governor and the standard bearer of the three-party Sigamos Haciendo Historia (Let’s Continue Making History) coalition that supports the left-leaning policies of outgoing President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), and Xóchitl Gálvez Ruiz, a 61-year-old former Fox administration official, ex-senator and businesswoman who’s the hopeful of a three-party center-right coalition, Fuerza y Corazón por México (Strength and Heart for Mexico).

A career politician, 38-year-old Jorge Álvarez Máynez, is running on the ticket of the centrist Citizen Movement (MC) party. Yet the male presidential contender faces a tough admittance to the main ring in a political slugfest held during an era that’s popularly dubbed “the time of the women.”

An estimated 98.9 million Mexicans, up from 89.1 million in 2018, will be able to cast ballots June 2 for a new president, Congress, state lawmakers, local officials and nine governorships, including the powerful Mexico City position.

According to the National Electoral Institute (INE), regulator and organizer of the country’s elections, nearly 20,000 offices nationwide are up for grabs.

Essentially, the election boils down to a

referendum on whether to continue forward with López Obrador’s Fourth Transformation (4T) program. The 4T’s components include reasserting state control over key economic sectors, curbing corruption and cutting governmental fat, reaffirming national sovereignty, and redistributing wealth to the lower-income, majority sectors of the population.

Given the overwhelming popularity of AMLO’s new social programs that benefit the elderly, low-income students and small farmers, the opposition is loath to openly attack them, much less propose their dismantlement as conservatives in the US do. Gálvez pledges to respect the programs, and even one up AMLO or Sheinbaum, for instance vowing to lower the eligible retirement age to 60 instead of 65. Voucher-like, Gálvez supports granting government financial assistance for some students to attend private universities.

Rated the strong frontrunner in numerous polls, Sheinbaum proclaims that her government will be a “Republic of and for Women” where the legal definition of femicide will be broadened, women searching for disappeared loved ones will be supported, and the spectrum of gender parity in high government positions will be expanded. She proposes granting women aged 60 to 64 a bimonthly half-pension until full retirement so females can enjoy “greater autonomy.”

On International Women’s Day, Gálvez proposed a 10-point women’s policy that aims for a gender violence free country, more day care facilities, free cancer treatment, and a monthly payment of approximately \$200 to women in vulnerable situations, La Jornada daily reported.

The candidates’ campaign promises don’t come out of thin air. Decades of protest and organizing by women activists precedes the current electoral contest, bolstered by

new waves of women’s activism rippling across the country. Hundreds of thousands of women turned out for marches and rallies in all 32 Mexican states on March 8 International Women’s Day.

For the most part, the movement in the streets fiercely maintains its independence from political parties and elections, but raises grievances and issues that frame the national political agenda.

Coinciding with AMLO’s political philosophy of Mexican humanism and the 4T, Sheinbaum has developed 100 policy proposals broadly organized around greater public-private investments, social welfare, environmental protection, education, health-care, and “shared prosperity.”

Tracing a journey from a young social activist to the likely first woman president in Mexican history, Sheinbaum studied physics and graduated with an energy engineering doctorate from the National Autonomous University of Mexico. She was Mexico City’s environment secretary during AMLO’s administration in the early 2000s, and served on the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change which was awarded a Nobel Prize in 2007.

From 2018 to 2023, Sheinbaum oversaw the governance of Mexico City, no small feat for anyone.

Insecurity is the big card wielded by the opposition. With violence connected to organized crime still destabilizing regions of the country, the opposition is zeroing in on AMLO’s “Hugs not Bullets” approach.

The physical safety of candidates, especially at the local level, is again emerging as a concern. The states of Michoacán, Guerrero, Veracruz, Chiapas, Colima, and Mexico rank high as danger zones. On March 15, Humberto Amezcua, who was seeking reelection as mayor of Pihuamo, was murdered. According to Aristeguinoticias, at least

26 local and state level politicians or political aspirants from multiple political parties have been murdered during the current electoral process.

Although gender rights, equity, social justice and public safety loom large in 2024, international relations, particularly with the United States, likewise are shaping the Mexican elections. Foreign influence in Mexican elections is nothing new, but with US elections also underway this year the two political transitions are intertwined not only by the calendar but in theme and tone as well.

On Feb. 29, the day before the Mexican general election campaign commenced, President Biden and former President Trump staged competing visits to the US Mexico border, which for all of President López Obrador’s earlier appeals for Mexico not to become the “piñata” of US politics, is again a big election year prop in the political theater of El Norte.

Trump has retrieved the rhetoric he found successful with his base in 2016, comparing migrants and refugees with criminals and crazies while denouncing an “invasion” of the United States. Stirring the pot further, both Republican Speaker of the House Mike Johnson and former Trump national security official Chad Wolf, the latter in comments made on CNN, urged a return to the Trump era policy of Remain in Mexico for asylum seekers.

South of the border, Johnson’s comments that Washington should tell Mexico what to do because “we are the United States” sounded like a ghostly recording from the Big Stick era of US intervention in Latin America. Stay tuned for more Mexico bashing as the US election season advances.

*Kent Paterson is a freelance journalist who divides his time between Mexico and the US Southwest. Email kentnews@unm.edu*

## Rosing...

Continued from previous page

eligible voters who make up nearly 30% of the electorate. If we were organized to take action together, we could determine what happens in any election.

Many eligible low-income voters are disillusioned because candidates don’t speak to us. But if we organize, they’ll have to. That’s why my wife and I work tirelessly to organize people like us every day — even as we continue to struggle with a lack of financial security and the lack of a proper

home.

We have the power of the vote. And you can bet your ballot that we and millions of our fellow poor and low-income voters nationwide will use it in November. I hope you will too.

*Matthew Rosing is a coordinator with Put People First! PA, a minister with the Freedom Church of the Poor, a board member of the National Union of the Homeless, and a faith leader with the Poor People’s Campaign. He lives in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. This op-ed was distributed by OtherWords.org.*



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# A Tale of Two Contagions

By JAMIE STIEHM

Real life froze four Marches ago. Clocks stood still. Memory turned into before and after.

The COVID pandemic claimed more than a million American lives.

We don't speak of it much, but we carry a deep sense of loss for all we missed. The trips we didn't take. The friends or lovers we never met. The school or college experience. The parties, holidays or funerals we could not attend.

The conversations we didn't plan in advance with colleagues or passersby. Only pure introverts could enjoy a lonesome Zoom era.

COVID contagion dwelled in our midst for a good couple of years.

But we suffered a second contagion spreading just as rapidly: the Trumpian virus that led to the armed mob attack on the Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021.

The pandemic gave Donald Trump the perfect chance to build a raging ragtag band and (almost) overturn the 2020 election by

violence.

Extremist groups like the Proud Boys had too much time hanging out *at home* to plan an insurrection. Few were going to work the next day, with everything closed down.

Same goes for the militaristic Oath Keepers, whose leader was convicted of sedition. Thirty thousand angry White supremacists showed up in Washington, organized on the internet, spoiling for a fight with the rule of law.

For the first time in history, a president violated the peaceful transfer of power. Democracy depends upon good sports and losers.

The sight was shocking, and inside the Capitol (where I was), the sounds were surreal. The mob's howls mixed with shattering glass in the marble halls. The siege left lasting scars.

But a ray of light peeped through the dark days. Kudos to the drug companies for quickly developing a COVID vaccine. Thank you for the amazing public service.

I can't say the same about leadership in crisis. More pointedly, Trump knew — and told author Bob Woodward he knew — how catching the coronavirus was. My heart sank when he showed up at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention with a MAGA cap.

His contradictory character is such that

he refused to give a clear and consistent message to the American people about the public health danger we faced. Masks, distancing and vaccines were the ways to go, proven effective. Isolation was not rocket science.

But Trump by nature cannot do the right thing, even after his near-fatal case of COVID. The United States came in last among developed nations, with the most COVID deaths, but you'd never hear it from him.

Rather, Trump presided over conflict on masks and vaccines, with deadly consequences. He loves festering fury and inciting lawlessness, tweet by tweet. Jan. 6 "will be wild," he promised followers.

From morning 'til night for years in the White House, Trump engaged in gutter talk, spoken or virtual. He exhausted the press corps but never tired of himself.

I might add, the pandemic did not bring out the best in us. Some started fights with strangers on planes; others threatened scientists like Dr. Anthony Fauci. Speeding drivers hit the roads.

Compare that to President Franklin D. Roosevelt leading the nation in World War II. We were all on the same side, rationing at home or serving overseas. The government ramped up penicillin production for wounded soldiers.

True spirit filled the air. The 1945 vic-

tory brought shared joy.

Historians agree, Roosevelt was the best of presidents; Trump was the worst. One sowed seeds of optimism; the other created chasms of bitter division. He vows a vengeful "blood bath."

"I feel very alone," I remember saying to my parents on a call across the country after the riot.

A saving grace: Speaker Nancy Pelosi kept the lights on in the Capitol and never missed a day meeting reporters in person. An 80-year-old woman inspired me to be braver.

There are holes in post-pandemic life. My coffee place in Union Station is empty. The bakery with a garden on the avenue is gone. The little boutique went out of business.

On March 3, 2020, I gave a history talk on woman suffrage. Five of us crossed the street to Sababa, an Israeli cafe, and joked nervously about the Last Supper.

Little did we know, we parted for years.

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## Outrage and Lip Service

By BARRY FRIEDMAN

On Feb. 13, 2021, Sen. Mitch McConnell took to the Senate floor and said Donald Trump was "morally responsible" for the attack on Washington a month earlier, adding that Trump's actions were "a disgraceful, disgraceful dereliction of duty."

McConnell never voted, however, to impeach such a man.

And now, a little more than 37 months later, McConnell said, "It is abundantly clear that former President Trump has earned the requisite support of Republican voters to be our nominee for President of the United States ... It should come as no surprise that as nominee, he will have my support."

Right. No surprise at all.

Strong words, though.

Which brings us to Oklahoma.

On Feb. 26 in Tahlequah, Oklahoma, Nex Benedict, a binary student, was beaten in a bathroom of an Oklahoma high school, a beating so bad it apparently led to Nex's suicide.

Days later, a woman at a town hall asked Oklahoma state Sen. Tom Woods why he supported legislation harmful to people like Nex: "Is there a reason why you won't answer about the 50 bills targeting the LGBTQ community in the state of Oklahoma?"

"We are a religious state," Woods responded, "and we are going to fight to keep that filth out of the state of Oklahoma, because we are a Christian state. We are a moral state."

Only one political party in today's America has representatives who have answers like that.

While some of Woods' fellow state Republicans condemned his comments — and this is the point, much like McConnell's condemnation of Trump — their condemnation had the weight of a cool breeze on a spring afternoon.

Oklahoma Senate Pro Tempore Greg Treat chalked it up to Woods having a bad day.

"Senator Woods and I have spoken, and I made it clear that his remarks were reprehensible and inappropriate. I am

of the belief that all people are image-bearers of God, and deserve to be treated with dignity and respect."

That's just terrific: All lives matter.

Treat continued: "His remarks were not in any way reflective of myself, the Senate Republican caucus, Senate leadership or the Senate overall. In my opinion, he had a serious lapse of judgment and it has distracted from the mission and good work we are attempting to advance on behalf of all Oklahomans."

"Reflective" of the GOP ... "lapse of judgment"?

That's it?

Woods brushed off Treat's comment like a piece of dark lint off a white KKK robe.

"I also want to say that I stand behind what I believe in," he responded two days later and then blamed individuals for pushing "gender reassignment in our schools."

Looks like he's still having such lapses.

We haven't heard from Treat since.

The state's labor commissioner, Leslie Osborn, also a Republican, said of Woods' remarks, "We should rise above spewing hate and legislating condemnation for every citizen who does not look like us, vote like us, worship like us, or identify or love like us."

Fine.

OK, maybe both statements are more than fine, but notice how neither Osborn nor Treat took serious issue with Woods' contention that Oklahoma is a "Christian" state — as in responding, "We are NOT a Christian state." Noticed how neither expressed any embarrassment about having the same "R" after their names.

Then again, the head of Oklahoma Republicans is headed by a serial God botherer.

Here was Gov. Kevin Stitt after being re-elected in 2022.

"Father, we just claim Oklahoma for you. Every square inch, we claim it for you in the name of Jesus."

For the love of Christ, you should pardon the expression.

Not for nothing, according to uscanadainfo.com, 21% of Oklahomans do not believe in Jesus.

"Father, we can do nothing apart from you," Stitt continued. "I claim Oklahoma for you that we will be a light to our country and to the world."

He then appointed God secretary of education.

"We thank you that your will was done on Tuesday and, Father, that you will have your way with our state, with our education system, with everything within the walls behind me."

Not one Republican in the state denounced the governor for establishing Jesus as the Sooner State's deity. Not one Republican turned in his or her decoder ring rather than be in a party that espouses such theocratic bullying.

And this is my point: At what stage do we ask the moderate Republicans among us — and, from what I have witnessed, Osborn and Treat are in that group in Oklahoma — to do more than engage in lip service at the arrogance and ugliness of their party.

Woods was not censured. Woods wasn't shamed. Woods was not removed from any of his committee assignments. Woods wasn't made to apologize.

I once heard Jim Bakker — yeah, that one — talk about a fellow pastor who had mocked a young girl for dancing in church, so moved she was by the Word being shared. Bakker said, and I'm paraphrasing, "If that's God, if mocking a young woman is what He wants, I don't want Him."

When will Republicans like Treat and Osborn conclude that if Woods is the Republican Party — or McConnell, for that matter, if Trump is — say, "If that's the GOP [and it increasingly is] I don't want it. I'm out"? To those who would argue they are more effective from inside the tent, how's that going?

Come tomorrow morning, Treat, Osborn, and McConnell will share with Tom Woods and Donald Trump the same "R" after their names. You lie down with such people, you wake up with rationalization and accommodation.

*Barry Friedman is an essayist, political columnist, petroleum geology reporter — quit laughing — and comedian living in Tulsa, Okla. His latest book, "Jack Sh\*t: Volume One: Voluptuous Bagels and other Concerns of Jack Friedman" is out and the follow-up, "Jack Sh\*t, Volume 2: Wait For The Movie. It's In Color" is scheduled to be released in April. 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 baryfriedman.com and friedmanoftheplains.com.*

## Facts Against Industrial Farming

By SETH SANDRONSKY

Rob Wallace is an evolutionary epidemiologist who writes for the layperson. His "Big farms make big flu: dispatches on infectious disease, agribusiness, and the nature of science" (Monthly Review Press 2016) is a guide to making sense of the world. To this end, he unpacks food and health, economics and politics, as a totality.

His totalizing angle is not, of course, a mainstream view of science and the society in which it operates. With the aim of making clear what is unclear in a mainstream narrative, Wallace's book features seven parts, with five to seven dispatches each. His introduction, notes and an index enhance the dispatches. They are hard-hitting and uncompromising.

To sum up, infectious diseases flow directly from industrial farming, according to Wallace. He delivers that view on page 11, a pre-coronavirus pandemic time that seems almost quaint now. "On my beat," Wallace writes, "evolutionary epidemiology, I came to the realization that Big Food has entered a strategic alliance with influenza, a virus that

took a newly dangerous turn in an ongoing and wholly avoidable industrial accident of multinational agribusiness's own undoing. That is, so as to leave no doubt of my contention, agribusiness, backed by state power home and abroad, is now working as much with influenza as against it."

Wallace dispels the myth of a self-governing market for one that relies upon direct state intervention to grow market share and profit for multinational corporations, he dives into dispatch one, "The Great Bird Flu Blame Game." It sets the stage for the subsequent dispatches. One thread is following circuits of capital investment to make sense of, for example, the hog industry and the political virology of offshore agriculture.

For example, Wallace traces the "Livestock Revolution" in the hog industry to the North American Free Trade Agreement that took effect on Jan. 1, 1994. Consequently, the NAFTA infected Mexico with the emergence of the H1N1 virus strain in 2009. That outbreak followed a sharp spike in migration north due to US taxpayer-financed imports of corn that bankrupted small farmers in Mexican states such as Chiapas.

There is much in this book about the scientific literature tied to the system's political economy. Along the way, read-

ers discover terms of science, ranging from clades to epizootology and phylogeography. The author also disentangles distortions of natural selection and its relevance to emerging pathogens, not the least of which is the coronavirus pandemic. Hat tip to Wallace for shining light on Darwin's continuing importance to understanding the modern world under a social system that prioritizes the growth of wealth for a few over an equitable and sustainable life for many.

Further, Wallace discusses in detail the planetary implications in China's transition to capitalism. The main driver of this process, according to the voluminous research he cites, is the changing relations of humans to nature, the most basic to life itself, as the climate catastrophe grows. High on the list of this damaging process is land use, a driver of our current structural crisis, Wallace writes. He cites in part István Mészáros, the Hungarian Marxist philosopher and writer, whose "Beyond Leviathan: Critique of the State" (MRP 2022), is a must-read.

You can also find Wallace online at Pandemic Research for the People. <https://www.prepthepeople.net/>

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## Israel's Right Wing Wants All the Palestinian Land — and This Explains Its State Terrorism

The Israeli government's "solution" to the Palestinian problem — eviction or destruction and colonization of what's left of Palestinian land — did not begin after the Oct. 7 Hamas raid. A Nov. 22, 2023, article in the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* headline reads,

"Netanyahu Ignored All the Warnings and Looming Threats. He's Primarily Responsible for the Calamity"

*Instead of dealing with the clear warnings he was given, the Israeli prime minister focused on crushing democracy, establishing his status as the supreme ruler and transferring resources to the ultra-Orthodox and the settlements*

The article notes, "There's no better proof of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's responsibility for the disaster suffered by Israel on Oct. 7 than the letters of warning sent to him by the head of the Military Intelligence research division, Brig. Gen. Amit Saar, in March and July."

For many decades Israeli politicians have been working toward the goal of establishing what they call "Eretz Israel" or "The Greater Land of Israel" — a greater Israel composed of all of the Palestine mandate "from the Sea to the River Jordan" (their words). After the partition of Palestine under UN auspices in 1948, Israel has expanded its territory, by military and non-military means, and now comprises 78% of what was once Palestine, plus Syria's Golan Heights.

There is a clear historical record of deliberate displacement documented by many scholars, including the book, "Plowshares into Swords: From Zionism to Israel," (Verso, 2008) by Princeton Professor Arno Mayer. Coming off the horrors of Russian pogroms and Nazi genocide, the early Founders of the Israeli state were in no

mood to respect the rights of the indigenous Palestinians.

It took an American-born Prime Minister of Israel, Golda Meir (1969-1974), to speak the ultimate antisemitism against the Arabs of Palestine, declaring, "There is no such thing as a Palestinian people ... It is not as if we came and threw them out and took their country. They didn't exist."

Other Israeli leaders before and after Golda Meir were brutally frank about what they were making happen on the ground. Israel's lead Founder, David Ben-Gurion, in 1937 wrote in a letter to his son, "We must expel the Arabs and take their places..." A year later he said in a speech, "Let us not ignore the truth among ourselves ... The country is theirs, because they inhabit it, whereas we want to come here and settle down, and in their view we want to take away from them their country..." Many years later, in the 1980s, Ben-Gurion renewed his candor: "There has been Anti-Semitism, the Nazis, Hitler, Auschwitz, but was that their fault? They see but one thing: we have come and we have stolen their country. Why would they accept that?"

In 1979, Israeli war hero, top general Moshe Dayan, recognized that "Jewish villages were built in the place of Arab villages." After naming a number of them, he added "There is not a single place built in this country that did not have a former Arab population." Speaking to Jewish settlers, Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir in 1988 warned resisters, meaning Palestinians would be crushed "like grasshoppers" and their "head smashed against the boulders and walls."

Other Israeli Prime Ministers — Menachem Begin (1977-1983), Ariel Sharon (2001-2006) and the incumbent Benjamin

nally conceived by the conservative Heritage Foundation. Figuring that the ACA would move the center of gravity closer to socialized medicine, leftists supported it despite their reservations.

By most accounts, the ACA has failed to fix the problems it was supposed to address. In many American counties (health plans are designed by county), the government "marketplace" has just one or two plans to "choose" from. The only high-income nation without universal health coverage, the US spends more by far on health care, both per person and as a share of GDP, than other countries. Yet we still have the lowest life expectancy at birth, the highest death rates for avoidable and treatable conditions, the highest infant mortality, the highest rate of people with multiple chronic conditions, and an obesity rate nearly twice the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development average. Premiums are high but copays are low, so we see physicians less often than patients in most other countries. A whopping 650,000 Americans go bankrupt each year due to health care bills, accounting for 60% of all personal bankruptcies. Americans are extremely dissatisfied with the cost and access to health care.

A decade and a half later, health care ranks near the bottom on the hierarchy of policy priorities articulated by voters. How can this be?

La Follette's dictum at work! The half-loaf of ACA dulled the appetite, creating the illusion that the health care problem had either been resolved — an opinion common among those with employer-supplied health insurance and/or those who live in one of the big cities where the online marketplace has competition — or had been as fixed as is reasonable to expect from the current system. As a result, there is no indication that politicians of either party are inclined to propose a legislative improvement anytime soon.

Nevertheless, the need is acute. People

Netanyahu have expressed similar assertions of the need to expel the Palestinians, as they have repressed and impoverished them in the Occupied Territories. Now, Netanyahu wants to push Palestinians out of Gaza entirely, if he can, into Egypt and Jordan.

Prime Minister Ehud Barak (1999-2001), responding to a columnist asking what he would have done if he had been born a Palestinian, frankly replied "I would have joined a terrorist organization."

When it comes to "terrorism," — defined as violence against civilians for political purposes, Palestinians have lost over 400 times more innocent lives than have innocent Israelis over the decades. Israeli state terror against Gaza's (starving, sick and dying) civilians, mostly children and women, is manifesting itself daily with vast supplies of American weaponry and diplomatic cover.

To Israeli hardliners, countered by numerous courageous Israeli human rights organizations, Palestinian lives are valued beneath "cockroaches" and "snakes," anti-semitic rants against Arabs flow through the Israeli media. One Rabbi who eulogized American-born Baruch Goldstein's 1994 massacre of 29 Palestinians killed and 150 others injured who were praying in Hebron's al-Ibrahimi Mosque, declared "One million Arabs are not worth a Jewish fingernail."

Israeli politicians have an encompassing reason why they believe they can get away with all kinds of violations of international law in their oppression of Palestinians and, in recent years, routine bombings and incursions into neighboring countries too weak to respond. That reason is the US government. The U.S. is a lawless Empire bombing and invading where it wants, without Congressional declarations of war and in violation of federal and international laws.

In 2001, the BBC reported that Israel's Prime Minister, Ariel Sharon, said, that "Israel may have the right to put others on trial, but certainly no one has the right to put the Jewish people and the State of Israel on trial."

That same year, P.M. Sharon declared what Israel's prime ministers, before and

want affordable health care (even if they despair of ever getting it). Affordable — no, free — health care is a basic human right. Without it, after all, people quite literally drop dead.

According to a 2020 estimate by the nonpartisan Urban Institute, Bernie Sanders' Medicare for All plan — the most thoroughly thought-out, frictionless plan on the drawing board that salvages as much from the existing network as possible — would cost about \$3 trillion per year. However, a Yale study concluded the government would save about half a trillion each year "by improving access to preventive care, reducing administrative overhead, and empowering Medicare to negotiate prices." Working net cost: \$2.5 trillion per annum.

Medicare for All would *replace* our current, highly wasteful system. "We're already paying as taxpayers for universal basic automatic coverage, we're just not getting it," economist Amy Finkelstein says. "We might as well formalize and fund that commitment upfront." She points to the fact that the federal government currently pays \$1.8 trillion a year for Medicare, Medicaid, veterans' services and other government-funded health care costs — all of which would vanish after they were replaced by a holistic Medicare for All scheme. Third-party programs, which are often government funded, and public health programs eat up an addi-

since, have striven for regarding Congress and the White House when he told former P.M. Shimon Peres (1984-1986), as reported on Kol Yisrael radio: "Every time we do something you tell me Americans will do this and will do that. I want to tell you something very clear, don't worry about American pressure on Israel. We, the Jewish people control America, and the Americans know it."

Such imperiousness and violent racist remarks against Palestinians are reflected in Israeli leaders and opinion-shapers who call Palestinians "beasts," "animals," "subhuman," "crocodiles," "vermin," and worse. With such vile pejoratives, it was easy for Eli Yishai, Israeli Interior Minister to say in 2012: "The goal of the operation [Operation Pillar of Defense] is to send Gaza back to the Middle Ages..."

Actually, the Palestinians have one of the highest literacy rates — 97 percent — in the world. Under dire conditions, they have accomplished farmers, physicians, scientists, engineers, poets, musicians, novelists, artists, and a deep entrepreneurial tradition carried on by the Palestinian diaspora around the world.

It is no accident that Israeli bombers directly target Palestinian cultural and educational institutions in their recurrent assaults on Gaza.

Israeli militarists have to degrade all Palestinians (3.2 million in the West Bank and 2.3 million in the Gaza Strip) to expel them from their ancestral lands and in so doing violently reveal the "other anti-semitism" that most of the media has ignored. (See the "Anti-Semitism Against Arab and Jewish Americans" speech by Jim Zogby and DebatingTaboos.org).

Degrading rhetoric makes it easier for Israel to reject outright, a 2002 peace proposal for a two-state solution by the 22 countries of the Arab League that is still on the table.

*Ralph Nader is a consumer advocate, lawyer and author. See [www.nader.org](http://www.nader.org) or [facebook.com/ralphnader](https://www.facebook.com/ralphnader). For documented sources and more similar declarations by Israeli politicians, see the *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, October 2018 issue, via the online version of this column.*

## TED RALL

### Health Care Is a Human Right

Liberals believe a compromise that gets us closer to a goal is better than no progress at all. But compromise can lead to the dead end of dilution and a false sense of resolution.

The early 20th-century progressive and presidential candidate Robert "Fighting Bob" La Follette argued that politics played into different a psychological dynamic. "In legislation no bread is often better than half a loaf," he observed. "Half a loaf, as a rule, dulls the appetite, and destroys the keenness of interest in attaining the full loaf."

Nothing in recent history demonstrates La Follette's viewpoint more clearly than the evolution of the health care debate. When Barack Obama won the presidential election in 2008, health care — particularly its expense — was such a big worry for American voters that the ruling classes came to view the problem as a crisis. The system was expensive, dysfunctional and despised. Despite an economy reeling from the Great Recession, the new president quickly moved to address the issue by pushing for passage of his 2009 Affordable Care Act, popularly known as Obamacare, and even a divided Congress went along.

Obamacare was a classic political compromise of the variety that moderates adore: it made nobody happy. The health care industry — though their concerns soon proved to have been wildly unfounded — worried about losing some of their precious profits. Patient advocates preferred a European-style, fully socialized system in which doctors and nurses are government employees to the ACA, a market-based system origi-



## Freed Wolves Move Into Their Old Niche

By CLINT McKNIGHT

What was it like for 10 captured Oregon wolves when Colorado Parks and Wildlife opened their crates on a December day last year? The wolves had been chased by helicopter, drugged, blindfolded and collared, then moved to remote public land in central Colorado. One of those animals might have had this experience.

The grey wolf in the metal crate tenses as the door unexpectedly opens. Through the bright threshold, he sees a field of winter grasses laced with snow and a line of juniper trees. After a moment, he bolts for the trees, disappearing into their shadows. And he keeps running.

Only after his captors are far behind does the wolf come to a stop. Panting with exhaustion, his heart pounding, he sniffs at the breeze and looks about. His pack—his family—is nowhere to be seen.

He throws back his head and un-

leashes a plaintive howl. The tone rises and falls and rolls across the landscape. Its meaning could not be clearer: “I am here. Where are you?” But there is no answer.

The wolf explores, nose to the ground. He ignores a scolding raven. Of far greater fascination is the discovery of an elk bedding area. Pawing at the flattened grasses, he notes they were there just this morning. This is good to know.

Always alert, he climbs a ridge above a broad tree-lined meadow. He knows he must find his pack, but he has no idea how to start searching when there is no wolf scent.

The short winter day is ending. Now the wolf feels the full weight of fatigue after his sleepless three-day ordeal. He finds a shallow depression next to a fallen tree. He circles, lies down.

And the wolf dreams. He dreams he is running through a forest. Up ahead, he can just see the bounding prey he is chasing but he cannot gain any ground. He yips in frustration and abruptly wakes to a pink sky dawning in the east.

A meadow below is shrouded in fresh snow and stillness. Then—a movement that electrifies his attention. A small herd of fe-

male elk is browsing among the trees.

He rises into a crouch and silently descends the ridge on an intercepting path. The elk pause upon reaching the meadow, then begin to cross the open space. One of them has a hitch in her walk and lags behind.

The wolf immediately explodes into a run. Simultaneously, the elk launch into a panicked flight.

The wolf races through the snow-covered grass. As the paths of prey and predator converge, he leaps and seizes the laggard's rear leg. She kicks and he lets go. He falls back and is startled to see her stop and turn to face him. The ailing elk is already spent. He leaps again, his jaws clamping down on her throat. She stands for only moments before collapsing. In minutes she is dead.

The meadow is quiet again. The wolf is suddenly overwhelmed with hunger as he tears into the elk's belly, powerful jaws ripping open the hide.

As his own belly fills, the wolf feels the fear of these last days falling away, and in that moment he sees, among the pinyons and junipers, a pair of eyes watching him. It is another captured wolf that had been re-

leased, a coal-black female.

She emerges from the shadows, head and tail down, but walking without hesitation. She comes before him and raises her muzzle to lick the blood off his. He does not object.

He turns back to the kill. She comes closer, then pauses to weigh his reaction. There is none, and the black wolf eagerly feeds.

In the weeks to follow, the grey wolf and the black wolf explore their new home. When they hear the howl of another wolf, they reply: “We are here. You stay there.”

They find a location for a den and learn to hunt well together. In time, their prey will learn things, too, and both they and the landscape itself will be better for it.

As winter turns to spring, the black wolf shows signs that a new pack is being created. A family in a tradition as old as the ancient hills themselves—is being born.

*Clint McKnight is a contributor to Writers on the Range, [writersontherange.org](http://writersontherange.org), an independent nonprofit dedicated to spurring lively conversation about the West. He is a former national park ranger and natural history illustrator.*

## My TV I Love Lucy Is Worsley

By ROB PATTERSON

As a history buff, I have a voracious appetite for the best historical documentaries. After all, I subscribe to Santayana's assertion that “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” That sure holds more than true in America today.

But these days, I go proverbially across the pond to England for my favorite history docs fix to enjoy those hosted by Lucy Worsley. A historian, author, academic and curator of Britain's unoccupied historic royal palaces, she presents her topics with an infectious fascination with and enthusiasm for whatever the subject at hand is. And she exudes such charm and likability that it all makes every show she does that I've seen, most all of her many for the BBC, a delight to watch.

Confession: One lesser reason I like the docs she hosts and narrates is that I have developed a bit of an innocent crush on Worsley. I readily admit that an English accent on a woman is like catnip to me; credit “The Avengers” coming on TV in the mid-'60s with Emma Peel in her catsuit just as I was

hitting puberty. I've dated a few English women, and found not just their accents but ways most enchanting.

Too often academics don't really have the zing on camera to be a presenter, as the Brits refer to Worsley and her ilk. Yes she's a natural on camera with that ineffable “it” that people who shine through the lens possess. Even though she has a small speech impediment in her pronunciation of the consonant “r” that would be, I'll bet good money, an immediate disqualification on US TV. Worsley even saw a speech therapist about it, to no avail. No matter. To me it burinishes her appeal as it indicates how real she is as a television personality. And it's that fulsome personality that makes her so good at what she does.

She's done some 50 docs since her first in 2009, which indicates that she must be doing her job at least as well as I think she does to the powers that be at “The Beeb” (in Brit shorthand). Nearly 30 are available on my streaming TV. Which means I've as yet only seen a small percentage. But those have sparked a near-addiction that will lead me to watch many more in the coming weeks and months.

Of special interest to readers in the US is “American History's Biggest Fibs with Lucy Worsley.” The first of its three episodes identifies the myths and falsehoods of the American Revolution (in which she doesn't display any bias of being on the losing side).

The second does the same regarding our Civil War. The final examines latter-day American superiority. Her charm and factuality is a spoonful of sugar that makes the medicine of abandoning fictional legends go down smoothly.

Worsley applies the same rigor to her own nation's history, as with “Royal History's Biggest Fibs with Lucy Worsley.” One other such doc series I quite enjoyed by her is “A Very British Murder,” which examines both the nature and means of murder and the tools and means of detecting and solving the crime from the Edwardian era forward.

I most recently enjoyed “Blitz Spirit with Lucy Worsley” and how it filled in my already rather informed knowledge of the Nazi air attacks on England. Its examination of how the British populace remained resolute as death and destruction surrounded them. It whets my desire to see “Dancing Through The Blitz: Blackpool's Big Band Story,” especially as one of her co-presenters is Jools Holland, whose wonderful skills as a keyboardist and avid music lover I've enjoyed since his days with the band Squeeze and make his ongoing BBC music show, “Later...” so delightful.

One aspect of her approach to what may even seem dry to many is how she relishes reading historical documents in old English, and savors the revelations. The pleasures, and even fun she derives from deep diving into her field of study, are in-

fectious. I would not be surprised if somewhere in the UK and maybe even here in the states, there are young women inspired by Worsley to pursue history as an academic concentration and career.

### Populist Picks

**TV DOCUMENTARY:** “Agatha Christie: 100 Years of Poirot and Mrs. Marple” – As an avid and well plus widely read lover of mysteries, I still didn't realize how much Christie wrote much of the contemporary book on such books. This richly comprehensive doc on her life, works and their film and TV adaptations says she's the most successful novelist ever. Must read more of her books (and see Worsley's doc on her).

**FEATURE FILM:** “Nyad” – This gripping tale of distance swimmer Diana Nyad's quest to swim from Cuba to Key West features superb performances by Annette Bening as its namesake and Jodie Foster as her coach, both brimming with the mature mastery of their craft. As one watches it becomes nigh-on impossible not to get swept up in the challenge and feel its (and Nyad's) toughness.

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## FILM REVIEW/Ed Rampell

### On the Chisholm Trail: Dramatizing the Story of the First Black Woman Presidential Candidate

*Netflix's new biopic chronicles Shirley Chisholm's trailblazing presidential campaign in 1972.*

Writer/director John Ridley's “Shirley” opens with newly minted Congressmember Shirley Chisholm (Regina King) appearing in early 1969 with her fellow freshman class on the steps of the U.S. Capitol Building—the only woman of color in a sea of overwhelmingly White, male colleagues. The first African American woman ever elected to Congress, Chisholm immediately bucks tradition, butting heads with her patriarchal, racially insensitive fellow members of the House.

At first, it seemed like this biopic would detail the iconoclastic Chisholm's turbulent terms in Congress, fighting to bring representation to the House of Representatives as an outspoken antiwar, pro-equal rights member of Congress. But Shirley quickly cuts to the real subject of this film:

Chisholm's groundbreaking campaign for the Democratic nomination for president in 1972. To the amazement of many, after Florida voters exceed expectations by raising \$10,000 to support a possible Chisholm candidacy, the US Representative for Bedford-Stuyvesant—America's largest Black community—tosses her hat into the ring.

This is the real focus of “Shirley”: the contentious race for the presidency in a crowded field that includes South Dakota Senator George McGovern; Minnesota Senator and perennial candidate Hubert Humphrey; Mayor John Lindsay, the liberal darling of New York; and rightwing demagogue Alabama Governor George Wallace. The presidential hopefuls vie with one another to become the Democratic Party nominee to run against Republican President Richard Nixon in 1972's general election.

Chisholm was renowned for her stirring social justice oratory, and while Regina King delivers some of that on-screen, “Shirley” zooms in on the nuts and bolts of campaigning. Fundraising, media coverage (or lack thereof), backroom politicking, and Chisholm's crusade to corral enough delegates in order to influence the Democratic Party platform are front and center in what may well be the most exhaustively detailed fact-based Hollywood feature ever about the race for the White House.

Left-leaning veteran voters and observers are likely to relish this trip down memory lane, with clips of McGovern, Nixon, feminist Betty Friedan, Congressmember Bella Abzug, CBS anchor Walter Cronkite, and other period political figures. Actors portray Wallace (W. Earl Brown), Congressmember Ron Dellums (Dorian Missick), future Congressmember Barbara Lee (Christina Jackson), and more.

Newcomers are treated to a dramatic history lesson and a powerful primer on presidential politics. But “Shirley” takes viewers behind the scenes to reveal backroom deals, campaign offices, and more. Even those who lived through

Chisholm's long march are bound to learn insider information from this fact-based script.

In particular, the candidate's interactions with other Black leaders are often eyebrow-raising, including with two African American members of Congress. Chisholm makes a deal with wheeler-dealer Walter Fauntroy (André Holland), Washington, D.C.'s delegate to the House of Representatives, who is also running for President as a favorite son, and she appears to have the solid, stalwart support of Oakland's lefty Congressional Representative Dellums. But when push comes to shove amidst all of the horse trading at the 1972 Democratic Convention in Miami, Chisholm appears to be sold out.

When Chisholm goes on the stump in California, 25-year-old Barbara Lee, who has been recruited as a campaign volunteer (despite her initial reluctance because electoral politics are “bourgeois”), engineers a meeting between the erstwhile candidate and the Black Panther Party's Minister of Defense, Huey Newton (Brad James). Shirley seeks the militant Newton's endorsement poolside at the posh Los Angeles home of film and television star Diahann Carroll (Amirah Vann), who, Lee quips: “Looks like an angel but fights like the devil for civil rights.”

The movie's other surprises include Chisholm's lawsuit against the television networks for excluding her from presidential debates. Shirley's straying from strict liberal orthodoxy also leaves some supporters scratching their heads: Chisholm is lukewarm on busing as the way to desegregate schools, and after her rival, Wallace, is wounded by a would-be assassin while campaigning, Chisholm—who herself survives an assassination attempt dramatized on-screen—visits the Southern racist at his hospital bed and prays for him. The film also depicts marital tensions caused by Chisholm's relentless, single-minded candidacy, and the rift with her sister Muriel (portrayed by Regina King's actual

*Continued on next page*

## Rampell...

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sister, Reina King).

There's only so much a two-hour biopic can cover, but there are arguably some crucial omissions. Although she was Brooklyn-born, Chisholm spent part of her childhood in Barbados, and the film gives her Caribbean roots short shrift. Chisholm's bold slogan is hardly alluded to, glimpsed on campaign posters, but her catchword was so catchy that it was the subtitle of Shola Lynch's 2004 documentary, "Chisholm '72: Unbought & Unbossed."

While Regina King repeatedly quotes her character's strong statements in favor of gender and racial equity, Chisholm's staunch opposition to the war in Vietnam is only mentioned in passing. Some liberal Democrats may criticize the fact that the movie

gives the impression that Senator George McGovern was a political hack who made deals in smoke-filled back rooms, instead of the peace candidate who opposed Tricky Dick. In addition, the 1972 Watergate break-in at the Democratic Party headquarters, which eventually changed the course of American history as Nixon and his team deployed dirty tricks to get re-elected, is never even referred to.

"Shirley" feels flat and has a low budget look, which may be due to cost cutting by producer Netflix. Although the story is set between 1969 and 1972—when pop music was at its memorable zenith—the movie's soundtrack is completely forgettable.

John Ridley, who won an Oscar for his screenplay of 2013's "12 Years a Slave," deftly directs this ensemble, with Regina King capturing the title character's resolute spirit, and Terrence Howard (2005's "Hus-

tle & Flow"), Brian Stokes Mitchell, and the recently deceased Lance Reddick playing Chisholm's campaign staffers. Lucas Hedges is a standout as White ally Robert Gottlieb, the national youth coordinator for this long shot presidential bid.

As a young Barbara Lee, Christina Jackson brings her talent to a pivotal role. "Shirley" ends on a bittersweet note: In a coda, we see footage of the actual Congressmember Lee, whom the film seems to suggest is Chisholm's heir apparent. But this past month, Lee was defeated in a hotly contested primary to become California's new US senator, and she will also lose the Bay Area Congressional seat that she has held since 1998, when she replaced her mentor, Ron Dellums.

Nevertheless, just as 2023's "Rustin" resurrected the architect of the 1963 March on Washington, "Shirley" is a vivid, wel-

come reminder of an electoral politics pioneer who fought to make America more inclusive, more diverse, and more just. As today's topsy-turvy, bizarre presidential race unfolds, Shirley provides a stark contrast by dramatizing a campaign for the Oval Office more than half a century ago, when idealism was on the ballot.

"Shirley" opened in select theaters on March 15 and premiered on Netflix on March 22.

*Ed Rampell is a film historian and critic based in Los Angeles. Rampell is the author of "Progressive Hollywood, A People's Film History of the United States" and he co-authored "The Hawaii Movie and Television Book," now in its third edition. This first appeared at Progressive.org.*

## EDGE OF SPORTS/Dave Zirin

### The Future of College Sports Is Unionized

By voting 13 to 2 to join SEIU Local 560, the Dartmouth basketball team has put the question of unionization of college athletes at center court. In the process, the players are educating the NCAA—if it would deign to listen—that the future of university-athlete relations lies in collective bargaining.

The current economy of college sports is, to put it mildly, dyspeptic. An unregulated system where players can profit from their name, image, and likeness has upended the revenue-producing sports of football and basketball. The transfer portal that grants the freedom to so-called "student athletes" to switch teams, has also created a cultural sea change. In short, a shifting of power away from autocratic coaches and athletic directors to the players themselves has taken place. Yet there still is that final frontier: unionization and collective bargaining, both of which could build a new and better framework for college sports.

While NIL money benefits a few athletes with regionally or nationally known names—like Iowa basketball star Caitlin Clark or Texas backup quarterback Arch Manning—and the transfer portal has been a vital reform, both skirt the question of whether these "student athletes" are in fact campus workers. As campus workers, they would, in theory anyway, be free to organize into a union and demand collective bargaining over not only compensation but other issues that affect "student athletes," like medical care, travel demands and the academic freedom to choose classes without athletic department interference. And this is just a smattering of the issues that would surely be brought to the table. Of course, the NCAA and many head coaches have no desire to sit across the table from players. They decry unionization as an affront to everything good and holy about amateur sports, but the fortress of anti-unionism that is the NCAA has been breached by the Dartmouth players. The sooner they recognize that this breach cannot be closed, the better for all parties.

Patrick Hruby, deputy editor of *The Washingtonian* and a longtime critic of what he calls "sham amateurism," made the point that the NCAA can keep "flushing money" by "paying lawyers and lobbyists who have taken repeated Ls in courtrooms and legislative offices" or they could stop resisting a generation that is not going to take the food scraps for which previous ones—sometimes literally—felt forced to settle. The NCAA can finally see the benefits of collective bargaining, or they can continue in their fierce belief that sham amateurism will have to be pried from their dead hands.

This is a battle for which the players are ready. Teammates Cade Haskins and Romeo Myrthil said to the Associated Press,

"We stuck together all season and won this election. It is self-evident that we, as students, can also be both campus workers and union members. Dartmouth seems to be stuck in the past. It's time for the age of amateurism to end."

While many experts cautioned against prematurely celebrating, they made clear that the Dartmouth hoops union is a very big deal. Nathan Kalman-Lamb, co-author of the forthcoming book "The End of College Football: On the Human Cost of an All-American Game," said, "It is not unreasonable to call the Dartmouth men's basketball unionization vote the single most significant development to-date in the struggle against the exploitation and harm that define US college sport."

Similarly, Andy Schwarz, a commentator on the rights of "student athletes," while lauding the decision, warned that "this is more a small step than a giant leap."

One reason for both cheers and caution being the order of the day is that it is not merely the NCAA standing athwart history and saying no to these athletes. Dartmouth University is making its objections clear as well. According to an SEIU spokesperson, the administration told players that unionizing could get them booted from the NCAA or the Ivy League.

In a statement, the Dartmouth administration said, "For Ivy League students who are varsity athletes, academics are of primary importance, and athletic pursuit is part of the educational experience. ... Classifying these students as employees simply because they play basketball is as unprecedented as it is inaccurate. We, therefore, do not believe unionization is appropriate."

This is why Schwarz thinks this is an opening salvo in a bigger fight. He told me, "Until college athletes have the same economic rights as college coaches, whether it's to negotiate in a free market or to take advantage of the rights and privileges accorded to workers more generally, everyone who is pro-athlete has work to do. With that said, there are lots of hurdles to surmount before it's real. ... Let us hope that Congress doesn't fall prey to the catastrophizing that this is going to kill college sports."

Overcoming congressional and NCAA fears about a lawless, unionized future will indeed be a hurdle. But we would do well to remember that the NCAA and their political lobbyists have been braying about progressive reforms killing college sports for at least 50 years. First, it was Title IX—the 1972 law providing women with equal access to, among other venues, athletic teams—that would kill college sports. Then, it was players' being able to opt out of scholarships after signing letters of intent. More recently, it was NIL and the transfer portal bringing godlessness to the land. Yet, with each reform, the profits grow and the popularity increases, so much so that Caitlin Clark—the NCAA's biggest star since Tim Tebow—was tempted with a mammoth amount of NIL money to stay at Iowa for a fifth year. Expect more of that and expect the college game to actually be strengthened as a result, with players staying longer and fan interest growing.

While succumbing to collective bargaining would be in the NCAA's long-term interests, rather than flushing money on lobbyist luncheons and losing lawyers, it'll fight unionization until the end. This is clearly not about money for the organization. It's about power. It's about anti-labor attitudes at the top of the sport—and in Congress. Jason Stahl, the founder and executive director of the College Football Players Association, told me, "This is a momentous day for college athletes across the country. Dartmouth basketball players have shown enormous courage in voting for their union in the face of immense opposition. We hope that college football players across the country see what these young men have accomplished and show the same courage organizing themselves in their own workplaces."

## SATIRE/Rosie Sorenson

### The Great Embryo Imbrogio

It was bound to happen.

You give some off-kilter powerful men the oppo to ruin the lives of women, even beyond *Dobbs* and, well, this is what you get: Embryos enrolling in Kindergarten.

Think of it. The very people who HATE providing government services for anyone other than the 1%, are now tasked with finding a way to feed and house and clothe and educate this wittingly created new class of welfare babies.

My, my, what would Reagan say?

Meanwhile, while the NCAA splinters, the players at Dartmouth are finding a new kind of community. Caoimhin O'Donnell, the national spokesperson for SEIU, described the following scene: "At the last game...security workers, custodians, people who worked for the library, were cheering really loud, because ... we consider [the team] part of local 560 now. In the labor movement, we say siblings—sisters and brothers—those were our brothers playing ball. It was really nice to see these union members excited. There was a real sense of what the team had done and what the local had done and what the members have done."

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Jesus School.

"See?" the Faith Leader says to this young cohort resting on their napping pads as he points to the portrait of Jesus hanging above them on the wall.

"Jesus was once an embryo, just like you! Except you now have Air-Embryo Sneakers. Well, aren't you the lucky ones," he says in his sing-songy way.

"All Jesus had were sandals he pounded out of animal hide himself. But then, he was a carpenter and had opposable thumbs, and you, well—you're kind of in a jelly-jam roll, aren't you?"

The embryos wiggled inside their gooey cocoon.

"By the way, how do you pee?"

*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.*

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## AMY GOODMAN



Rachel Corrie died in 2003, crushed by an Israeli military bulldozer in Rafah, where she had gone to commit her idealism to action.

### Aching Rafah: Gaza, 21 Years After the Killing of Rachel Corrie

“O h rafah. aching rafah. aching of refugees aching of tumbled houses bicycles severed from tank-warped tires and aching of bullet riddled homes...”

So begins a poem written by Rachel Corrie, in Gaza in 2003, just weeks before she was crushed to death by a US-made Israeli military bulldozer, while she and others from the International Solidarity Movement (ISM) nonviolently resisted the demolition of yet another Palestinian home.

Now, as Israel plans a land invasion of

Rafah, where an estimated 1.4 million refugees from across Gaza have fled Israel's unrelenting bombardment that has killed over 32,000 people, and as Israel's strategically-imposed starvation stalks and kills the children of Gaza, her words are strikingly relevant.

Rachel Corrie died on March 16, 2003, three days before the U.S. invasion of Iraq. She was 23 years old, soon to graduate from Evergreen State College in her hometown of Olympia, Washington. She went to Gaza to commit her idealism to action, in solidarity with Palestinians living under Israeli occupation. What she saw transformed her.

“I've been here for about a month and a half now, and this is definitely the most difficult situation that I have ever seen,” Rachel said on camera, later released in “Death of an Idealist,” a 2005 documentary. “In the time that I've been here, children have been shot and killed. On the 30th of January, the Israeli military bulldozed the two largest water wells, destroying over half of Rafah's water supply. Every few days, if not every day, houses are demolished here.”

Tom Dale, a fellow activist, was with Rachel when she was killed.

“A bulldozer turned toward the home of Dr. Samir Nasrallah. Dr. Samir and his young family were friends of Rachel,” Dale recalled on the *Democracy Now!* news hour in March, 21 years after Rachel was killed. “She placed herself between the bulldozer and the home, as we had done so many times before and, indeed, as we had done earlier in that day. The bulldozer driver just

kept on going ... ultimately, she lost her footing, and she was sucked down into the earth and terribly, horrifically died.”

Devastated by the loss of their daughter, Rachel's parents, Craig and Cindy Corrie, committed themselves to the cause that cost Rachel her life. They formed the Rachel Corrie Foundation for Peace and Justice, to support peacebuilding in Gaza and elsewhere. They also sought justice, unsuccessfully, through the courts in both Israel and the US, suing the Israeli military and Caterpillar, the bulldozer manufacturer.

Speaking in March on *Democracy Now!*, the Corries reflected on the ongoing occupation, siege, and now war on Gaza, a place they have visited multiple times, never without personal risk. Cindy recalled their September, 2003 visit to Rafah:

“We sat on the floor in the Nasrallah family's home and ate a wonderful lunch,” she said. “We were taken to the spot... exactly where Rachel had been when she was killed.”

Craig Corrie described how Dr. Samir Nasrallah, a pharmacist, and his family are now trying to escape Gaza into Egypt:

“That family did everything they could to hold onto that house. They were eventually forced out, and some of them went through seven other houses. Now we hear that they want out of Gaza. After 21 years of trying to hold onto their homes and their lives and their futures and their pasts in Gaza, like so many people, they want to survive, and they want out,” Craig said.

He added, “At this point we have to be looking directly at the Palestinians and hear-

ing their voices... as long as Israel is coveting the lands and the homes of Palestinian people, there will not be peace in Israel and Palestine, and neither the Israeli people nor the Palestinian people will be safe.”

Rachel Corrie was a talented writer. On Feb. 27, 2003, just over two weeks before she was killed, she wrote her mother, “I'm witnessing this chronic, insidious genocide and I'm really scared ... This has to stop.” Rachel went on, “Coming here is one of the better things I've ever done. So when I sound crazy, or if the Israeli military should break with their racist tendency not to injure White people, please pin the reason squarely on the fact that I am in the midst of a genocide which I am also indirectly supporting, and for which my government is largely responsible.”

Streets in Palestine are named after Rachel, as is a children's center in Rafah. Palestinian poet Mohammed Abu Lebda, who as a child lived not far from where Rachel was killed, said on *Democracy Now!*, “Every single person here in Gaza... and especially Rafah, knows Rachel Corrie – because she was trying to deliver a very important message, the most important message in the world, which is peace.”

*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.”*

### We Must Show Up and Do Better for Our Communities

By BONNIE JEAN FELDKAMP

A big part of my job is community engagement. The opinion section of any newspaper cannot happen without the people of the community. In order to lift up the voices of our neighbors, I must reach out and be willing to talk to people, not just sit at the computer and wait for my inbox to fill up. Email is still a digital space, and it lacks the interaction with others that is a balm for the soul. Email is sterile. It puts others at arm's length, making it easier to discharge negative emotions without considering the recipient's humanity. Especially when you feel that the person on the other end represents an opposing view.

I attended three events in mid-March.

And spoke to at least a dozen people over the phone. The connections made in person really do trump all. To disconnect from technology and reconnect with humanity is something we all must do if we're going to have any chance at making important changes in our society and for our children.

Each of these events I attended were free. I did not get an invitation from some elite individual; they were accessible to anyone. These were grassroots community forums to talk about the good work being done in my neighborhood and to address the needs of our city's most vulnerable. One was a talk given by a local civil rights activist who marched with Martin Luther King Jr., one was about the gun violence that plagued our city and the other was about services for troubled and homeless teens.

The message that threaded through all three of these events was love. We must be brave enough to bear witness to the struggle and offer compassion to those who are living their darkest days. We do this by closing our laptops, turning off our phones and showing

up to learn what our community needs while determining how we can be part of the solution. It really does start with simply being there.

Memes and judgments on social media launched like bombs from a distance may fuel your self-righteousness, but they do nothing to move our communities forward. Your peace, love and compassion are this world's lifeblood. Being willing to have difficult conversations makes this world better. We do not need judgment. We need fellowship.

Getting out of your house and into your community and interacting with new people makes it really difficult to stay entrenched in your own bias. People think differently than you and that's OK. Engaging with a diverse population and learning the struggles of your community is not about surrendering your convictions to some other side. It's about leaning into your values and expanding your mind to better understand personal experiences that differ from your own. I don't have to take on someone else's identity to have

compassion for their struggle.

We can no longer afford to turn a blind eye to what's happening around us. Gun violence has found its way to all of our doorsteps – regardless of where we live, work and seek entertainment. It affects every age, race and socioeconomic status. Suicide and depression is the same. And so is the rift in our education system. There is no reason you cannot show up at the next school board meeting, city council meeting or nonprofit event, even if you must do so via Zoom. The time is now to learn what your community and country needs. The next generations are our children and grandchildren. They need us. We must show them the way.

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### Dispatches ...

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than the nation as a whole.

Upon learning last year of Allred's intent to challenge Cruz, Cook Political Report downgraded the race from “solid” to “lean” Republican. When Allred officially announced his candidacy, he raised \$2 million in the first 36 hours of his campaign. In the final quarter of 2023, Allred raised nearly \$4.7 million, ending the year with \$10.1 million in cash on hand, while Cruz raised about \$2.7 million during the same period, with about \$6.1 million on hand.

Allred also turned heads in the Democratic primary in March, winning 59% of the vote in a nine-candidate contest, avoiding a runoff and demonstrating widespread appeal to voters across the state.

In head-to-head matchups against Cruz, several polls this year have found Allred polling even or just a couple points behind the two-term GOP incumbent.

In short, the Democratic nominee is a charismatic over-performer, while one of Cruz's most indelible images remains fleeing the state for Cancún, Mexico, in February 2021 as millions of Texans were without power amid a major winter storm.

In Florida, Democrats got the candidate they wanted in former Miami-area Rep. Debbie Mucarsel-Powell, the first South American immigrant elected to Congress. Mucarsel-Powell still faces a crowded Democratic primary,

but she has party backing and has posted solid fundraising numbers, raising more than \$2 million in the final quarter of 2023.

In a recent head-to-head poll, Mucarsel-Powell is already giving Scott a run for his money, trailing him by just 3 points, 41% to 44%, in a Public Policy Polling survey paid for by EMILY's List. The survey also found she had plenty of room to grow, with 63% of Florida voters saying they were unsure about their opinion of her. The same poll showed 53% of Florida voters think it's time to elect someone new to the U.S. Senate.

In November, Scott will face voters for the first time since he penned a proposal two years ago seeking to sunset Social Security and Medicare. One year later, Scott—seeking reelection in a state with one of the country's largest share of voters over age 65—thought better of the plan, amending it to exclude Social Security and Medicare from the provisions his plan would end.

Last July, Senate Democrats used the anniversary of Medicare becoming law to launch digital ads hitting Republicans on the issue, including individualized spots for Scott and Cruz.

In head-to-head polling conducted by Global Strategy Group for the DSCC last year, Mucarsel-Powell beat Scott handily among politically unaffiliated voters once they were apprised of the candidates' profiles, according to Florida Politics.

Before hearing profiles, Scott leads among those no-party voters by 7 percentage points, but after hearing profiles, pollsters found Mucarsel-Powell leading by 16 points.

Florida Democrats may also have the advantage of campaigning on an abortion-rights ballot measure if the state's high court greenlights it for November. Such a battle over reproductive freedom will surely infuse the race with extra money, resources, and enthusiasm. Mucarsel-Powell has been pressing Scott on his support for the state's six-week abortion ban, calling him one of the “most radical Republicans” on the issue.

“He has also publicly said that he supports a national abortion ban, so make no mistake, abortion is on the ballot in November,” she told FloridaPhoenix.com in January.

#### BUDGET PROPOSAL SHOWS GOP IS ‘PARTY OF CUTTING SOCIAL SECURITY AND MEDICARE.’

Defenders of Social Security and Medicare on Wednesday swiftly criticized the biggest caucus of Republicans in the U.S. House of Representatives for putting out a budget proposal for fiscal year 2025 that takes aim at the crucial programs, Jessica Corbett noted at CommonDreams (3/20).

The 180-page “Fiscal Sanity to Save America” plan from the Republican Study Committee (RSC) follows the release of proposals from President Joe Biden, who proposes to tax the wealthy to preserve Social Security and Medicare, and House Budget Committee Chair Jodey Arrington (R-TX), who wants to create a fiscal commission for the programs that critics call a “death panel” designed to force cuts.

The RSC plan promotes premium support for Medicare Advantage plans administered by private health insurance providers as

well as changes to payments made to teaching hospitals. For Social Security, the proposal calls for tying retirement age to rising life expectancy and cutting benefits for younger workers over certain income levels, including phasing out auxiliary benefits.

The document also claims that the RSC budget “would promote trust fund solvency by increasing payroll tax revenues through pro-growth tax reform, pro-growth energy policy that lifts wages, work requirements that move Americans from welfare to work, and regulatory reforms that increase economic growth.”

In a lengthy statement blasting the RSC budget, Social Security Works president Nancy Altman pointed out that recently, former President Trump, the presumptive Republican nominee to face Biden in the November election, “told CNBC that ‘there's a lot you can do’ to cut Social Security.”

“Now, congressional Republicans are confirming the party's support for cuts—to the tune of \$1.5 trillion. They are also laying out some of those cuts,” Altman said. “This budget would raise the retirement age, in line with prominent Republican influencer Ben Shapiro's recent comments that ‘retirement itself is a stupid idea.’ It would make annual cost-of-living increases stingier, so that benefits erode over time. It would slash middle-class benefits.”

“Perhaps most insultingly, given the Republicans' claim to be the party of ‘family values,’ this budget would eliminate Social Security spousal benefits, as well as children's benefits, for middle-class families. That would

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# Schumer Said Out Loud What Many of Israel's Friends are Thinking

By E.J. DIONNE Jr.

Among liberals and many moderates who support the right of Israel to exist as a Jewish homeland, the Hamas attacks of Oct. 7 and the ensuing war in Gaza have called forth anger, agony and a reckoning.

This constituency, which looms large in the Democratic Party and among American Jews, has been whipsawed by competing moral commitments: justified rage over Hamas's slaughter of innocents; an insistence that Israel has a right to defend itself; alarm over the deaths of tens of thousands of Palestinian civilians as the war has dragged on; and a conviction that peace will require a settlement based on two states for Israelis and Palestinians.

Underlying all these concerns is exasperation with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who is in thrall to his government's extreme-right coalition partners and whose policies are alienating his country's longtime friends, in the United States and elsewhere.

This constellation of views has been common enough in synagogues and in po-

litical conversations over kitchen tables. But it took genuine courage for Senate Majority Leader Charles E. Schumer (D-N.Y.) to articulate it in a remarkable speech on the Senate floor March 14. Schumer spoke simultaneously of his passion for Israel — "We love Israel in our bones," he said — and an insistence that "Palestinian civilians do not deserve to suffer for the sins of Hamas."

What grabbed headlines around the world was his frank assessment of Netanyahu's government. "As a lifelong supporter of Israel, it has become clear to me: The Netanyahu coalition no longer fits the needs of Israel after October 7," he said. "The world has changed — radically — since then, and the Israeli people are being stifled right now by a governing vision that is stuck in the past." He called for a new election as "the only way to allow for a healthy and open decision-making process about the future."

A brief summary doesn't do justice to the nuances and personal anguish conveyed in the 6,000-word speech, which cast aside diplomatic niceties and identified "four major obstacles" standing in the way of peace and a two-state settlement: "Hamas, and the Palestinians who support and tolerate their evil ways. Radical right-wing Israelis in government and society. Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu."

We live in a time when crass political motives are regularly ascribed to whatever elected officials do. Lord knows, Schumer is

no stranger to the imperatives of politics. He's very skilled at the business.

But there was no guaranteed political upside to this speech. It immediately earned criticism both from Republicans as interfering in Israeli politics and from parts of the Democratic left for being insufficiently critical of Israel and lacking policy specifics on ending the war.

What the speech does represent is a watershed, as the liberal Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* called it. It's hard to find anyone who has been as pro-Israel as Schumer during his 43-year congressional career. For him to split with Netanyahu so sharply and so publicly speaks to the profound change in opinion among Israel's sympathizers since the Gaza war began. But this shift builds upon a far longer estrangement between Netanyahu and American liberals.

"Chuck Schumer's speech is proof that one by one, Netanyahu is losing Israel's biggest supporters in the U.S.," said Israeli centrist opposition leader Yair Lapid. "Even worse — he's doing it on purpose."

That Schumer reflected a current running deep among traditionally pro-Israel Democrats was brought home when President Biden called his effort "a good speech" that "expressed a serious concern shared not only by him but by many Americans."

There was nothing precipitous about this intervention. "I spent two months thinking about this and wrestling with it," Schumer told me in an interview March 15. Far from being an attack on Israel, Schumer said, it

was an attempt to shore up support for the Jewish state, particularly among young Americans who have known Israel only under Netanyahu's leadership.

"Too many people are turning against Israel because of their dislike for Netanyahu," he said. "And I felt an imperative to show that you could be against Netanyahu and still be very pro-Israel, which of course I am."

And he defended his call for early elections as consistent with the wishes Israelis themselves have expressed to pollsters. Surveys also show that Netanyahu would be voted out if an election were held now. "We're not determining who Israel should pick," Schumer told me. "We're just asking that they get a right to choose when so many people are just upset with the direction of the present government in Israel."

It's rare for a speech on the Senate floor to create a sense of relief, but this was the effect of Schumer's willingness to say out loud what so many were thinking. "No one else could have done it other than Chuck," Sen. Jack Reed (D-R.I.) said in a statement. "No one has the spiritual and emotional connections to Israel."

Schumer's bottom line is hard to dispute. "Israel cannot survive," he said in his speech, "if it becomes a pariah."

*E.J. Dionne Jr. writes a column for the Washington Post. He is a professor at the McCourt School of Public Policy at Georgetown University, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution. Dana Milbank was off this week.*

## It's a Trump Fire Sale, and Everything Must Go!

By ALEXANDRA PETRI

Donald Trump needs money, and he needs it quickly! Everyone keeps saying no to his requests to borrow on the grounds that they want to see their money again and that giving money to Trump has historically been like sending it to sail off the flat side of the Earth.

So if you've ever been interested in buying a Trump property, now is the time! Act now — before the state of New York does — and add any of the following exciting investments to your portfolio today!

**Tower:** Lightly used, escalator included! If you love brass fixtures, you are going to love this place. Free brass letters convey but don't need to. (Say you run a RUM store or a store that sells TP? If you sell turnips, talk to us — we can figure something out.)

**Beautiful Golf Course:** This one comes with a battlefield monument. Currently, it claims to have been the site of the "River of Blood," but this is entirely fictional, and you can easily replace it with a plaque commemorating a favorite imaginary event of your choosing.

**Plane:** Unfortunately, this is a Boeing, because our luck is not holding. But just because a brand falls on hard times, that doesn't mean that it has been out to swindle you all along with no regard for the trail of broken lives it leaves in its wake. It does in some cases, but not always!

**Trump Wine:** This wine was made in 1472 by the

original inventor of wine right before he died, so it is extra rare, even rarer than an 1869 Château Lafite-Rothschild, although if you want some of that instead, it is that. Indeed, pretend that is what we said it was initially. We can't bear to part with it. This wine is so wonderful! (We will, though, for the right price.)

**Hotel:** Full of spies and, conveniently for the spies, classified documents. Pretty close to the lagoon and not far from the mar!

**Box o' Docs:** We have lots of these exciting mystery boxes. Some contain really important, interesting papers, whereas others are duds. So you'd better buy several in the hopes of getting something cool, such as a list of our intelligence assets or a chocolate frog. We have as many boxes of these as you have dollars!

**Rudy Giuliani's Soul in a Small Glass Bottle:** Unclear how this got into the properties, but someone found it among the papers next to an empty bottle of hair dye, and we aren't going to ask questions.

**One of Those Cursed Red Christmas Trees From Melania's White House Decor:** I was not looking at this, and when I looked back, it had moved! Please buy this; I am scared of it.

**Hat:** Big, red with white letters.

**Ties:** Also red. Worn by a celebrity!

**Assorted Golf Shirts:** These all technically do have letters on them, too, but the letters are very easy to remove. They include a P and a T, a great start if you want a shirt that says "pterodactyl" and cannot spell.

**Lindsey Graham's Integrity:** This also comes in Mitch

McConnell and Tim Scott, if those flavors are more appealing.

**The Republican National Committee:** We are in the process of stripping this for parts anyway, but if you can see a use for it, we'd be happy to part with it!

**Trump University Diplomas:** We will make them say anything! They are also absorbent if that's helpful for any reason.

**Highway:** Trump once adopted a highway, and the highway is grown up enough to strike out on its own, he feels. If you would like to be the new place this highway goes for Thanksgiving for stilted conversation, he'd be willing to part with it.

**Rights to Miss USA Competition:** We don't technically still have these, but we will accept money for them anyway! Just give us money! We can say we got confused! We really need money.

**Presidential Futures:** Listen, we aren't saying that Trump is definitely going to be the next president, but we don't hate our odds. Have you ever thought, "I'd sure like to have a president owe me so much money that the only way he could ever hope to repay was to hold me as far above the law as possible"? Well, I am not saying that your largesse right now could have that effect, because I think technically that might be against the law to promise. But after just two easy payments of \$232 million ... who can say?! Just think about it, is all!

*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*

punish women who take time out of the workforce to care for children and other loved ones," she continued. "This coming from a party that wants to take away women's reproductive rights!"

"The RSC budget would also take away Medicare's new power to negotiate lower prices on prescription drugs, putting more money into the pockets of the GOP's Big Pharma donors," Altman warned. "And it accelerates the privatization of Medicare, handing it over to private insurance companies who have a long history of ripping off the government and delaying and denying care to those who need it."

"In recent days, Trump has tried to walk back his support for Social Security and Medicare cuts," she noted. "This budget is one of many reasons why no one should believe him. The Republican Party is the party of cutting Social Security and Medicare, while giving tax handouts to billionaires."

"The Democratic Party is the party of expanding Social Security and Medicare, paid for by requiring the ultrawealthy to contribute their fair share," Altman added. "Everyone who cares about the future of these vital earned benefits should vote accordingly in November."

### TRUMP-IN-LAW KUSHNER CALLS FOR ETHNIC CLEANSING IN GAZA TO 'FINISH THE JOB.'

Jared Kushner, son-in-law of former president and presumptive 2024 Republican nominee Donald Trump, said in an interview that if he were in charge of Israeli policy, he would push Gaza civilians into Egypt or Israel's Negev desert—a proposal that critics denounced as ethnic cleansing. Jake Johnson noted at CommonDreams (3/19).

"You want to get as many civilians out of Rafah as possible," Kushner told Harvard University's Middle East Initiative, Tarek Masoud, in a March 8 interview that was first reported widely March 19. "I think that you want to try to clear that out. I know that with diplomacy maybe you get them into Egypt."

"I know that that's been refused, but [with] the right diplomacy I think it would be possible," Kushner added. "But in addition to that, the thing that I would try to do if I was Israel right now is I would just bulldoze something in the Negev, I would try to move people in there. I know that won't be the popular thing to do, but I think that that's a better option to do so you can go in and finish the job."

Kushner played a central role in crafting Trump's Middle East policy during his first four years in the White House, and the former president's son-in-law's remarks provided a potential glimpse of how the US would approach Gaza if Trump wins another term.

Earlier in March, Trump said he wants Israel to "finish the problem" in Gaza—a re-

mark Kushner echoed just three days later in his 3/8 interview.

In addition to advocating removal of civilians from Rafah—which is now packed with more than 1.5 million, including hundreds of thousands of children—Kushner said Gaza's "waterfront property could be very valuable."

"It's a little bit of an unfortunate situation there, but from Israel's perspective I would do my best to move the people out and then clean it up," Kushner said.

Kushner responded flippantly to concerns that if Gazans were forced out of their territory, the Israeli government wouldn't let them return—something that top Israeli officials have publicly advocated.

"Maybe," he said, "but I'm not sure there's much left of Gaza at this point."

### ANOTHER RESIGNATION MEANS HOUSE GOP'S MARGIN FOR ERROR SHRINKS EVEN FASTER.

Republican Rep. Mike Gallagher, who had already said he wouldn't seek reelection, decided that he didn't want to spend the next nine months in Congress either. And once Gallagher resigns his seat in northern Wisconsin on April 19, House Speaker Mike Johnson's margin for error will shrink to just a single vote—almost two weeks earlier than previously expected, David Nir reported at Daily Kos (3/22).

With Colorado's Ken Buck saying adios on Friday, the House GOP caucus now stands at just 218 members. But once Gallagher also

makes his exit, that figure will drop to 217. Democrats, meanwhile, have 213 seats and have remained remarkably unified in the face of Republican anarchy.

That means that when Gallagher is gone, Johnson will be able to afford a maximum of one defection on any given vote as long as Democrats stick together. If as many as two Republicans join with Democrats, the result would be a 215-215 tie—and in Congress, a tie is the same as a defeat.

But wait! The news is about to get even worse for Johnson. Democrats are set to see their caucus increase on April 30 when a special election is held in a safely blue district in upstate New York. That won't directly impact the topline math, but it will make the GOP's life even harder, because there are almost always absences on the House floor.

Three vacant Republican seats, meanwhile, won't be filled until special elections in May and June—but this is where it gets better still: Gallagher's seat won't be filled until November.

Under Wisconsin law, if a seat becomes vacant after the second Tuesday in April, then a special election to fill it gets consolidated with the state's regularly scheduled elections. Gallagher could have avoided this by making his resignation take effect a couple of weeks sooner, but the fact that he didn't has to make you wonder whether his timing was deliberate.

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