



Koehler on Police and the
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Chomsky on
A Failed
State

June 2020

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Covid-19: The “Great Equalizer”?

By H. Patricia Hynes

There is a meme circulating in this time of pandemic that we are all in this together, that COVID-19 is, as New York Governor Cuomo stated, the “great equalizer.” From one vantage point, this appears to be true: as I write, news broke that a staff person to Vice President

Economic inequality in the United State drives much of the health and social problems of our society

Pence and another to President Trump are infected with the coronavirus, adding to 11 infected U.S. Secret Service agents. But from many other outlooks, this statement—implying we are all at equal

risk—is a blatant cover-up of inequalities baked into our society. Before the virus, 78 percent of Americans were living paycheck to paycheck. Since the virus, many billionaires and wealthy have be-



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We don't have a choice of whether or not we're in a class war. It's going on perpetually—waged with enormous financial, political and media firepower

come richer while the working poor (millions of whom have lost jobs and lack benefits and health insurance), are poorer. As the fissure of financial inequality widens, so also does the disparity in infection and death rates.

Economic inequality in the United States—or the gap between the rich and the rest—is directly linked with, drives

in fact, much of the health and social problems of our society. Rising income inequality leads to a plague of ills: higher rates of people in prison, higher teenage birth rates, higher rates of mental illness, more child neglect and children bullying other children, higher rates of homicide, lower educational performance, and lower life

expectancy.

The United States ranks highest in income inequality and correspondingly ranks highest in ill health and social problems among other rich, developed countries. And, conversely, the Scandinavian countries and Japan, which score highest on income equality, fare best in health and social well-being.



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“When I looked more deeply at my own life, I noticed that my life was not now and never had been built around ‘hope.’ Laos was an example. I went there, I learned to love the peasants, the bombing shocked my psyche and soul to the core, and I responded—not because I was hopeful or hopeless, but because I was alive.”

How then does this inequality manifest in the pandemic we are experiencing?

The United States, with the greatest total wealth of any country, has the highest number of confirmed coronavirus cases and deaths of any country in the world. Higher than countries with four times as many people, namely China and India, a relatively poor country. Our failure in public and medical health is worsened by a callous, know-nothing president who underfunds federal health agencies, disbands pandemic expert teams, refuses to respect the basic rudiments of science, and cares more about the fallout of COVID-19 on the upcoming election and his faltering poll numbers than his citizens.

Who are, then, the most likely victims of the virus? Workers of color, both Black Americans and Latinos, are proportionately found in the lowest-paying service and

domestic occupations. Two thirds of these workers are women. This means more exposure to risk-laden work in many cases—agricultural workers, meat processing, hospital and nursing home, janitorial and housekeeping in health care facilities. They are more likely to plunge into deeper poverty if infected, laid off, without health insurance or paid sick leave. They cannot “stay in place” working from home online, like the professional class can. Further, Blacks and Latinos are more likely to live in environmental justice communities, meaning they are more frequently exposed to air and water pollution and toxic wastes than whites. Recent Harvard-based research has found that those exposed to greater air pollution from cars and factories are more vulnerable to contracting COVID 19.

Add to economic and environmental inequality the

social inequality of racial discrimination—in hiring, in pay, in “driving while Black,” in persistent housing segregation, in greater rates of arrests and prison terms, in day-to-day interpersonal exclusion and slights inducing unrelenting stress—and we find reasons for higher rates of COVID-19 infections and deaths among Latinos and Blacks.

In New York, for example, African Americans are twice as likely to die from COVID-19 than white people. As of mid-April, counties with a majority of African Americans had three times the infection rates as counties with a white majority. Chelsea, Massachusetts, long a working class city with a majority of Latinos and immense daily air polluting traffic to Boston across the Tobin Bridge overhead, is the hotspot of infections in Massachusetts.

No, COVID-19 is not the

“great equalizer.” If anything, it exposes the fault line of injustice that runs through this country, wherein the wealthy can “stay in place” on gigantic yachts; wealthier, private and non-profit hospitals hold much larger cash reserves than safety net hospitals for the poor and uninsured; larger businesses get preference over smaller ones for government loans; the professional class can work from home with their children having access to computers for online learning; and corporate insurance and pharmaceutical companies lobby against a single-payer health care system.

We urgently need health care for all and a working so-

cial democracy.

Pat Hynes, a retired Professor of Environmental Health, directs the Traprock Center for Peace and Justice in western Massachusetts: <https://traprock.org>.

Why Conspiracy Theories Are So Dangerous

By Sonali Kolhatkar

Z A mysterious new video documentary, slickly produced, and offering answers to the coronavirus pandemic, has been viewed millions of times on the internet in spite of the fact that various platforms have repeatedly removed it. The “Plan-demic” video is, according to the BBC, “filled with medical misinformation,” and claims that, “the virus must have been released from a laboratory environment and could not possibly be naturally-occurring; that using masks and gloves actually makes people more sick; and that closing beaches is ‘insanity’ because of ‘healing microbes’ in the water.” It offers a scientific and authoritative-sounding



Austin, Texas - Apr. 18, 2020: Demonstrators protest COVID-19 stay at home orders at a rally heavily promoted by Alex Jones' InfoWars
Photo by Vic Hinterlang/Shutterstock.com



**Toronto, Ontario - May 2, 2020: A protester calls for an end to the COVID-19 shutdown outside of the Ontario Legislative Building at Queen's Park.
Photo by Puffin's Pictures/Shutterstock.com**

basis for the far-right anti-lockdown activists protesting across the country, some of whom are even holding up signs that say, "Plandemic."

Why do so many people believe in vast and incredible-sounding conspiracy theories? Psychologists have attempted to answer this question for years, and some have suggested that moments of crisis and the resulting stress humans feel make us more susceptible to accepting far-fetched claims as we try to make sense of the world. One published study in the journal of the American Psychological Association found that,

"more stressful life events and greater perceived stress predicted belief in conspiracy theories."

While choosing to believe in conspiracy theories may result in the believers feeling empowered with knowledge that only they have, the consequence of a collective belief in nonsensical ideas usually results in regressive policies. It hampers progressive political organizing and undermines the credibility of the left. It more often than not feeds into right-wing ideas and policies.

In the case of the "Plandemic," the discredited sci-

entist at the heart of the film, Judy Mikovits, even thanked President Donald Trump on Twitter for throwing the nation's leading infectious diseases expert Dr. Anthony Fauci under the bus and, like so many of Trump's own supporters, repeatedly attempts to undermine Fauci. Mikovits's bizarre and dangerous theories about the origins of the virus echo Trump's own idea that China created the COVID-19 virus in a lab. She continues to be interviewed widely about the film as per her Twitter feed, suggesting that the film continues to be promoted.

Particularly now, with intense focus on U.S. health care, it's timely to recognize that in the past five years U.S.-supported Gulf Coalition airstrikes bombed Yemen's health care facilities 83 times

Nearly two decades ago, when the U.S. was hit by the earth-shattering events of September 11, 2001, Americans similarly were drawn to wild conspiracy theories that coalesced around what came to be called the “9/11 Truth Movement.” The idea that George W. Bush’s administration was somehow in on the horrific terrorist attacks that killed thousands of Americans was apparently a comforting thought to those who simply could not accept that they were inspired by the blowback of decades of destructive American foreign policy. In the years following the attacks, millions of Americans watched and shared the film “Loose Change,” which was held up as a central document of the “truther” movement.

Ten years after “Loose Change” was released, its filmmaker Dylan Avery explained his motive for making the film, saying: “September 11 was ‘welcome to the real

world,’ for me. My best friend was overseas fighting this war that was a direct consequence of this event, and that’s one of the main things that drove me during those years. If I could somehow raise awareness that this event was fraudulent or faulty, maybe my friend could get home quicker... I was angry about something at the time, and that was my way of expressing it.”

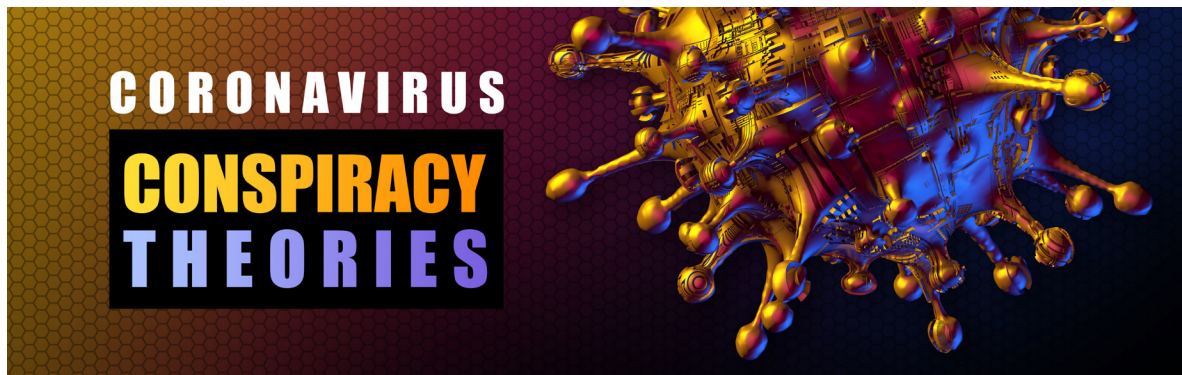
Avery even admitted that one of the main claims of the film—that footage of Osama bin Laden was fake—may have been because, “What I think happened was the aspect ratio got screwed up, and when the footage was put on the internet, he looked fatter.”

One of the most prominent proponents of the “9/11 truth” movement was Alex Jones, the now-discredited media figure behind Infowars who has promoted dozens of wild theories that his followers take seriously. Among his believers was a presidential candidate named Donald Trump,

about whom Jones said, “It is surreal to talk about issues here on air and then word for word hear Trump say it two days later.”

But plenty of people on the left are also routinely seduced by films promoting conspiracy theories. In fact, “Loose Change” first gained widespread traction on the radio station where I work, KPFK—a fact that is mentioned on the Amazon listing of the film (yes, it is still listed there). Recently, since the release of “Plandemic,” I have gotten several emails from listeners of my show on KPFK asking me to watch and cover the film—which is incidentally where I first heard of the dubious documentary.

Conspiracy theories offer an easily digestible worldview that helps to make sense of our perplexing circumstances. But they are destructive and antithetical to constructive political organizing. Imagine if the energy wasted



Graphic by CROCOTHERY/Shutterstock.com

on believing that “9/11 was an inside job,” had instead been poured into fixing American foreign policy in the Middle East. Claiming that the attacks were a pretext for the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq has done little to actually end those wars. It has simply enabled “9/11 truth” believers to congratulate themselves on having the inside scoop on the most harrowing American event in recent memory.

Today’s anti-vaccination movement that bases its belief in the dangers of vaccines on the profit motives of the pharmaceutical industry has actually done little to hold that industry to account. It has simply resulted in growing numbers of Americans withholding vaccinations of their children, which in turn has helped previously eradicated diseases like measles to return and endanger the most vulnerable among us. In fact,

while the world waits for an effective vaccine against COVID-19, the “anti-vaxxer” movement has laid the groundwork to undermine the critically important collective action to get vaccinated. In a very real way, this conspiracy theory stands to obstruct progress.

We have to fight the seductive comfort that conspiracy theories offer. But that means putting trust in some institutions that have rightfully lost some credibility in the eyes of the public: scientific institutions that are sometimes wrong or sometimes collude with big business, or media outlets that sometimes succumb to nationalism and put on blinders, and pharmaceutical companies on whom we rely to manufacture lifesaving medication and vaccines but who are obviously in it to make money and sometimes allow dangerous products on

the market for that reason.

Getting past conspiracies is not easy to do, but it is imperative if we want to organize for a better world. There are many actual conspiracies out in the open that are well-documented and can be taken at face value—that the U.S. fights wars to further its financial and political interests, that fossil fuel corporations fund climate change denialism because it serves their purpose, or that pharmaceutical companies overcharge Americans for medication simply because they can. These real conspiracies may not be as sexy as the idea that shadowy figures have seeded a virus or that “9/11 was an inside job,” but they have a very real impact on our world that requires the unsexy work of political organizing on a mass scale. Pouring our energy and anger into the wrong direction ultimately hurts us,

And it gives me hope that maybe...just maybe, this newfound compassion and introspection will continue and expand beyond our borders

not the elites that conspiracy theorists claim to target. **Z**

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The Sanders Campaign Was About “Us”—Not Bernie—Remember?

By Norman Solomon

During the weeks since Bernie Sanders suspend-

ed his campaign, many fervent supporters have entered a “WTF?” space. The realities of disappointment and distress aren’t just about dashed hopes of winning the presidential nomination. Much of the current disquiet is also due to a disconnect between choices made by the official Sanders campaign in recent weeks and his statement on April 8 that, “we must continue working to assemble as many delegates as possible at the Democratic convention, where we will be able to exert significant influence over the party platform and other functions.”

There are scant indications that the remnants of the Bernie 2020 campaign are doing anything to win “as many delegates as possible” in the 20 state primaries set for the next two months. That fact has left it up to individuals as well as independent groups and coalitions to do what they can to gain more Bernie delegates

for the Democratic National Convention.

If the total number of Sanders delegates goes over the 25 percent threshold required by party rules—a goal that’s within reach—progressives will get appreciable leverage over convention decisions. While top-level negotiations between the Sanders and Joe Biden camps have led to agreements that are a bit murky, there’s no doubt that the best way for Bernie forces to gain clout is to win as many delegates as possible.

But while Bernie has continued to provide valuable forums and town halls via livestreams, such as “Saving Our Planet from the Existential Threat of Climate Change,” what remains of the Sanders campaign is not urging supporters to vote in the presidential primaries this spring.

That choice not only makes it harder to win more Bernie delegates in primaries. It also has an effect of depressing



Photo by J. Bicking/Shutterstock.com

...if we can expand our consciousness and compassion, we can begin to comprehend our government's behavior in the world and come out of this pandemic demanding to be better members of the human family

turnout from left-leaning voters overall, to the detriment of progressive candidates in important down-ballot races in a score of states.

The recent Nebraska primary netted zero delegates for Bernie, but the Oregon and Hawaii primaries are more promising to gain substantial numbers of Sanders delegates.

To get a grip on the torch that Bernie is implicitly passing to the grassroots—now more than ever—we should take heed of a passage from his painful statement suspending the campaign: “Let me say this very emphatically. As you all know, we have never been just a campaign. We are a grassroots, multiracial, multigenerational movement which has always believed that real change never comes from the top on down, but always from the bottom on up.”

From the bottom up, it's up to us. In effect, that now means the leadership for the

Bernie campaign and what it stands for must come from the “movement which has always believed that real change never comes from the top on down.”

We should take Bernie at his words, and take them to heart: “Not me. Us.”

That means grassroots activists in upcoming primary states should take the initiative and get out the vote for Bernie. It also means that progressives around the country should jump into the fray, connecting with organizations that are working to maximize turnout for Bernie such as Our Revolution, People for Bernie Sanders, Progressive Democrats of America, RootsAction.org (where I'm national director), and the new coalition Once Again.

No leader is infallible, and the best ones—like Bernie Sanders—don't claim to be. Bernie's deeply progressive and visionary leadership has been extraordinary, with inspiring ripple effects nation-

wide. The rest is up to “us.” **Z**

Norman Solomon is co-founder and national director of RootsAction.org. He was a Bernie Sanders delegate from California to the 2016 Democratic National Convention. Solomon is the author of a dozen books including *War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death*.

To Re-Open Safely We Need a “Health Force” of Disease Detectives

By Sandy Smith-Nonini

Conservative governors are now openly at odds with epidemiologists as plans move ahead for more than half the states to loosen social distancing and permit many businesses to re-open this month despite none of them meeting White House Coronavirus Taskforce guidelines.

Unlike re-openings in China, Hong Kong and South Korea where new cases fell rapidly after aggressive containment efforts, the United States, with nearly 1.4 million cases and over 81,000 COVID-19 deaths (as of May 11), must follow a different model.

Many critics blame the Trump Administration's lag-gard scale-up of testing for the dilemma. But studies of past emerging disease epi-

demics have taught us that testing alone will not prevent new outbreaks. To re-open the economy we must undertake the most massive effort to trace and isolate new infections in history.

Ironically, the states moving most rapidly to restore commerce—e.g. Georgia, Texas, and Florida—not only have regions with high caseloads, but also inadequate public health workers to contain new outbreaks, according to a study by *Politico*. In the Midwest, despite high caseloads per capita in Iowa and Nebraska, officials are jumping ahead of federal criteria calling for two weeks of falling cases before relaxing stay-at-home rules. Robert Redfield, director of the Centers for Disease Control and

Prevention (CDC), warns that re-opening requires not only ramped up testing, but “very aggressive” contact tracing of new cases. Such disease tracking, together with testing, was critical to controlling spread of the virus in South Korea, New Zealand, Germany and China.

An April 27 letter released by former public health officials, including Andy Slavitt, who ran Medicare and Medicaid in the Obama administration, and Scott Gottlieb, a former Food and Drug Administration chief under President Trump, estimated 180,000 contact tracers are needed to re-open the economy. Tom Frieden, who directed the CDC from 2009 to 2017, extrapolated from experiences in Asia to estimate



Photo by Phil Pasquini/Shutterstock.com



At present local health departments and the CDC have only about 2,200 professional “disease detectives,” although other health staff often assist during a contagious outbreak
 Photo by theskaman306/Shutterstock.com

that up to 300,000 such workers may be needed across the country. At present local health departments and the CDC have only about 2,200 professional “disease detectives,” although other health staff often assist during a contagious outbreak.

Until early May, federal officials and the media have tended to ignore contact tracing despite the critical role

it has played in every infectious disease outbreak. The labor-intensive nature of the task is probably why. Our chronically underfunded, and now overwhelmed, public health departments have no capacity for such a massive scale up without significant new funding.

A recent NPR survey and follow-up report on 44 state health departments turned up

a total count of 11,142 workers trained in contact tracing. As a point of contrast, at the height of China’s viral crisis it took 9,000 contact tracers in Wuhan alone to contain the outbreak. Officials in state health departments surveyed described a variety of plans to expand capacity, some relying on volunteers, with the goal of scaling up to 66,197. Most will need federal aid for the new hires.

Unfortunately, there is no federal health workforce or emergency fund up to the task. The closest we have to a U.S. rapid response team might be the Medical Reserve Corps (MRC), which matches over 175,000 volunteers with public health and medical assistance needs across the country. Thousands of MRC volunteers are now deployed in call centers or administering tests during the coronavirus crisis. Some may be trained as contact tracers in coming months.

We also entered into the COVID-19 crisis with a shortage of nurses and primary care doctors. The Chinese government sent 42,000 health workers to the Wuhan from other parts of the country. Despite the likelihood that many new hot spots will crop up here as we re-open, the United States lacks a coherent mobile medical corps of professionals who can be

Our urgent need to scale up infectious disease control is not unlike the impetus for the Green New Deal (GND) jobs and infrastructure proposal to support a just energy/climate transition

deployed rapidly. Given the perpetual shortages of physicians in U.S. rural areas, another program that deserves to be scaled up is the underfunded “National Health Service Corps” which ties medical school loan forgiveness to commitments by new doctors to practice for two years in underserved areas.

Our urgent need to scale up infectious disease control is not unlike the impetus for the Green New Deal (GND) jobs and infrastructure proposal to support a just energy/climate transition. Both ideas draw inspiration from President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s response to mass unemployment in the Great Depression

by creating the Works Progress Administration which hired millions of unemployed people over an eight-year period for public works projects.

Clearly the need to address the climate crisis remains urgent, but first we have to get out of the house safely. Jeremy Brecher, of the Institute



Photo by Samuel Perry/Shutterstock.com

Epidemic models predict the infection will continue to spread across the country in the months ahead, producing not hundreds of thousands, but millions of new infections

for Policy Studies, has called for such an emergency GND that includes health. Such a new health corps could offer a win-win solution to our two acute (and simultaneous) dilemmas: record levels of unemployment and a vital need for more feet-on-the-ground to reduce our viral caseload.

At present, many political observers predict that after the pandemic, citizens will demand more investment in health care and disease surveillance. Thus, a plan to strengthen health staffing—including new professional and community health workers—could address future needs as well as our current emergency. Besides containing new infections and providing vital paychecks to our unemployed, like other “essential” workers, new health workers would spend their funds into the economy,

boosting demand for goods and services.

Dr. Frieden argued in early May that lockdowns, while effective at stopping spread, are blunt tools that cause unemployment and bankruptcies. Instead, he said, “we have a sharper tool (a strategy) to stop chains of transmission by widespread testing, isolation of cases, contact tracing and quarantine of contacts.”

Frieden, who now directs the non-profit Resolve to Save Lives, gained extensive experience overseeing responses to the H1N1 influenza, Ebola and Zika epidemics while running the CDC. But the importance of contact tracers was brought home to him many years earlier in New York City. I did post-doctoral research in 1999 comparing two epidemics of resurgent multi-drug-resistant tuberculosis (MDR-TB)—one in

New York City and one in Lima, Peru. I learned that Frieden, while working in the CDC’s Epidemic Intelligence Service in 1991, helped demonstrate that MDR-TB was widespread in many poor neighborhoods of New York City, a finding that spurred the mayor to replace city health officials who had ignored mounting signs of the epidemic.

Frieden was appointed to lead the city’s tuberculosis division and later credited for innovative policies that brought the deadly outbreak under control. One key initiative was the hiring and training of community health workers (who did not have professional degrees) to do outreach, track cases and administer doses of anti-TB drugs, effectively cutting the chain of contagion and drug-resistance.

Community health workers were also the key to controlling MDR-TB in Peru. TB drug resistance was first identified in a barrio of Lima in the late 1990s by the Boston-based non-profit Partners in Health (PIH). Drs. Paul Farmer and Jim Yong Kim, who directed PIH, built a program at an urban clinic in Lima to address the deadly outbreak using a similar strategy of outreach and treatment with lay workers doing home visits and social programming with patients. In both the New York and Lima epidemics, a training staple for

successful community outreach was cultural sensitivity and a willingness to establish relationships and trust with patients and their families. PIH's Peru work helped established a model for treating MDR-TB outbreaks in low-income countries.

PIH is now applying that experience to COVID-19 in Massachusetts where the health department recently contracted with PIH to hire 1,000 full-time community health workers as half of a 2,000-person contingent who will do contact tracing statewide. Another model may be

California, which has invested in a well-designed disease tracking system, and now aims to combine hired staff and volunteers to ramp up to 10,000 contact tracers.

Since April 1, new U.S. cases per day have exceeded 20,000 on every day except one, and have ranged as high as 38,000. Epidemic models predict the infection will continue to spread across the country in the months ahead, producing not hundreds of thousands, but millions of new infections, especially in places where social distancing is lax. Many states project



Photo by Christopher Penler/Shutterstock.com

using new electronic tracing systems for COVID-19 exposure which have been heavily hyped by tech companies, such as Google and Apple. But even if the serious privacy concerns raised by these apps are resolved, such systems will only be an aid, not a replacement for humans who follow-up with contacts exposed to the virus.

The work of a contact tracer, ideally hired from the same area where he or she would serve, starts with interviewing infected patients and following leads to find people that person was recently in contact with. These workers then help arrange testing for new contacts, advise them on self-isolation, and assist those who become sick with treatment and access to humane quarantine options like hotel rooms or other facilities for patients in crowded households so as to avoid infecting immune-compromised or elderly members. Support for patients in quarantine would include food and daily follow-up on medical needs. This level of support is the only way to prevent super-spreader events—such as the widely reported outbreaks at funerals or nursing homes that contributed to the U.S. having a quarter of all reported cases globally.

When locally-based and trained well, community

Tore-open safely, the country needs a more comprehensive approach

health workers are also the ideal outreach personnel to educate others on coronavirus prevention and treatment, including advice on chronic problems that contribute to high COVID-19 mortality rates in Latino and Black families. In the long run, such a workforce could help address the long-standing shortage of primary care in the United States—including community-based programming to assist families with preventive health, nutrition, exercise, chronic diseases and mental health needs.

In their public letter, Drs. Gottlieb and Slavitt called for \$46 billion in national support for states to trace contacts and

isolate infected patients, with an additional \$4.5 billion for quarantine facilities, including rental of otherwise vacant hotel rooms. While the last Congressional stimulus package (HR 266) contained \$25 billion for state health departments, the bulk of those funds were aimed at scaling up testing, with only a small slice likely to be spent for tracing contacts.

To re-open safely, the country needs a more comprehensive approach. One promising bill, introduced by Senators Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY) and Michael Bennet (D-CO), would allocate \$55 billion a year for a new “Health Force” training and hiring hundreds of thousands of new public health workers to do testing, contact tracing and eventually vaccinating the population. The Senators even cite FDR’s Great Depression work program as an inspiration.

It is clear that re-opening alone will not rapidly reduce unemployment, and federal stimulus efforts to date to keep working people afloat are woefully inadequate. The country needs to look beyond welfare solutions. There is much work to be done. Why not hire the unemployed to find and stem new viral outbreaks so we can reopen without recurring waves of deadly outbreaks? Until we

have an army of disease detectives, the virus will continue its massive crime wave. **Z**

Sandy Smith-Nonini, PhD, is an adjunct assistant professor of anthropology at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. She is the author of *Healing the Body Politic: El Salvador's Popular Struggle for Health Rights from Civil War to Neoliberal Peace*, <https://www.rutgersuniversity-press.org/healing-the-body-politic/9780813547367>. Her writings on the drug-resistant tuberculosis epidemic in Peru and New York City can be found at https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Sandy_Smith-Nonini/research

Trump's Death Denialism

By Ted Glick

The Vietnam War was my first experience with death on a mass scale. I remember, in the 1960s as a teenager, seeing the reports on TV and in newspapers of hundreds of people, Vietnamese and American, dying each day, day after day. As I

The truth is that Trump's abdication of leadership is responsible for tens of thousands of unnecessary deaths so far

learned the truth about why this was happening—U.S. government/corporate efforts to replace French colonialism with a U.S. version—it became harder and harder to do nothing about this monstrous obscenity. Over 50 years later, the activism for peace and justice begun at that time continues for me and many more of my generation.

I thought about all of this a month or more ago as the daily U.S. death toll from the COVID-19 virus kept going up and up, now to an astounding 2,000 or so a day, with some predictions that within a month it could be 3,000.

This pandemic wasn't immediately caused by imperialist plans and desires for military conquest. It was caused by a virus likely first emerg-

ing within wild bats in China and eventually spread to humans. But the deeper reality is that this happened because of the inexorable destruction of wildlife habit and deforestation by exploitative corporations, entities part of an economic system, capitalism, all about continual expansion in the search for commodities and the raw materials for products able to be sold for profit.

The huge number of U.S. deaths from COVID-19, however, among the highest rates per population in the world, is directly traceable to one man: Donald J. Trump. Mafioso Don was in denial of this deadly virus for many weeks as health experts in the federal government were trying to get him to be vocal about how dangerous it was. As late as February 28 he was describing it as "the Democrats' new hoax." A partial chronology of his ignorant and devastating dereliction of duty leading up to the eventual acknowledgement of reality in mid-March can be found at <https://insideclimatenews.org/news/19032020/denial-climate-change-coronavirus-donald-trump>.

The truth is that Trump's abdication of leadership is responsible for tens of thousands of unnecessary deaths so far. But it's actually been getting worse over the last

couple of weeks. Trump, white supremacist that he is, is openly encouraging his ever-loyal racist base to demonstrate, some carrying automatic rifles, Nazi swastikas and Confederate flags, for an end to social distancing, staying at home as much as possible and other public health actions which have prevented this horrible pandemic from being ultra-horrible.

The fact that a disproportionate number of those who have died from COVID-19 have been people of color and low-income is a major factor in Trump's and the Republicans' current efforts. To him and many of them, those people just don't really matter. The race and class dynamics are outrageous.

For those getting sick and their families, especially those getting very sick or dying, this is truly a terrible period in our history. For most of us, the strain, the fear, and the restrictions are emotionally and spiritually very difficult. I have seen friends of mine on social media, sister/brother activists, openly confessing how depressed they are.

What makes it harder is the limits on what we can do about the many injustices and crimes coming along with this pandemic. We can't come together in massive numbers with our signs and

banners to demonstrate, other than in vehicles and maybe bikes, because we believe in general in the measures being taken to protect public health. Mass demonstrations are important to movements, in part to strengthen the morale and spirit of those committed to the cause.

Zoom calls help, but I keep hearing others say, and feeling myself, that though there are good things about Zoom calls, it sure has its limits.

Are there any silver linings to this pandemic time? Yes.

The big one is the further exposure of how wicked and evil Trump and those in positions of power supporting him really are. His poll numbers are not good, especially for a leader in a time of great crisis. Historically, at such a time, poll numbers go up 20-30 points when the President, or a governor or mayor, is acting decisively at a time of crisis or war. This has happened this time around for governors like Cuomo and Murphy in New York and New Jersey; both have approval ratings in the 70s. Trump's are down in the mid-40s, pretty much where they've been since being elected. In addition, polling indicates that his approval ratings among those over 65, those being hit the hardest by COVID-19, are down at least 10 percent since before it.

For the next six months,

getting rid of Trump and as many of his overt supporters as possible is job number one, far and away. However we can do that work, via phone, text, zoom call, social media, car demonstrations, long social distanced demos at least six feet apart, or whatever, it's priority work. Trump needs to go, as decisively and massively as possible. In addition to attention to our personal needs and other issues we consider important, for me the climate crisis, this is what must keep us focused and relentlessly active until he's gone. **Z**

Ted Glick is the author of the forthcoming *Burglar for Peace: Lessons Learned in the Catholic Left's Resistance to the Vietnam War*. Past writings and other information can be found at <https://tedglick.com>, and he can be followed on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/jtglick>.

If Farmworkers Are “Essential,” Why Are They Treated So Badly?

By Lawrence Wittner

On March 19, 2020, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, spurred to action by the coronavirus pandemic, issued a memorandum that identified the nation’s 2.5 million

farmworkers as “essential” workers. Soon thereafter, agribusinesses began distributing formal letters to their farm laborers, also declaring that that they were “essential.”

Of course, it shouldn’t have required a government-business effort to establish this point. Without farmworkers, there is no food. And the American people need food to survive.

But, remarkably, over the course of U.S. history, farmworkers, although essential, have been terribly mistreated. Whether as slaves, indentured servants, sharecroppers, or migrant laborers, these millions of hardworking people endured harsh and brutal lives, enriching others while

living (and usually dying) in poverty.

Nor is the situation very different today. Farm labor remains hard, grinding physical toil, often requiring long hours of bending and repetitive motion to gather crops under conditions of extreme heat. Back strain, poisoning by pesticides, and other injuries, sometimes leading to death, contribute to making agriculture one of the nation’s most hazardous industries. Employment is often seasonal or otherwise precarious.

Some problems hit portions of the farm labor force particularly hard. Roughly half of all farmworkers are undocumented immigrants, a status that places them in constant



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fear of being arrested, deported, and separated from their families. Furthermore, women farmworkers face high levels of sexual harassment, thereby confronting them with the difficult choice of reporting it and facing the possibility of being fired or remaining silent and allowing the harassment to continue.

In recent decades, the federal government has prosecuted numerous growers and labor traffickers in the Southeastern United States for what one U.S. attorney called “slavery, plain and simple.” These cases revealed farmworkers were lured to the United States under false pretenses and, then, deprived of their

passports, chained, held under armed guard, and forced to work. If they refused, they were threatened with violence, beaten, drugged, raped, pistol-whipped, and even shot. In 2015, President Obama awarded the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, which exposed these practices, the Presidential Award for Extraordinary Efforts in Combatting Modern Day Slavery.

Although people performing some of the hardest and most essential work in the United States certainly seem to deserve a break—or at least reasonable compensation—they have not received it. In 2017, according to the U.S.

Department of Labor, a quarter of all farmworkers had a family income below the official poverty level, while most of the others teetered just above it. Most of them were forced to rely on at least one public assistance program. Even after some of the more progressive states raised the state minimum wage, the average wages of farmworkers remained abysmal. In 2019, they earned only a little more than half the hourly pay rate of all American workers. Moreover, they now face enormous danger from the coronavirus pandemic. Greg Asbed, a leading voice for agricultural laborers, has pointed out that, for farmworkers,



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Some, to be sure, will be assisted by the one-time \$1,200 payment Congress voted for members of low and middle income families. But undocumented workers, who constitute so many of the nation's millions of farmworkers, are excluded from the provisions of that legislation

“the two most promising measures for protecting ourselves from the virus and preventing its spread—social distancing and self-isolation—are virtually impossible.” Many farmworkers live, crowded together, in decrepit, narrow trailers or barracks, ride to and from their workplaces in crowded buses, have little access to water and soap once in the fields, and cook and

shower in the same cramped housing facility. Rapid contagion is almost inevitable, and very few have access to healthcare of any kind.

Despite the heightened danger, though, working—even working while sick—is the only practical option for farmworkers, for, given their impoverishment, they cannot afford to be unemployed. Very few receive

paid sick days. Some, to be sure, will be assisted by the one-time \$1,200 payment Congress voted for members of low and middle income families. But undocumented workers, who constitute so many of the nation’s millions of farmworkers, are excluded from the provisions of that legislation. Nor are undocumented workers eligible for unemployment insurance—

Despite the heightened danger, though, working—even working while sick—is the only practical option for farmworkers, for, given their impoverishment, they cannot afford to be unemployed



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All the measures necessary to contain and control the virus must go forward, but they must be guided by an understanding of the racial fractures that pose continuing danger to democracy and to social well-being

although, of course, they pay the taxes that fund these programs, as well as the programs that are now bailing out America's multi-billion dollar industries.

Meanwhile, the Trump administration is getting set to deliver yet another blow to farmworkers. Almost a tenth of that work force is composed of Mexican guest workers, legally admitted to the United States for short periods under the U.S. Agriculture Department's H-2A program. As America's big agricultural growers are perennially short of laborers to harvest their crops, they have pressed hard for the admission of these guest workers. But they dislike the fact that, to avoid undercutting the wages of American workers, the H-2A program sets the wage level for guest workers at local American wage standards. And in states like California, the state's rising

minimum wage has lifted the wages of farmworkers considerably beyond the pitiful federal minimum of \$7.25 an hour. As a result, the growers have fought for years to reduce the wages paid to guest workers. Finally, in April 2020, the news broke that their dream of cheap labor would soon be realized, for the Trump administration is now laying plans to lower the guest worker wage rate to \$8.34 an hour. These plans, made at the same time that farmers and ranchers are about to receive a \$16 billion federal bailout, will cut between \$2 and \$5 per hour from the pay of guest farmworkers.

Naturally, small labor organizations like the United Farm Workers, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, and the Farm Labor Organizing Committee are fiercely resisting the continued exploitation of the 2.5 million people who

grow and harvest America's food. But there are severe limits to their power, given the greed of the agribusiness industry, plus the nakedly pro-business policies of the Trump administration and its Republican allies in Congress and many states. For the time being, at least, farmworkers seem likely to remain essential, but expendable. **Z**

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Racial Fault Lines and the Coronavirus

By Andrew Moss



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Along with millions of other Southern Californians, my family and I have been learning to live with the probability in our lifetimes of a mega-quake, a massive earthquake generated not only by sudden movement in the southern sector of the 800-mile-long San Andreas Fault, but also possibly triggered and magnified by the countless other faults that crisscross our region.

In many respects, the coronavirus pandemic has been a mega-quake rippling throughout the world, debilitating and killing tens of thousands, inflicting untold

damage on economic life and the social fabric of nations, and exposing deep fissures of inequality and injustice across America and throughout the world. In the U.S., the pandemic has underscored the pervasiveness of racism in our society, manifesting like trigger faults in myriad ways and posing formidable barriers to recovery and to the achievement of any semblance of democratic life and culture. All the measures necessary to contain and control the virus must go forward, but they must be guided by an understanding of the racial fractures that pose continuing danger to democracy and to social well-being. Failure to

do so will hobble full recovery for many years to come.

With almost 2.3 million people behind bars, the U.S. continues to have the highest number of prisoners in the world, a legacy of several decades of racially propelled policies of harsh sentencing and rapid prison building. We confine this population in what one prison official called “petri dishes” of incubation and infection: sites that lack adequate sanitation, health care, and means of social distancing. It’s no surprise, therefore, that prisons are seeing rapidly increasing rates of infection. Over 14,000 cases and 218 deaths had been re-

...a substantial body of authoritative medical and public health research underscores not only the disproportionate effects of environmental injustice (e.g. greater exposure to pollution) on these communities but also the adverse health effects of documented racial bias

ported among individuals incarcerated in state and federal prisons as I was writing this article, and the numbers have undoubtedly grown quickly since then. And in those populations are disproportionate numbers of people of color (African-Americans, for example, are incarcerated in state prisons at five times the rate of whites).

Similar issues face immigration detention facilities, where the vast majority of detained individuals are from Mexico and Central America. Considering these developments in prisons and detention facilities, one notes the insight shared by historian Kelly Lytle Hernandez: “immigration control and mass incarceration emerged as the systems of social control that frame alienated citizens and criminalized immigrants as a racialized caste of outsiders in the United States today.” As the pandemic continues to rage, these systems of social control accentuate the vulnerabilities of the millions of individuals so defined and so

framed.

Hernandez and other scholars have commented on the impacts of these systems not only on incarcerated individuals, but also on tens of millions of other people (probationers, parolees, family members, correctional employees, and residents living near prisons), and racism has been a major driver of these impacts. Writing about prisons more than a decade ago, scholar Ruth Wilson Gilmore defined racism as “the state-sanctioned and/or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.”

Today, Gilmore’s definition also speaks unerringly to the catastrophic and disproportionate impacts of the coronavirus. According to data current as of April 13, Africans constitute 6 percent of the population in Wisconsin but have accounted for 39 percent of the deaths from the coronavirus. They make up 32 percent of the population in Louisiana but almost 60

percent of the fatalities from the disease. Similar disparities exist in many other states. Conservative commentators, including Surgeon General Jerome Adams, have sought to put the onus on African-Americans themselves (the Surgeon General recently advised black people to stay clear of alcohol, tobacco, and drugs), stressing individual responsibility rather than the complex of social and environmental factors affecting communities of color. By contrast, a substantial body of authoritative medical and public health research underscores not only the disproportionate effects of environmental injustice (e.g. greater exposure to pollution) on these communities but also the adverse health effects of documented racial bias. A 2003 National Academy of Sciences report, “Unequal Treatment: Confronting Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Health Care,” found racially biased treatment to be pervasive in the American health care system. Subsequent

studies continue to affirm the presence of this bias and document its negative medical effects, including what one researcher called the “accelerated aging” associated with stresses generated by racism.

This past January, before the pandemic shut down much of America, scholar Michelle Alexander published a *New York Times* op-ed that, among other things, examined racial injustice since the publication ten years ago of her landmark book, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. Alexander critiqued the continuing pattern of reform,

retrenchment, and re-formation of racial castes that has characterized social and political change since emancipation almost 160 years ago. And she assailed the profound denial that continues to thwart genuine racial progress in America. Her title? “The Injustice of This Moment is Not an ‘Aberration’.”

Several months later, with a pandemic raging and a national election just six months away, the urgency of casting out the white nationalist regime in power is more urgent than ever. But such a victory, if it transpires, will be hollow if unaccompanied by a deep,

...with a pandemic raging and a national election just six months away, the urgency of casting out the white nationalist regime in power is more urgent than ever



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This is far from the first time Tyson, the world's second largest chicken, beef, and pork producer, has been in the news with food production scandals

sustained grappling with injustices that have cast their shadows over this country for achingly too long. **Z**

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Tyson Opens Slaughterhouse Despite 1,000 Sick Workers

By Martha Rosenberg

Even though 1,000 workers at Tyson's slaughterhouse in Waterloo, Iowa, have

tested positive for the coronavirus, it has reopened. Tyson has said last week it would begin slaughtering pigs.

The company promised that workers would receive daily screenings and access to nurse practitioners, but many who can transmit the coronavirus are asymptomatic. At 2 other Tyson Iowa plants, 956 workers have tested positive. Meanwhile, "Millions of animals—chickens, pigs and cattle—will be depopulated because of the closure of our processing facilities, Tyson admits.

This is far from the first time Tyson, the world's second largest chicken, beef, and pork producer, has been in the news with food production scandals. Tyson had a sordid food production history before the coronavirus. Here is its rap sheet.

- In June 2019, 36,420 pounds of Tyson chicken nuggets were recalled due to rubber contamination.
- In March 2019, Tyson re-

called 12 million pounds of ready-to-eat Tyson chicken strip products for possible metal contamination.

- In 2008, Tyson was caught injecting eggs with the dangerous antibiotic gentamicin, linked to serious side effects. The previous year the government disallowed the Tyson slogan "Raised Without Antibiotics," because the ionophores it adds to poultry feed are antibiotics.
- In 2004, an internal Tyson memo revealed that the wives of two veterinarians stationed at Tyson plants in Mexico had been receiving about \$2,700 a month "for years," reported the *New York Times*. When Tyson executives discovered the bribes, the payments were simply switched to the veterinarians themselves.

"Doctors will submit one invoice which will include the special payments formal-

ly [formerly?] being made to their spouses along with there [sic] normal consulting services fee,” said a Tyson’s audit department memo. No one was charged in the scandal and Greg Lee, Tyson’s chief administrative officer who received the e-mail about the veterinarians, received \$1 million and a \$3.6 million consulting contract when he retired.

- In 2003, Tyson pleaded guilty to violating the Clean Water Act with effluvia from its Sedalia, Missouri, facility and agreed to pay \$7.5 million. But before its probation ended, Tyson was charged by the state of Oklahoma with polluting the Illinois River watershed. Poultry polluters eject as much phosphorous into the watershed as a city of ten million people, said State Attorney General Drew Edmondson after bringing the changes. Phosphorus

causes overgrowth of algae and other aquatic plants which chokes off oxygen vital to other marine life.

- In 2003, Virgil Butler, a worker at Tyson’s Granis, Arkansas, chicken slaughterhouse, revealed how birds regularly miss the blade intended to kill them and are scalded alive in the defeathering tank.

“When this happens, the chickens flop, scream, kick, and their eyeballs pop out of their heads,” wrote Butler in a sworn affidavit. “Then, they often come out the other end with broken bones and disfigured and missing body parts because they’ve struggled so much in the tank.

Such birds are so common that they’re called “red birds” in the industry and account for two percent of U.S. chickens according to the National Chicken Council

- In 2001, Tyson was served with a federal indictment charging that the company paid smugglers to transport illegal workers from Mexico across the Rio Grande, after which they were supplied with phony social security cards and brazenly paid with corporate checks. “This is a company with a bad history,” Rev. Jim Lewis, an Episcopal minister in Arkansas, told the *New York Times*. “They cheat these workers out of pay and benefits, and then try to keep them quiet by threatening to send them back to Mexico.”
- In 1997 Tyson bribed former agriculture secretary in the Clinton administration Mike Espy with gifts to influence legislation in 1997 leading to his disgraced resignation. Tyson paid \$6 million to settle the accusations but the two convicted Tyson executives facing prison

“This is a company with a bad history”

time were pardoned by President Clinton.

Is it any surprise that a company that bribes federal officials and regulators, pollutes public waterways, mistreats animals and sells contaminated products would subject workers to a viral outbreak? Already two Tyson employees have died from the coronavirus.

Racism and the National Soul

By Robert C. Koehler

How deep does American racism go?

And is it possible to uproot it?

Or will it simply—endlessly—shift shape, wrap itself in the political correctness of the day and morph, say, from slavery to Jim Crow, from Jim Crow to stand-your-ground laws, gerrymandering and voter suppression?

At some point, the forces of sanity and survival must prevail and we must face this

stain on the national soul with terrifying and transcendent honesty—and eliminate it. But how, oh God, how?

Every “legal” murder—by police, by private citizens—of a human being of color brings up such questions. The most recent race-entangled murder to suddenly explode across the headlines is that of Ahmaud Arbery, a 25-year-old man who was shot and killed on February 23, while jogging in Brunswick, Georgia. Two white men—a father (a former employee of the local District Attorney’s office) and his son—had seen him running through their neighborhood, assumed he was a criminal, grabbed their guns and stalked him. The local DA, George Barnhill, refused to prosecute the case. No charges were filed against the two men for 74 days—until after a video of the shooting was made public.

As Adam Serwer noted recently in *The Atlantic*, “Barnhill’s leniency is selective.” He had spent years attempting (unsuccessfully) to prosecute a black woman who had helped another black voter use an electronic voting machine for the first time. Serwer wrote: “A crime does not occur when white men stalk and kill a black stranger. A crime does occur when black people vote.”

This is American racism

in the raw: the emperor with no clothes. And such stories are endless. For instance, the family of Breonna Taylor, an EMT, recently filed a lawsuit—with the help of the same civil rights attorney working with Ahmaud Arbery’s family—against three Louisville, Kentucky police officers who broke into her apartment at 1:00 AM on March 13 during a narcotics investigation. Taylor, age 26, was killed.

No drugs were found, the person the police were seeking didn’t live there, and they didn’t knock or identify themselves. But during the melee, according to the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, “police fired more than 20 rounds into Taylor’s home, striking objects in the living room, dining room, kitchen, bathroom, both bedrooms and into an adjacent residence where a 5-year-old child and pregnant mother were present.”

And, oh yeah, Taylor was shot eight times.



These are not isolated incidents. They're situation normal: part of the pandemic of racism that has been gnawing at the soul of this continent ever since the Europeans arrived here. The nation's racism has manifested itself over the centuries in countless ways, politically, socially, economically. The racism is deeply embedded in the coun-

try's institutions, its legal system and—oh so discretely and between the lines—in our founding documents.

Serwer, discussing the ideas of Jamaica-born philosopher Charles Mills, points out that the assumptions of white innocence and black guilt—the basic American institutional understanding of social order—are part of what Mills,

in his book of the same name, calls “the racial contract.” Serwer explains: “If the social contract is the implicit agreement among members of a society to follow the rules—for example, acting lawfully, adhering to the results of elections, and contesting the agreed-upon rules by nonviolent means—then the racial contract is a codicil



rendered in invisible ink, one stating that the rules as written do not apply to nonwhite people in the same way. The Declaration of Independence states that all men are created equal; the racial contract limits this to white men with property. The law says murder is illegal; the racial contract says it's fine for white people to chase and murder black people if they have decided that those black people scare them."

And Esau McCaulley, writing in the *New York Times* about the Arbery killing, put it this way: "Black folks need more than a trial and a verdict. Our problems are deeper, rooted not in the details of a particular case, but in distrust of the system charged with protecting us and pun-

ishing those who do us harm. This cynicism is well earned, arising out of repeated disappointments. To begin to heal this distrust we need this country to take responsibility for its devaluation of blackness and its complicity in violence against black bodies."

Obviously, some enormous approach to change is necessary. Can this country grow up—finally? We won't "end" racism. We won't end fear, hatred, projection, stupidity or mental illness, but can we not at least begin disinfecting our legal and political structure of racism's horrific consequences? What would it take to deinstitutionalize racism?

First it would take a belief that doing so was not simply necessary but possible. Be-

yond that, the answer feels almost beyond reach . . . something the size of a social Big Bang. Certainly the answer isn't bureaucratic: some new law, with the "racial contract" still invisibly simmering between the lines.

Real change would probably have to begin with an enormous public conversation, on the order of South Africa's post-apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and national acknowledgment of our history, including slavery and genocide—the theft of people, the theft of the continent—followed by atonement, reparations and institutional changes.

The first institutional change would have to be in our criminal justice system

**What
would it
take to
deinstitu-
tionalize
racism?**

Photo by AustenRisolvato/
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BRUNSWICK, GEORGIA - May 8, 2020: Scenes from the rally at the Glynn County Courthouse on the day following two arrests in the shooting death of Ahmaud Arbery.
By Michael Scott Milner/Shutterstock.com

and our underlying theory about the maintenance of social order. Disarm policing. Rethink justice. It's not a matter of punishment but a matter of healing. This would require moving from the simple to the complex, i.e., from imprisonment and the further devastation of impoverished families and communities to processes such as restorative justice, in which victims and offenders—believe me, this is not simple—are able to talk and reach reconciliation.

We don't maintain order by threat and domination. Order results from trust and understanding. An entire social

transformation is needed that acknowledges this. Without it, the worst of who we are will find ways, as it always does, to sneak back in and regain control.

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A response to the right-wing “reopen business” crowd: Be careful what one asks for

By Bill Fletcher, Jr.

In a classic episode of Rod Serling's original *Twilight*

Zone entitled “The Old Man in the Cave,” a small town has survived a nuclear holocaust for ten years while most of humanity is extinct. They have received sound advice from their leader who receives recommendations from an unseen “Old Man” in a cave.

One day, some soldiers show up claiming to be restoring order. They join with members of the town in insisting that some canned food and bottled water that the “Old Man” had insisted was radioactive be opened to everyone to enjoy. The town’s leader protests strongly, pointing out that they have not been misled by the “Old Man” in the past, but he is overridden. During this debate, the town’s people and the soldiers discover that the “Old Man” is a computer that has been providing advice. They set about destroying the computer, then consuming the food and water, and finally celebrating their liberation.

The following day everyone but the town’s leader is dead.

I found myself thinking about this episode when I watched pictures of right-wing protesters insisting that their states be reopened for business and that the restrictions imposed upon all of us as a result of the plague called COVID-19, be lifted or sig-

nificantly reduced. Trump, never someone to avoid stirring up a hornet’s nest, entered this fray insisting that his supporters “liberate” their states from the (Democratic) tyrants.

I came up with a solution that I floated on Facebook. The response was so overwhelming that I decided to compose this column.

Hiding behind the mask of so-called “libertarianism,” elements of the right-wing are insisting that government has gone too far. Yes, they acknowledge, we are in a pandemic, but it is really not that bad. After all, I’m not sick or dying, they squawk. Release us from the burdens of the

restrictions on social distancing and re-open our states for business and intimate gatherings.

Public health experts and scientists have repeatedly responded that we are not out of the woods. There is a significant danger that even after the “flattening” of the curve, there can be a round two if this re-opening is not handled carefully. Further, scientists are discovering that COVID-19 has more dangerous effects than were first thought, i.e., it is not just a bad flu; organ damage can accompany it.

For elements of the right-wing, and specifically the anti-science protesters we have seen on many streets, none of



Photo by Timothy Sanders/Shutterstock.com

The reality is that the free market and the so-called free enterprise system is largely responsible for much of today's health crisis

this matters. Open everything up, they insist.

So, here's the compromise that I propose. It's rather straightforward.

An affidavit should be developed by every level of government and all health-care providers that reads as follows: "I, _____, hereby agree that in ignoring social distancing and the other recommendations issued in order to stop the spread of COVID-19, I shall waive all rights and obligations for medical care and treatment for myself and any family member living with me over the age of 18 should I/they become ill as a result of COVID-19. I shall treat the symptoms at home through any form of self-medication available and shall not endanger any family member under the age of 18, any first responder, and/or any medical personnel. Further, should I infect anyone not

covered by this agreement through my refusal to abide by government direction regarding COVID-19, I accept criminal liability on my part."

And that's it. If the right-wing believes that government is interfering in their ability to do what they wish; if they believe that this pandemic is overstated; if they believe that social distancing infringes on their Constitutional rights, then we should release them from this burden and also release the rest of society from the responsibility to look out for them.

In watching these Trumpist, anti-science protesters parade I found myself thinking about doctors and nurses that I know on the front lines, as well as those who I watch every night on the news. I thought about the first responders who are obligated to show up when illness strikes. And then I thought about how many of them have come down with

the virus, and in many cases, died.

Leaving aside the neofascist element in the room which is suggesting that COVID-19 should be actively spread to government, Jews, and people of color, there are other Trumpist protesters who have decided that scientific guidance is of little value, particularly when it comes up against their gut feelings (to borrow from Trump). They believe, much like the people in Rod Serling's scenario, that they know better than science (the "Old Man in the Cave") and that they should trust their own judgement.

While my immediate feelings about what should happen to the right-wing anti-science protesters who paraded around cannot be put in writing, I will suggest that society should not be put at risk by those trapped in delusions. Let them pay the dear and steep price for their prideful

Dhaka, Bangladesh - May 20, 2020: Garment workers block a road as they gather in a protest demanding their unpaid wages during nationwide lockdown to curb the spread of coronavirus in Dhaka

Photo by Sk Hasan Ali/Shutterstock.com

It is the “market” that has given us the massive shortages in hospital beds, ventilators, critical personal protection equipment (PPE), and the long lag in developing interim medical treatments—let alone a vaccine

ignorance and complacency.

Hopefully, in our case, we can stop the Trumpist protesters from destroying the Old Man in the Cave (science) and, thereby, prevent further tragedies.

Z

Bill Fletcher, Jr. is the executive editor of globalafricanworker.com, former president of TransAfrica Forum, and long-time labor activist and writer.

As COVID-19 Ravages the Garment Industry, It's

Time for Consumers to Stand in Solidarity with the People Who Make Our Clothes

By Shahidur Rahman



Hunger and frustration have led to garment worker demonstrations across Dhaka

and Jason Rhodes

Visit the “Gap for Good” section of the Gap’s website, and you’ll be assured that, in the words of its founder, the company exists to “do more than sell clothes.” Gap is passionate about protecting the environment and empowering communities, we learn, so we can all feel good about swiping our credit cards in exchange for clothes that are “made responsibly and with respect for the planet that we all share.” There’s good reason for skepticism about such corporate self-promotion, of course. In fact, the fashion industry’s voluntary codes of “corporate social responsibility,” complete with advance notice of factory inspections and industry-funded “third-party verification,” have long been shown to be toothless, and a detailed 2018

report by Asia Floor Wage Alliance found gender-based violence to be rampant in the Gap’s supply chain.

If there was any remaining debate about the sincerity of global fashion’s commitment to the people and communities on which it depends, however, it was settled in the wake of the current COVID-19 crisis, as brands and buyers have responded with mass cancellations of in-process and already completed orders in an effort to minimize their own losses by pushing them onto factory owners and garment workers, the most vulnerable segments of the global fashion supply chain. The results have been catastrophic. According to the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), in Bangladesh alone 1,127 factories have reported order cancellations totaling over \$3 billion and impacting over 2

million workers. More than 50 percent of factory owners in Bangladesh report having had “a lot” or “most” of their nearly or entirely completed orders canceled, according to a recent report by Penn State’s Center for Global Workers’ Rights, with over 70 percent reporting that buyers have refused to pay for raw materials already purchased in order to fulfill the since-canceled orders. Despite posting profits of over \$6 billion in 2019, Gap, with its pledge to “do more than sell clothes,” i.e., to “do good,” is one of the many major brands listed as having not only canceled orders, but as having failed to respond to demands that it publicly commit to taking financial responsibility for them.

While these cancellations threaten the survival of Bangladesh’s garment sector, on which the country depends for over 80 percent of its export earnings, it is the sector’s

estimated 4 million workers, mostly women, who are paying the heaviest price. Bangladesh's garment workers, whose recent efforts to push the minimum wage beyond 8,000 Taka (U.S. \$95) per month were met with violent repression by government and employers, live a hand-to-mouth existence in which wages are so far below the Asia Floor Wage Alliance's living wage estimate of 42,280 Taka per month (U.S. \$570) that in a 2019 survey of hundreds of Bangladeshi garment workers,

over 90 percent reported that their wages were insufficient to adequately feed their families. For these workers, the unemployment has come in waves, as over 1 million garment workers in Bangladesh were fired or furloughed as a result of order cancellations, followed by the government shutdown of the industry on March 26 to combat the spread of the coronavirus. The hunger-inducing crisis of the sudden loss of wages has been exacerbated by incompetence, as the government's last-minute extension of the

industry shutdown, originally scheduled to be lifted on April 4, left stranded the tens of thousands of workers who had returned to Dhaka from the countryside, often traveling long distance on foot or in crowded vans and trucks in the expectation of a resumption of work. The shutdown is currently slated to last through May 5.

Hunger and frustration have led to garment worker demonstrations across Dhaka, as workers demand March wages. The protests of April 16 ended with em-



Garment workers shout slogans as they block a road demanding their due wages during the lockdown amid concerns over the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak in Dhaka, Bangladesh, April 15, 2020. Dhaka, Bangladesh

Photo by Zabeed Hasnain Chowdhury/Shutterstock.com

ployer assurances that workers would receive their wages by the end of the month. The Bangladeshi government has announced a \$588 million package to help factory owners pay their workers, but labor leaders insist that it's not nearly enough, with Kalpona Akter, founder of the Bangladesh Centre for Worker Solidarity stating that, "If Western buyers and owners don't come forward to support workers, it's going to be a disaster." While Nike, H&M, Target and a handful of other major brands and retailers have distinguished themselves by pledging to pay for orders already placed, they are the all-too-rare exceptions to the industry rule in which 98 percent of surveyed factory owners who reported order cancellations stated that they received no assistance from buyers to make legally mandated payments to furloughed workers, despite the fact that many buyers have "responsible exit" policies which ostensibly commit them to avoiding precisely the kind of "cut and run" behavior that they are currently exhibiting.

While labor organizations implore government, employers, and foreign brands and buyers to respond to the crisis of survival facing Bangladeshi garment workers with the sense of urgency and scale of response required

by the current emergency, it comes as no surprise that a chasm exists between the needs and demands of the workers, and the actions of the responsible parties. The coronavirus crisis, which plays out in the Bangladeshi garment sector as cost-shifting by foreign buyers and brands, imminent threat of bankruptcy for domestic manufacturers, and hunger for garment workers, lays bare the structure of an industry in which the ruthless competition of thousands of factories is deftly exploited by the handful of major brands and retailers that control the market, allowing them to make demands on factory owners that result in profit margins so thin that forced overtime is required to meet targets, and wages that produce not just poverty, but hunger, are accepted as the industry standard. What makes the contrast between the Gap's \$6 billion in annual profits with the malnourishment of the workers who produce its clothes even more galling is how stunningly unnecessary it all is: the factory labor cost of a garment made in Bangladesh represents less than 1 percent of its retail price. Far from representing an economic impossibility, living wages for garment workers could be realized with price increases measured in quar-

ters rather than dollars.

The industry structure which offers factory owners and garment workers so little leverage against the seemingly all-powerful brands and large retail chains in fact makes those brands and retailers vulnerable to consumer pressure, as their value, measured in billions, is entirely dependent upon shaping the consumption habits of consumers and maintaining the positive public image on which those habits depend. April 24 marks the 7th anniversary of the Rana Plaza disaster, which took the lives of over 1,100 Bangladeshi garment workers, and focused the world's attention on the cruelty of a system in which the super-profits of an industry are predicated upon a reckless disregard for the lives and well-being of the people who make its products. The revulsion of consumers in response to the crisis put genuine pressure on brands, retailers and the Bangladeshi government to take genuine steps to improve safety in Bangladesh's garment sector.

The result was The Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh, an agreement which committed signatories—led by industry heavies such as H&M, Inditex (Zara), and Abercrombie & Fitch—to independent in-

spections and binding remediation plans, and has resulted in a real but uneven record of improvement. (The Gap, incidentally, received The Public Eye's 2013 "Worst Company of the Year" Award for its refusal to sign).

The current crisis of the coronavirus pandemic should serve as a wake-up call to concerned consumers that it's time for us to once again stand in solidarity with the people who make our clothes, and augment the impact of the struggles taking place

outside factory gates with our own ability to mar the images of the brands and retail outlets whose practices result in hunger and insecurity for garment workers regardless of whether they find themselves unemployed as a result of a global pandemic or working at the frenetic pace required in "normal times." We can do this by partnering with grassroots garment worker organizations in a two-way exchange by which concerned consumers send small monthly donations in support

of labor organizing—\$5 goes much further in Bangladesh than it does here—while the labor organizations send regular reports on working conditions and their struggle to improve them. It will be our job to find creative ways to share these reports far and wide in an effort to replace the vapidness of a Gap "Be You, Be True" ad with something closer to the contents of the "Gender Based Violence in the Gap Garment Supply Chain" report in the public mind.



Garments workers shout slogans as they block a road demanding their due wages during the lockdown amid concerns over the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak in Dhaka, Bangladesh, April 15, 2020.

Dhaka, Bangladesh
Photo by Zabed Hasnain Chowdhury/Shutterstock.com

You can be a part of this effort by making a small contribution to the grassroots labor organization Bangladesh Garment Workers Solidarity. Founded by internationally renowned photographer and labor activist Taslima Akhter, Bangladesh Garment Workers Solidarity is currently providing face masks, food and hand sanitizer to garment workers while lobbying the government and employers' associations to provide relief to garment workers. You can support their efforts by making a small contribution at <https://www.gofundme.com/f/bangladesh-workers-solidarity-education-campaign>. Contributors will receive regular updates from the front lines of the garment workers' struggle in Bangladesh, and we will strategize together and with Bangladesh Garment Workers Solidarity on the best ways to use these updates to bring pressure to bear on the brands and retailers responsible for a system that derives profit from poverty. It is also crucial that we work to publicly shame the companies that reneged on their obligation to pay for orders already completed or in process, resulting in predictable crises of solvency and survival for over 1,000 factories and more than 1 million workers. You can help with this by signing the #PayUp

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petition, and circulating it widely among friends. It is our hope that our collective expression of solidarity in this time of crisis lays the foundation for an ongoing campaign which brings workers and consumers together in an effort to end the current brutality of the global fashion industry, and dismantle the façade that allows companies like the Gap, which cut and run from workers and communities in times of crisis, to hide behind empty promises of “doing good.”

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Feature



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COVID-19 Has Exposed the U.S. Under Trump as a “Failed State”

C.J. Polychroniou interviews Noam Chomsky

CJ. Polychroniou: Noam, it is widely accepted by now that the U.S. coronavirus response not only was delayed, but remains mired in contradictions as Trump battles with scientists over policy. Moreover, the country as a whole was shown to be completely unprepared for a major health crisis.

Are we talking here not simply of an incompetent administration but also of a failed state?

Noam Chomsky: Fifteen years ago, I wrote a book called *Failed States*, a common locution in the day, referring to states that are incapable of meeting the needs of citizens, in the most important case because of deep policy choices, and are a danger not only to their own citizens but the world. The prime example was the United States. Extensive evidence was reviewed. That's not of course the intended use of the phrase in the doctrinal system, just as "rogue state" means some enemy, not ourselves, the prime example.

I still stand by that judgment, which was not mine alone. A few years later, a Gallup/WIN international poll found that the U.S. is regarded as the greatest threat to world peace, no one else even close. And the severe threats of government policy to the domestic population, already quite apparent when the book appeared, became much clearer a year later when the housing bubble burst and the financial crisis ensued—along with Obama's response: bail out the perpetrators, who became richer and more powerful than before, and forget about the congressional legislation that called for some help to the many who had

lost their homes in corporate scams facilitated by the Clinton-Rubin-Summers deregulation extravaganza, extending the neoliberal assault on the population that took off under Reagan.

That's a large part of the background for what finally brought us the Trump malignancy—which may, quite literally, doom human society on Earth. We've discussed elsewhere why this is no exaggeration. I hope that the basic facts and their dread import are well understood, and won't review them here.

Trump has indeed hit America with a hammer blow—and much of the world as well, a matter we should not overlook. Just keeping to the current COVID-19 crisis, it is remarkable to see how little attention has been given to his sadistic assault against poor and suffering people around the world in pursuit of his goal of enhancing his electoral prospects.

There has been some attention to his extending his vicious attacks against refugees fleeing from misery and oppression, appealing to a deluded voter base that has been led to believe that refugees are the source of their suffering under the programs to which Trump is passionately committed.

But there is hardly a word about his attack against poor people in Africa, where unknown numbers will die thanks to his defunding of

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the World Health Organization (WHO), which has been protecting them from a wide range of diseases, now this new plague. Or about Palestinians in the occupied territories, victims of Israel's racist contempt for their health and other basic needs, amplified by Trump's defunding of their meager health, educational and support systems generally because—as he explained—they weren't treating him with enough respect while he's smashing them in the face.

Trump's withholding funds from the WHO was just the first step in his campaign to destroy the organization. The campaign provides real insight into the deeply rooted malevolence not only of Trump but of the gang he has collected around him, most of whom cower in silence (though some speak out), sometimes even outdoing the boss. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has been in the forefront of demonizing the WHO in support of Trump's increasingly desperate efforts to find a scapegoat for his terrible crimes against Americans. It doesn't matter how many miserable people are slaughtered in Africa and elsewhere in the Global South as crucial WHO services are undermined. Just “shithole countries” anyway, as the Dear Leader has explained.

It is by now common understanding that the U.S. under Trump is a failed state that is a serious danger to the world. Diplomats speak in muted tones, not wanting to offend the raging beast in Washington who has unlimited power to destroy. But the meaning is clear when a “senior European official” says that “The U.S. administration is very fixated on the reelection campaign and on who can get blamed for this catastrophic COVID-19 situation in the U.S. They are blaming WHO and China for it. Therefore it is very difficult to agree on a common language about the WHO.”

The “common language” in question has to do with a UN Security Council resolution that the Trump administration is blocking.

The resolution calls for “a global ceasefire pertaining to armed conflict in response to the pandemic [and urges] member states to ‘share timely and transparent information regarding the outbreak of COVID-19.’” But the resolution is unacceptable to the White House, because it calls on countries to “support the full implementation of the WHO International Health Regulations.” As the senior European official said, asking countries to implement procedures to contain the crisis is harmful to Trump's reelection campaign.

In brief, the dedication to slaughter poor and suffering people in pursuit of personal gain is so profound that even reference to WHO health regulations cannot be mentioned. The WHO is reaching the status of climate change, a phrase that has to be excised from official documents dealing with the environment. Across the board, Trump and his acolytes are echoing the words of Francisco Franco's fascist Gen. Millán Astray: “Down with intelligence! Long live death!”

Turning directly to your question, I think “incompetent” is not the right word for Trump's malevolence, which turned serious problems in the U.S. into a devastating crisis. But we should not overlook the serious problems inherited by the cruel gang in today's White House. It's crucial to understand the background for the crisis if we hope to contain the next pandemic, likely to be worse than this one because of the impact of the global warming that is a far more severe threat.

At the root, there are three factors: general capitalist logic, the more brutal neoliberal variant, and reactions by individual governments.

In 2003, after the SARS epidemic, scientists were well aware that a pandemic is likely, probably a related coronavirus. They also understood how to prepare for it—just as scientists today have a good idea as to how to prepare for the coming one.

But it's not enough to know. Someone has to pick up the ball and run with it. The obvious candidate is Big Pharma, with huge resources, bloated with profits thanks to the exorbitant patent rights granted them under the highly protectionist "free trade" agreements. They're ruled out, however, by normal capitalist logic. There's no profit in preparing for a catastrophe down the road. And in fact it can be in their interest to impede a constructive response.

Next, the government could step in, but

that's blocked by the neoliberal intensification of capitalism's inherent inhumanity. As Reagan declaimed in his inauguration speech, government is the problem, not the solution. Translation: Take decision-making away from government, which is at least partially responsive to public influence, and hand it over to private tyrannies that are unaccountable to the public. An essential component of neoliberalism, overt since its origins in interwar Vienna, is that democracy is a threat that must be contained, even destroyed by state violence if

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necessary, principles advocated in word and action by the gurus of the movement: Ludwig von Mises, Friedrich Hayek and others. Furthermore, as Milton Friedman counseled in the Reagan years, the unaccountable tyrannies who control decision-making must be guided by sheer greed. Any concern for others would shake the foundations of civilization.

The creed was not strictly observed. Obama tried to evade it slightly, but the efforts were quickly smashed by capitalist logic (the ventilator-Covidien affair that we've discussed elsewhere is an example). But government intervention was largely blocked.

The third factor is the reactions of individual governments. They varied. China very quickly provided the WHO and the world with all relevant information. By early January, Chinese scientists had identified the virus and sequenced the genome. Some countries

at once reacted: Taiwan, South Korea, Singapore, New Zealand, a few others, which now seem to have the crisis largely under control. Europe dithered but finally acted, with varying degrees of success.

At the bottom of the barrel is Trump, reflecting his dedication to his primary constituency, private wealth and corporate power, lightly hidden under a farcical display of "populism." Throughout his term in office, Trump has systematically pursued policies that enrich his primary constituency while harming others, including his adoring crowds. One part of this program was steadily defunding the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and dismantling programs that could have provided advance warning of what was likely to happen. As a result, the U.S. was singularly unprepared.

Though the U.S. and a few other failed



states had all the information that led functioning societies to react appropriately, of course not all was entirely clear. That could hardly have been possible in such tumultuous circumstances. Like others, high U.S. health officials had some uncertainty about what exactly was happening and how best to handle it. Nevertheless, it was possible to take effective action, as shown by the record of governments that have some concern for their citizens. U.S. intelligence and health officials understood more than enough. Through January and February, they were trying to get through to the White House, but Trump was too busy watching his TV ratings. In the style of petty dictators, he has surrounded himself with sycophants or comical figures. So, nothing from them. Or from the Republican Party, now trembling in fear of the crowds that can be mobilized by Trump and his corporate sponsors.

When some dare to inject a little rationality into administration discussions, they quickly learn their lessons, like the physician in charge of developing vaccines who was dismissed in April for warning against one of the quack medicines that Trump was advertising.

“Down with intelligence! Long live death!”

Trump should be given credit for his consid-

erable achievements. It’s not easy to get away with holding up a banner with one hand saying “I love you, I’m our savior, I’m chosen by heaven to protect you,” while the other hand is stabbing you in the back. But Trump is doing it, brilliantly. He’s the supreme con man, who makes P.T. Barnum look like an amateur. He’s in a long tradition, back to trading tales for fun in the old West, to the self-declared King of France in Huckleberry Finn, to the guy who’ll sell you the Brooklyn Bridge. Moving to a different sphere, we might also include the president who won the “marketer of the year” award from the Association of National Advertisers for his political campaign, easily defeating Apple and other amateurs, and went on to win a Nobel Peace Prize for some pleasant rhetoric.

But Trump is in a class by himself. Not just as a con man, but much more significantly as a dedicated enemy of the human race. That much is demonstrated by his policies on accelerating environmental catastrophe and dismantling the arms control regime that has provided some protection from terminal nuclear war, quite aside from a stream of peccadilloes of the kind already mentioned.

While praising Trump for his considerable achievements, we must also bear in mind that

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the health system that he has been wrecking was already in terrible shape. The privatized profit-driven health system in the U.S. was an international scandal long before Trump, with costs about twice as high as comparable countries and some of the worst outcomes. On the eve of the pandemic, the costs of this dysfunctional system were estimated at \$450 billion in wasted expense and 68,000 deaths annually by *The Lancet*, one of the world's leading medical journals.

Beyond that, the neoliberal business model dictates that hospital care must be “efficient”: the minimum number of nurses and hospital beds to just get by in normal times—not much fun for patients even in normal times even at the world's best hospitals, as many can attest (myself included). And if anything goes wrong, tough luck.

It should be added that contrary to common belief, the U.S. does have universal health care. It's called “emergency rooms.” If you can drag yourself to one, they'll take care of you, often with superb care—and often a hefty bill. It's the most cruel and expensive form of universal care known, but at least it's there.

Bad as the situation was that Trump inherited, he has been committed to making it worse. One illustration of the commitments (and

moral level) of the White House is the budget it submitted for the coming year on February 10, while the pandemic was raging. It called for still further cuts for the CDC along with increased subsidies to the fossil fuel industries that are driving us to final catastrophe. And, of course, more funding for the bloated military and for the famous wall that will protect us from the rapists and murderers surging across the border.

That barely skims the surface. Failed state? Four more years?

Are the anti-lockdown protests, which Trump is openly encouraging, merely about the shutting down of the economy and quarantines?

We have enough experience to see that virtually everything Trump does is about himself—the country and the world be damned. In this case, one can detect a strategy behind the ongoing circus. Trump has been casting about to find someone to blame for his crimes. After evoking the Yellow Peril and laboring to destroy the WHO, with grim effects, he's pretty much run out of targets. A rational next step is to tell governors that it's your business: the federal government, which has all the resources, can't do anything for you. If anything

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goes wrong, it's your fault, not mine. And if something happens to go right somewhere, it demonstrates what a stable genius I am, and will be trumpeted by Sean Hannity as the most brilliant decision in human history.

This is similar to the strategy of saying one thing today and the opposite tomorrow, each echoed rapturously by Fox News while the liberal press dutifully tots up the lies (20,000?). If you shoot arrows at random, some may hit the target. And if one does? I'm vindicated and the scam goes on. You can't lose.

The governors' ploy is about the same: en-

force lockdown, open up the economy (and protect our "Second Amendment rights," which has nothing to do with anything but pushes the right buttons). If it makes life harder for the governors and leads to many deaths, that's OK too. It's all the fault of the urban centers where diseases and other maladies fester among those who are poisoning our lily-white society.

Malevolent, but not stupid.

It's tempting to add the injunction to the states by Mitch McConnell, the real evil genius of the Republican organization. Go bank-

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So it's important to divert attention to "cultural issues," to pretend to be adamantly opposed to abortion rights and love assault rifles, to be terrified of them, to dismiss global warming as a Commie plot, and all the rest

rupt. The Republican Senate is not going to compensate you for your foolish decision to give pensions to firefighters, teachers, policemen and other undeserving takers. We have to save the money for the makers, like the airline industries that need \$50 billion because in the glory days of high profits, instead of improving services and building the enterprises, they spent close to \$50 billion in buybacks to inflate stock prices and compensation for management. After all, first things first. There's no need to elaborate. His vileness has been so egregious that there's been plenty of commentary in the mainstream press.

In defense of Trump, McConnell and the rest of the merry gang, they are carrying to an extreme the only way of dealing with the dilemma that the Republicans have faced since they turned to pure service to the business world. It's hard to go to voters and say, "Look, we're the more extreme of the two business parties. We're designing policies to benefit our primary constituency of great wealth and corporate power, and to throw you into the waste bin. So vote for us."

Somehow, that doesn't work well. So it's important to divert attention to "cultural issues," to pretend to be adamantly opposed to abortion rights and love assault rifles, to be terrified of them, to dismiss global warming as a Commie plot, and all the rest. The word "pretend" is quite appropriate, but I won't go into that here.

The Democratic establishment has its own sins to answer for, but it is nothing like this; more like the moderate Republicans of the days before the Gingrich-Hastert-McConnell era. And it is subject to popular pressures, which have moved the party considerably to the left in recent years. That's not insignificant.

World leaders' approval rating has soared as a result of their handling of the coronavirus crisis, with the exception of Donald Trump. Could coronavirus be the determinant element that will put an end to four years of a nightmarish scenario written, directed, produced and carried out by the most dangerous buffoon this country has had for president? Trump's Waterloo, so to speak?

Trump benefited from the usual leadership bump when he finally acknowledged that the crisis was real, two months late, and assumed the proper presidential pose. His approval ratings have since receded to the norm from the beginning of his presidency. That's a pretty impressive performance considering what he's done to the country. I can't guess where it will go from here. It's really hard to say. He's damned resilient, and his voting base and media echo chamber stay loyal. Current statistics show that he seems to be back to his norm of approval, which hasn't varied a great deal through his term. And if it looks bad, they

might pull something before November. Like concocting an incident and bombing Iran.

Why is Trump bent on destroying the U.S. Postal Service (USPS)?

What does the postal service contribute to private wealth and corporate power (Trump's primary constituency)? Essentially nothing. Just means that they have to pay taxes for rural mail service and other services for ordinary people—insofar as they pay taxes, another interesting topic that I'll put aside. If the USPS is privatized, it can contribute to private wealth and corporate power, and they can run it "efficiently," like the health care system.

A good deal more is involved. It's important to them to drive out of people's heads the idea that democracy might work, that a public system can serve the needs of the general public. In much of the country, the local post office not only serves people's needs efficiently but is even a place where you can stop by and chat with a human being and meet your friends.

And—horror of horrors—activists might be able to help people realize why the postal service was set up by the founders. Its prime function in early years was to deliver journals and magazines cheaply, a subsidy to an independent press, what the founders seem to have had in mind in framing the First Amendment. These matters are explored in depth in scholarly work by Robert McChesney and Victor Pickard, who carry the discussion right to the 20th century struggles to join the world in having vibrant public media, a critical matter for media activists today.

That's dangerous turf. Better to destroy the virus of democracy before it infects too many people.

Joe Biden expressed the fear last week that Trump might attempt to delay the November 2020 election. Is this a likely scenario? Does

the sitting president have the authority to do so on account of a national crisis?

No constitutional authority, but Trump is quite capable of imitating his ludicrous friend Jair Bolsonaro and declaring "I am the Constitution." Unlike the Brazilian judiciary, the Roberts Supreme Court might back such a statement up. And if granted another four years of court-packing up and down the line with young ultra-right figures, virtually anything will be possible. Anything, that is, but mildly progressive measures. Their fate will be dim for a generation or more.

It's also not beyond imagination that if Trump loses the electoral college (not just the popular vote), he'll declare the election illegitimate, claiming that the Democrats brought in undocumented immigrants, and insist on staying in office, surrounded by armed militias.

I can't verify it, but it's been credibly reported that if he has to leave the White House, Trump may be facing serious charges brought by states' attorneys. That aside, given his mental state, Trump might not be able to handle defeat and walk away like a normal human being.

Many on the left feel, naturally, and with much justification, extremely uncomfortable about Joe Biden. In fact, we hear now from some quarters the same arguments we heard in 2016 about Hillary Clinton, which is to say that it would be unconscionable for progressives to accept the "lesser of two evils" principle. How can we understand the political and conceptual context of electoral choices made by progressives and the left in November 2020?

These questions are plainly important. They are a matter of intense discussion and often impassioned debate on the left, and plenty of

invective. That makes them worth discussing. To be quite frank, I don't see much other reason for discussing them. I've tried to explain in recent interviews, and judging by the reactions, have failed. So, I will repeat in more detail.

I've been around for a long time and can't think of a candidate about whom I was not "extremely uncomfortable," at least since FDR (and I was too young to have considered opinions then).

In Biden's case it's easy to think of reasons to be extremely uncomfortable. We can begin with his participation in the destruction of Libya and Honduras, in Obama's global assassination campaign, in breaking all records in deportation—and on from there. But while continuing with constant efforts to change that world, we have to take off a few minutes to each make our own choices on election day.

Let's think through the two concepts that lie behind the question: "unconscionable" and "lesser of two evils principle."

Let's start with "unconscionable." There are those—including close personal friends and long-time activists whom I greatly respect—who take the position that some actions are simply "unconscionable," whatever the consequences. I will ignore this position. To me, frankly, it seems not worth discussing. In the moral domain, what matters is the predictable consequences of your actions, those you are well aware of but choose to ignore. No one cares if you feel your conscience is clear.

Let's turn to the lesser of two evils principle.

Throughout my lifetime of activism (almost 80 years), I've been familiar with two doctrines about voting. One is the official doctrine.

Official doctrine holds that politics consists of showing up every few years, pushing a lever, then going back to one's private pursuits. Citizens are "spectators," not "participants

in action," according to official doctrine. They can choose one or another member of the leadership class ("the responsible men") but that's the limit of popular participation. I happen to be quoting Walter Lippmann, a respected public intellectual of the 20th century (a Wilson-FDR-JFK liberal), in his "progressive essays in democracy," but the ideas are representative of prevailing liberal opinion. They trace back to the framers of the Constitution. That's why the "gold standard" in constitutional scholarship, a fine and illuminating study by Michael Klarman, is called "The Framers' Coup"—a coup against the popular demand for democracy.

On the right, views are much harsher.

A second doctrine is the one that has always prevailed on the left, call it "left doctrine." Politics consists in constant direct popular engagement in public affairs, including a wide variety of activism on many fronts. Occasionally an event comes up in the formal political arena called an "election." For left activists, that requires spending a brief period assessing the options (a very brief period for legitimate activists, who've been following everything relevant closely). Then comes a decision as to whether it's worthwhile to take a few minutes away from ongoing political work to push a lever in the quadrennial extravaganza. It's at most a brief departure from political engagement.

That's the doctrine that I've followed all my life, sometimes abstaining because the show didn't seem to matter and there's no point legitimizing the charade by participating, sometimes voting for a third party, sometimes voting for Jones if it's important to block Smith. I've sometimes voted for a Republican, in years when the Republicans were still a bone fide political party and had a better candidate.

There are, of course, myriad other cases, but the general point of left doctrine seems clear.

...another four years of Trump and we'll have approached or possibly passed tipping points on the path toward environmental catastrophe

In recent years, a third doctrine has made an appearance and is now consuming much debate on the left: the lesser of two evils principle. I'd never heard of it before, in a lifetime of intensive political engagement (in the left doctrine sense). And it seems quite strange to me. It obviously is quite different from left doctrine, the prevailing doctrine on the left. The intensive debate about it falls within official doctrine, with its laser-like focus on the elections.

My own feeling about the lesser of two evils principle, of course, is that we should reject it in favor of left doctrine. It has no merits that I can see, so I think we can put it aside, along with the often-fevered debate about it.

Let's now consider the immediate case in hand. If the traditional left doctrine were applied to the current situation, it would require comparing Trump and his entourage with Biden and his, and asking whether there is a difference between them.

I personally think the difference is colossal. First and decisive, another four years of Trump and we'll have approached or possibly passed tipping points on the path toward environmental catastrophe toward which Trump is racing, his "party" in tow, virtually isolated in the world, certainly in the political system

here. Just as important, the arms control regime will be dismantled, sharply increasing the threat of terminal war. The severe threats that Trump has incited in the Middle East will have increased, if not exploded. The Doomsday Clock, already reduced to seconds under Trump, will probably be close to abandoned. The reactionary international led by the White House that Trump is establishing will be well solidified. At home, the judiciary will be so packed by ultra-right young judges that no progressive initiatives will be able to be implemented for a generation. By the wayside we'll be observing other horrors, like children sent to concentration camps on the border, Black people murdered on a whim, etc.

An advocate of left doctrine will spend a few minutes reviewing the familiar facts, then take off another few minutes to push a lever, then go back to work.

I know of only one proposed counterargument. We have to put pressure on the Democratic establishment. To begin with, it's not a counterargument. It simply reiterates the main thesis of left doctrine: constant pressure. The only remaining question is how to impose pressure. There are, basically, two proposals on the table. The first is left doctrine. The second is refusing to vote for Biden.

Let's take a look at these.

First, left doctrine. We continue with what has been done, and has been very effective. One illustration is the Sanders campaign, which has been a remarkable success in shifting debate and policy choices to the left. The activism of the Sunrise Movement—aided by young congresswomen brought to office in the Sanders wave, notably Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez—has brought to the legislative agenda a Green New Deal, with the cooperation of liberal Democrat Ed Markey, senator from Massachusetts. Some version of a Green New Deal is essential for survival. There have also been significant shifts in other areas

(health care, minimum wage, harsh repression in vulnerable communities, women's rights, on and on). We can, in fact, see this in Biden's program, which is well to the left of previous Democratic front-runners. That's why Biden is supported against Trump by Sanders (who had a large role in bringing the shift about) and also by longtime labor activists like Lawrence Mishel and Jared Bernstein. It's not my program, or yours, but we can hardly doubt that it is an improvement over what preceded.

Left doctrine efforts can work, as they often have before. We all know that that has been the main source of progress over the years, particularly when there were administrations



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susceptible to activist pressure.

It could be argued that political programs are just words. True, but irrelevant. Left doctrine efforts can keep Biden's feet to the fire, as has often happened in the past. And there will be opportunities to go far beyond, an urgent necessity.

In contrast, we can be sure that a Trump administration will be rock solid in opposition.

The second approach is to refuse to vote for Biden in the hope that withholding the vote will convince the Democratic establishment to take us seriously down the road. I can't honestly construct a plausible version of this view, and it would be unfair to try.

Turning finally to your question, "How can we understand the political and conceptual context of electoral choices made by progressives and the left in November 2020?"

To me the answer seems clear. We should assess whether there is meaningful difference between the candidates, and also recognize that, for most of us, voting takes a few minutes. Then we go back to our real activist work.

Z

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Feature



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Trump Must Choose Between a Global Ceasefire and America's Long Lost Wars

By Medea Benjamin & Nicolas J S Davies

As President Trump has complained, the U.S. does not win wars anymore. In fact, since 1945, the only four wars it has won were over the small neocolonial outposts of Grenada, Panama, Kuwait and Kosovo. Americans across the political spectrum refer to the wars the U.S. has launched since 2001 as “endless” or “unwinnable” wars. We know by now that there is no elusive victory around the corner that will redeem the

criminal futility of the U.S.'s opportunistic decision to use military force more aggressively and illegally after the end of the Cold War and the horrific crimes of September 11. But all wars have to end one day, so how will these wars end?

As President Trump nears the end of his first term, he knows that at least some Americans hold him responsible for his broken promises to bring U.S. troops home and wind down Bush's and Obama's wars. Trump's own day-in-day-out war-making has gone largely unreported by the subservient, tweet-baited U.S. corporate media, but Trump has dropped at least 69,000 bombs and missiles on Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria, more than either Bush or Obama did in their first terms, including in Bush's invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.

Under cover of highly publicized redeployments of small numbers of troops from a few isolated bases in Syria and Iraq, Trump has actually expanded U.S. bases and deployed at least 14,000 more U.S. troops to the greater Middle East, even after the U.S. bombing and artillery campaigns that destroyed Mosul in

Iraq and Raqqa in Syria ended in 2017. Under the U.S. agreement with the Taliban, Trump has finally agreed to withdraw 4,400 troops from Afghanistan by July, still leaving at least 8,600 behind to conduct airstrikes, "kill or capture" raids and an even more isolated and beleaguered military occupation.

Now a compelling call by UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres for a global ceasefire during the COVID-19 pandemic has given Trump a chance to gracefully de-escalate his un-winnable wars—if indeed he really wants to. Over 70 nations have expressed their support for the ceasefire. President Macron of France claimed on April 15 that he had persuaded Trump to join other world leaders supporting a UN Security Council resolution backing the Secretary General's call. But within days it became clear that the U.S. was opposing the resolution, insisting that its own "counterterrorism" wars must go on, and that any resolution must condemn China as the source of the pandemic, a poison pill calculated to draw a swift Chinese veto.

So Trump has so far spurned this chance



to make good on his promise to bring U.S. troops home, even as his lost wars and ill-defined global military occupation expose thousands of troops to the COVID-19 virus. The U.S. Navy has been plagued by the virus: as of mid-April 40 ships had confirmed cases, affecting 1,298 sailors. Training exercises, troop movements and travel have been canceled for U.S.-based troops and their families. The military reported 7,145 cases as of May 1, with more falling sick every day.

The Pentagon has priority access to COVID testing, protective gear and other resources, so the catastrophic shortage of resources at civilian hospitals in New York and elsewhere are being exacerbated by shipping them all over the world to 800 military bases, many of which are already redundant, dangerous or counter-productive.

Afghanistan, Syria and Yemen were already suffering from the worst humanitarian crises and most compromised health systems in the world, making them exceptionally vulnerable to the pandemic. The U.S.'s defunding of the World Health Organization leaves them in even worse straits. Trump's decision to keep U.S. troops fighting America's long lost wars in Afghanistan and other war-zones only makes it more likely that his presidency may be tainted by indelible images of helicopters rescuing Americans from embassy rooftops. The U.S. Embassy in Baghdad was purposely and presciently built with a helipad on the ground to avoid duplicating the U.S.'s iconic humiliation in Saigon—now Ho Chi Minh City.

Meanwhile, nobody on Joe Biden's staff seems to think the UN's call for a global ceasefire is important enough to take a position on. While a credible accusation of sexual assault has sabotaged Biden's main message that "I'm different from Trump," his recent hawkish rhetoric on China likewise smacks of continuity, not contrast, with Trump's at-

titudes and policies. So the UN's call for a global ceasefire is a unique chance for Biden to gain the moral high ground and demonstrate the international leadership he likes to brag about but has yet to show off during this crisis.

For Trump or Biden, the choice between the UN ceasefire and forcing America's virus-imperilled troops to keep fighting its long lost wars should be a no-brainer. After 18 years of war in Afghanistan, leaked documents have shown that the Pentagon never had a real plan to defeat the Taliban. The Iraqi parliament is trying to expel U.S. forces from Iraq for the second time in 10 years, as it resists getting dragged into a U.S. war on its neighbor Iran. The U.S.'s Saudi allies have begun UN-mediated peace negotiations with the Houthis in Yemen. The U.S. is no closer to defeating its enemies in Somalia than it was in 1992. Libya and Syria remain mired in civil war, nine years after the U.S., along with its NATO and Arab monarchist allies, launched covert and proxy wars against them. The resulting chaos has spawned new wars in West Africa and a refugee crisis across three continents. And the U.S. still has no viable war plan to back up its illegal sanctions and threats against Iran or Venezuela.

The Pentagon's latest plan to justify its obscene demands on our country's resources is to recycle its Cold War against Russia and China. But the U.S.'s imperial or "expeditionary" military forces regularly lose their own simulated war games against formidable Russian or Chinese defense forces, while scientists warn that their new nuclear arms race has brought the world closer to Doomsday than at even the most terrifying moments of the Cold War.

Like a movie studio that's run out of fresh ideas, the Pentagon has plumped for the politically safe option of a sequel to "The Cold War," its last big money-spinner before "The



War on Terror.” But there is nothing remotely safe about “Cold War II.” It could be the last movie this studio ever makes—but who will be left to hold it accountable?

Like his predecessors from Truman to Obama, Trump has been caught in the trap of America’s blind, deluded militarism. No president wants to be the one who “lost” Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq or any other country that has been politically sanctified with the blood of young Americans, even when the whole world knows they should not have been there in the first place. In the parallel universe of American politics, the popular myths of American power and exceptionalism that sustain the military occupation of the American mind dictate continuity and deference to the military-industrial complex as the politically safe choice, even when the results are catastrophic in the real world.

While we recognize these perverse constraints on Trump’s decision-making, we think that the confluence of the UN ceasefire call, the pandemic, anti-war public opinion, the presiden-

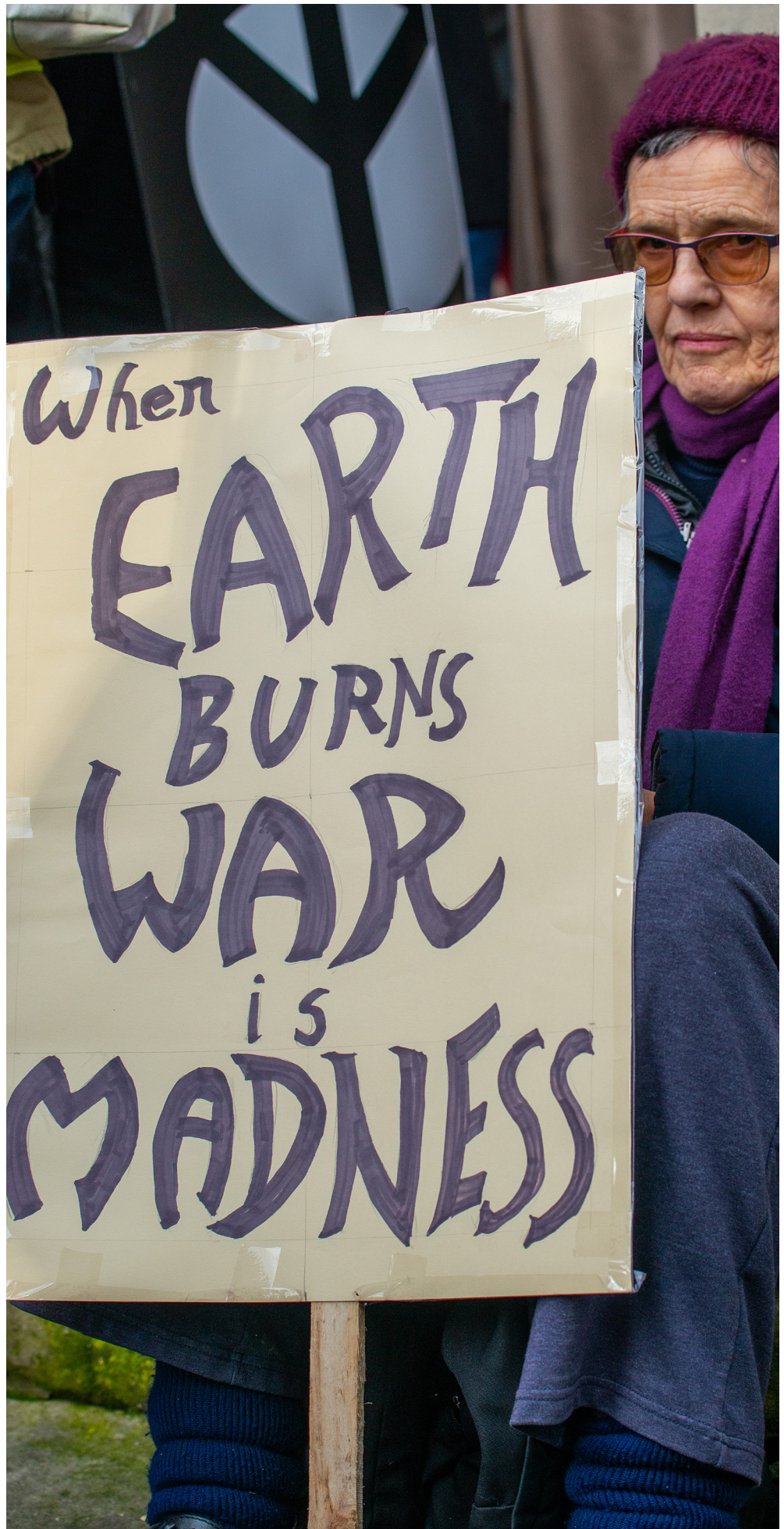
tial election and Trump's glib promises to bring U.S. troops home may actually align with doing the right thing in this case.

If Trump was smart, he would seize this moment to embrace the UN's global ceasefire with open arms; support a UN Security Council resolution to back up the ceasefire; start socially distancing U.S. troops from people trying to kill them and places where they are not welcome; and bring them home to the families and friends who love them.

If this is the only correct choice Donald Trump ever makes as President, he will finally be able to claim that he deserves a Nobel Peace Prize more than Barack Obama did. Z

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Feature



Photo by owlcloud/Shutterstock.com

Welcome to the Era of the Great Disillusionment

By Jonathan Cook

This is a column I have been mulling over for a while but, for reasons that should be immediately obvious, I have been hesitant to write. It is about 5G, vaccines, 9/11, aliens, and lizard overlords. Or rather, it isn't. Let me preface my argument by making clear I do not intend to express any view about the truth or falsity of any of these debates—not even the one about reptile rulers. My re-

fusal to publicly take a position should not be interpreted as my implicit endorsement of any of these viewpoints because, after all, only a crazy tinfoil hat-wearing conspiracy theorist sympathizer would refuse to make their views known on such matters.

Equally, my lumping together of all these disparate issues does not necessarily mean

I see them as alike. They are presented in mainstream thinking as similarly proof of an unhinged, delusional, conspiracy-oriented mindset. I am working within a category that has been selected for me.

Truth and falsehood are not what this column is about. To consider these topics solely on the basis of whether they are true or false

With that kind of media in place—one that truly holds politicians to account and celebrates scientists for their contributions to collective knowledge, not their usefulness to corporate enrichment—we would not need to worry about the safety of our communications systems or medicines, we would not need to doubt the truth of events in the news or wonder whether we have lizards for rulers, because in that kind of world no one would rule over us



These kinds of debates are shaping our discursive landscape, and have profound political implications. It is these matters, not questions of truth, I want to examine in this column

would distract from the critical thinking I wish to engage in here—especially since critical thinking is so widely discouraged in our societies. I want this column to deny a safe space to anyone emotionally invested in either side of these debates. (Doubtless, that will not deter those who would prefer to make mischief and misrepresent my argument. That is a hazard that comes with the territory.)

I am focusing on this set of issues now because some of them have been playing out increasingly loudly on social media as we cope with the isolation of lockdowns. People trapped at home have more time to explore the Internet, and that means more opportunities to find often obscure information that may or may not be true. These kinds of debates are shaping our discursive landscape, and have profound political implications. It is these matters, not questions of truth, I want to examine in this column.

Social Media and 5G

Let's take 5G—the new, fifth-generation mobile phone technology—as an example. I am not a scientist, and I have done no research on 5G. Which is a very good reason why no one should be interested in what I have to say about the science or the safety of 5G. But like many people active on social media, I have been made aware—often with little choice on my part—of online debates about 5G and science.

Like TV presenter Eamonn Holmes, I have inevitably gained an impression of that debate. To a casual viewer, the debate looks (and we are discussing here appearances only) something like this:

a) State scientific advisers, as well as scientists whose jobs or research are financed by the mobile phone industry, are very certain

that there are no dangers associated with 5G.

b) A few scientists (real ones, not evangelical pastors pretending to be former Vodafone executives) have warned that there has not been independent research on the health effects of 5G, that the technology has been rushed through for commercial reasons, and that the possible dangers posed long term to our health from constant exposure have not been properly assessed.

c) Other scientists in this specialist field, possibly the majority, are keeping their peace.

Business our new god

That impression might not be true. It may be that that is just the way social media

has made the debate look. It is possible that on the contrary:

- the research has been vigorously carried out, even if it does not appear to have been widely reported in the mainstream media,
- mobile phone and other communication industries have not financed what research there is in an attempt to obtain results helpful to their commercial interests,
- the aggressively competitive mobile phone industry has been prepared to sit back and wait several years for all safety issues to be resolved, unconcerned about the effects on their profits of such delays,
- the industry has avoided using its mon-

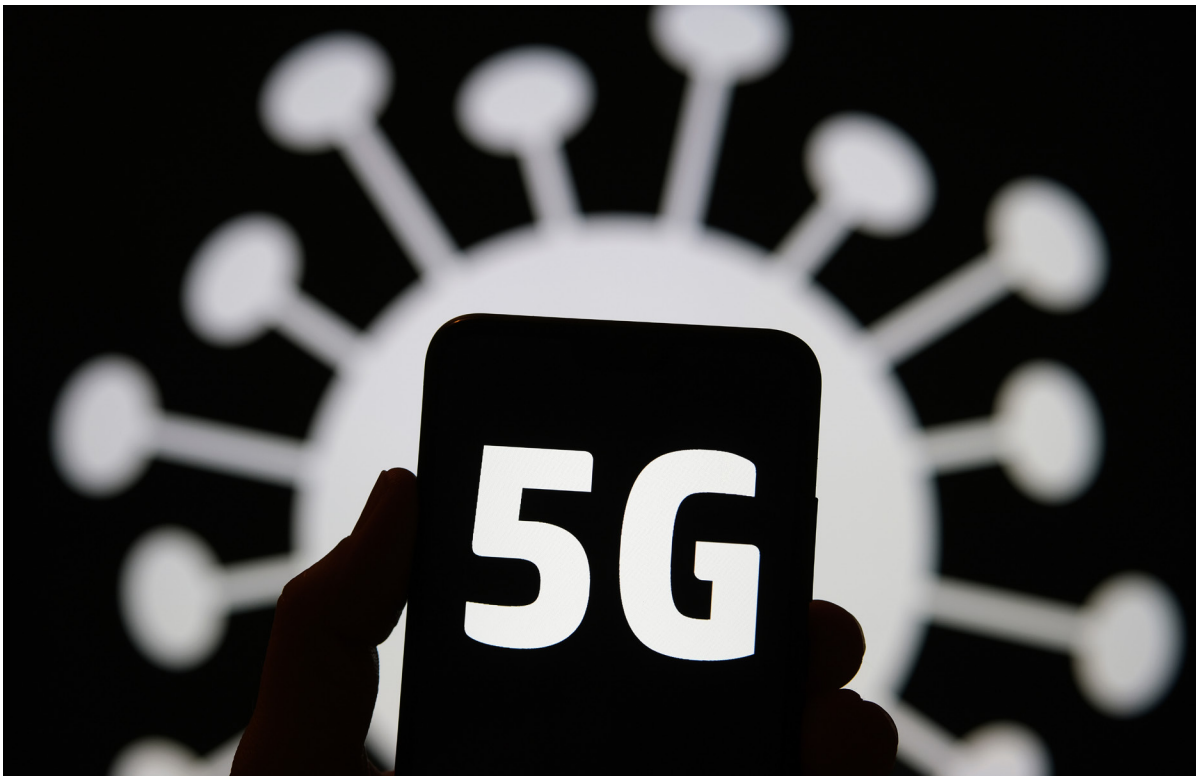


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Those who worry about 5G—a growing section of western populations, it seems—have very little trust in our institutions and increasingly in our scientists too. And the people responsible for that erosion of trust are our governments—and, if we are brutally honest, the scientists as well

ey and lobbyists to buy influence in the corridors of power and advance a political agenda based on its commercial interests rather than on the science, and

- individual governments, keen not to be left behind on a global battlefield in which they compete for economic, military and intelligence advantage, have collectively waited to see whether 5G is safe rather than try to undercut each other and gain an edge over allies and enemies alike.

All of that is possible. But anyone who has been observing our societies for the past few decades—where business has become our new god, and where corporate money seems to dominate our political systems more than the politicians we elect—would have at least reasonable grounds to worry that corners may have been cut, that political pressure may have been exerted, and that some scientists (who are presumably human like the rest of us) may have been prepared to prioritize their careers and incomes over the most rigorous science.

Again, I am not a scientist. Even if the research has not been carried out properly and the phone industry has lobbied sympathetic politicians to advance its commercial interests, it is still possible that, despite all that, 5G is entirely safe. But as I said at the start, I am not here to express a view about the science of 5G.

I am discussing instead why it is not unreasonable or entirely irrational for a debate about the safety of 5G to have gone viral on social media while being ignored by corporate media; why a very mainstream TV presenter like Eamonn Holmes might suggest—to huge criticism—a need to address growing public concerns about 5G; why such concerns might quickly morph into fears of a connection between 5G and the current global pandemic; and why frightened people might decide to take things into their own hands by burning down 5G masts.

Explaining this chain of events is not the same as justifying any of the links in that chain. But equally, dismissing all of it as simply looney-tunes conspiracism is not entirely reasonable or rational either.

The issue here is not really about 5G, it's about whether our major institutions still hold

Looney-Tunes Conspiracism

public trust. Those who dismiss all concerns about 5G have a very high level of trust in the state and its institutions. Those who worry about 5G—a growing section of western populations, it seems—have very little trust in our institutions and increasingly in our scientists too. And the people responsible for that erosion of trust are our governments—and, if we are brutally honest, the scientists as well.

Information Overload

Debates like the 5G one have not emerged in a vacuum. They come at a moment of unprecedented information dissemination that derives from a decade of rapid growth in social media. We are the first societies to have

access to data and information that was once the preserve of monarchs, state officials and advisers, and in more recent times a few select journalists.

Now rogue academics, rogue journalists, rogue former officials—anyone, in fact—can go online and discover a myriad of things that until recently no one outside a small establishment circle was ever supposed to understand. If you know where to look, you can even find some of this stuff on Wikipedia (see, for example, Operation Timber Sycamore).

The effect of this information overload has been to disorientate the great majority of us who lack the time, the knowledge and the analytical skills to sift through it all and make sense of the world around us. It is hard to discriminate when there is so much information—good and bad alike—to digest.



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Nonetheless, we have got a sense from these online debates, reinforced by events in the non-virtual world, that our politicians do not always tell the truth, that money—rather than the public interest—sometimes wins out in decision-making processes, and that our elites may be little better equipped than us—aside from their expensive educations—to run our societies.

- their corporate sponsors;
• and now, the criminal failures of our governments to prepare for, and respond properly to, the Covid-19 pandemic, despite many years of warnings.

Anyone who still takes what our governments say at face value ... well, I have several bridges to sell you.

Two Decades of Lies

There has been a handful of staging posts over the past two decades to our current era of the Great Disillusionment. They include:

- the lack of transparency in the U.S. government's investigation into the events surrounding 9/11 (obscured by a parallel online controversy about what took place that day);
- the documented lies told about the reasons for launching a disastrous and illegal war of aggression against Iraq in 2003 that unleashed regional chaos, waves of destabilizing migration into Europe and new, exceptionally brutal forms of political Islam;
- the astronomical bailouts after the 2008 crash of bankers whose criminal activities nearly bankrupted the global economy (but who were never held to account) and instituted more than a decade of austerity measures that had to be paid for by the public;
- the refusal by western governments and global institutions to take any leadership on tackling climate change, as not only the science but the weather itself has made the urgency of that emergency clear, because it would mean taking on

Experts Failed Us

But it is not just governments to blame. The failings of experts, administrators and the professional class have been all too visible to the public as well. Those officials who have enjoyed easy access to prominent platforms in the state-corporate media have obediently repeated what state and corporate interests wanted us to hear, often only for that information to be exposed later as incomplete, misleading or downright fabricated.

In the run-up to the 2003 attack on Iraq, too many political scientists, journalists and weapons experts kept their heads down, keen to preserve their careers and status, rather than speak up in support of those rare experts like Scott Ritter and the late David Kelly who dared to sound the alarm that we were not being told the whole truth.

In 2008, only a handful of economists were prepared to break with corporate orthodoxy and question whether throwing money at bankers exposed as financial criminals was wise, or to demand that these bankers be prosecuted. Most economists did not argue the case that there must be a price for the banks to pay, such as a public stake in the banks that were bailed out, in return for forcing taxpayers to massively invest in these discredited businesses. And the economists did not propose overhauling our financial systems to make

sure there was no repetition of the economic crash. Instead, they kept their heads down as well, in the hope that their large salaries continued and that they would not lose their esteemed positions in think-tanks and universities.

We know that climate scientists were quietly warning back in the 1950s of the dangers of runaway global warming, and that in the 1980s scientists working for the fossil-fuel companies predicted very precisely how and when the catastrophe would unfold—right

about now. It is wonderful that today the vast majority of these scientists are publicly agreed on the dangers, even if they are still trapped in a dangerous caution by the conservatism of scientific procedure. But they forfeited public trust by leaving it until so very, very late to speak up.

And recently we have learned, for example, that a series of Conservative governments in the UK recklessly ran down the supplies of hospital protective gear, even though they had more than a decade of warnings of a coming

We know that climate scientists were quietly warning back in the 1950s of the dangers of runaway global warming, and that in the 1980s scientists working for the fossil-fuel companies predicted very precisely how and when the catastrophe would unfold—right about now



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pandemic. The question is why did no scientific advisers or health officials blow the whistle earlier. Now it is too late to save the lives of many thousands, including dozens of medical staff, who have fallen victim so far to the virus in the UK.

Lesser of Two Evils

Worse still, in the Anglosphere of the U.S. and the UK, we have ended up with political systems that offer a choice between one party that supports a brutal, unrestrained version of neoliberalism and another party that supports a marginally less brutal, slightly mitigated version of neoliberalism. (And we have recently discovered in the UK that, after the grassroots membership of one of those twinned parties managed to choose

a leader in Jeremy Corbyn who rejected this orthodoxy, his own party machine conspired to throw the election rather than let him near power.) As we are warned at each election, in case we decide that elections are in fact futile, we enjoy a choice—between the lesser of two evils.

Those who ignore or instinctively defend these glaring failings of the modern corporate system are really in no position to sit smugly in judgment on those who wish to question the safety of 5G, or vaccines, or the truth of 9/11, or the reality of a climate catastrophe, or even of the presence of lizard overlords.

Because through their reflexive dismissal of doubt, of all critical thinking on anything that has not been pre-approved by our governments and by the state-corporate media, they have helped to disfigure the only yardsticks we have for measuring truth or falsehood.

We should not be surprised that the “thought-leaders” for shutting down the cacophony of the internet are those whose failures have been most exposed by our new freedoms to explore the dark recesses of the recent past

They have forced on us a terrible choice: to blindly follow those who have repeatedly demonstrated they are not worthy of being followed, or to trust nothing at all, to doubt everything. Neither position is one a healthy, balanced individual would want to adopt. But that is where we are today.

Big Brother Regimes

It is therefore hardly surprising that those who have been so discredited by the current explosion of information—the politicians, the corporations and the professional class—are wondering how to fix things in the way most likely to maintain their power and authority.

They face two, possibly complementary, options.

One is to allow the information overload to continue, or even escalate. There is an argument to be made that the more possible truths we are presented with, the more powerless we feel and the more willing we are to defer to those most vocal in claiming authority. Confused and hopeless, we will look to father figures, to the strongmen of old, to those who have cultivated an aura of decisiveness and fearlessness, to those who look like down-to-earth mavericks and rebels.

This approach will throw up more Donald Trumps, Boris Johnsons and Jair Bolsonaros. And these men, while charming us with their supposed lack of orthodoxy, will still, of course, be exceptionally accommodating to the most powerful corporate interests—the military-industrial complex—that really run the show.

The other option, which has already been road-tested under the rubric of “fake news,” will be to treat us, the public, like irresponsible children, who need a firm, guiding hand. The technocrats and professionals will try to re-establish their authority as though the last two decades never occurred, as though we never saw through their hypocrisy and lies.

They will cite “conspiracy theories”—even the true ones—as proof that it is time to impose new curbs on internet freedoms, on the right to speak and to think. They will argue that the social media experiment has run its course and proved itself a menace—because we, the public, are a menace. They are already flying trial balloons for this new Big Brother world, under cover of tackling the health threats posed by the COVID-19 epidemic.

We should not be surprised that the “thought-leaders” for shutting down the cacophony of the internet are those whose failures have been most exposed by our new freedoms to explore the dark recesses of the recent past. They have included Tony Blair, the British prime minister who lied western

We will need fewer curbs on free speech, not more

publics into the disastrous and illegal war on Iraq in 2003, and Jack Goldsmith, rewarded as a Harvard law professor for his role—since whitewashed—in helping the Bush administration legalize torture and step up warrantless surveillance programmes.

Need for a New Media

The only alternative to a future in which we are ruled by Big Brother technocrats like Tony Blair, or by chummy authoritarians who brook no dissent, or a mix of the two, will require a complete overhaul of our societies' approach to information. We will need fewer curbs on free speech, not more.

The real test of our societies—and the only hope of surviving the coming emergencies, economic and environmental—will be finding a way to hold our leaders truly to account. Not based on whether they are secretly lizards, but on what they are doing to save our planet from our all-too-human, self-destructive instinct for acquisition and our craving for guarantees of security in an uncertain world.

That, in turn, will require a transformation of our relationship to information and debate. We will need a new model of independent, pluralistic, responsive, questioning media that is accountable to the public, not to billionaires and corporations. Precisely the kind of media we do not have now. We will need media we can trust to represent the full range of credi-

ble, intelligent, informed debate, not the narrow Overton window through which we get a highly partisan, distorted view of the world that serves the 1 percent—an elite so richly rewarded by the current system that they are prepared to ignore the fact that they and we are hurtling towards the abyss.

With that kind of media in place—one that truly holds politicians to account and celebrates scientists for their contributions to collective knowledge, not their usefulness to corporate enrichment—we would not need to worry about the safety of our communications systems or medicines, we would not need to doubt the truth of events in the news or wonder whether we have lizards for rulers, because in that kind of world no one would rule over us. They would serve the public for the common good.

Sounds like a fantastical, improbable system of government? It has a name: democracy. Maybe it is time for us finally to give it a go. **Z**

This essay first appeared on Jonathan Cook's blog: <https://www.jonathan-cook.net/blog/>

Jonathan Cook won the Martha Gellhorn Special Prize for Journalism. His books include *Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East* (Pluto Press) and *Disappearing Palestine: Israel's Experiments in Human Despair* (Zed Books). His website is www.jonathan-cook.net.

Feature



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Can We Simultaneously Oppose Bayer/Monsanto's Biotechnology and Support Cuba's Interferon Alpha 2B?

By Don Fitz

Genetically engineered crops are a form of food imperialism. This technology allows mega-corporations like Bayer/Monsanto to patent seeds, lure farmers into buying them with visions of high yields, and then destroy the ability of small farmers to

survive.

Genetic engineering produces an artificial combination of plant traits which often result in foods with less nutritional value while introducing health problems to animals and humans who eat them. It increases costs of



Photo by Alex SG/Shutterstock.com

food production, pushing millions of farmers throughout the world into poverty and driving them off their land.

Agricultural corporations get control of enormous quantities of land in Africa, Latin America and Asia which they use to control the world's food supply and reap super-profits from the cheap labor of those who work for them, sometimes people who once owned the same land. These crops can be developed in open-field testing which allows the novel pollen to contaminate wild relatives of the engineered crops.

Agro-industries which dominate this process have the resources to lobby two sections of governments. They tell one government agency that their plants do not need to pass safety tests because they are "substantively equivalent" to already existing plants. Yet, out of the other side of their mouths, corporate lawyers argue that, far from being equivalent to existing plants, their engineered ones are so novel as to deserve patents, patents which allow companies to sue farmers who save seeds for planting during the next season.

As a resident of St. Louis, a veritable plantation of Monsanto (now Bayer), I have participated in and organized dozens of demonstrations at the company's world headquarters, as

well as forums and conferences. It is necessary to compare the use of biotechnology by food corporations with that of Cuba to decide if they are the same or fundamentally different.

Medicine in Cuba

John Kirk's *Health Care without Borders: Understanding Cuban Medical Internationalism* (2015) provides a wealth of information regarding Cuba's early use of biotechnology in medicine. It is a poor country suffering from the effects of a blockade by the U.S. which interferes with its access to materials, equipment, technologies, finance, and even exchange of information. This makes it remarkable that Cuba's research institutes have produced so many important medications. Even a partial list is impressive. The use of Heberprot B to treat diabetes has reduced amputations by 80 percent. Cuba is the only country to create an effective vaccine against type-B bacterial meningitis, and it developed the first synthetic vaccine for *Haemophilus influenza* type B (Hib), which causes almost half of pediatric meningitis infections. It has

Patents for its many medical innovations are held by the Cuban government. There is no impetus to increase profits by charging outrageously high prices for new drugs—these medications become available to Cubans at much lower cost than they would in a market-based health care system like that of the United States

also produced the vaccine Racotumomab against advanced lung cancer and has begun clinical tests for Itolizumab to fight severe psoriasis.

By far, the best known efforts of Cuban biotechnology followed an outbreak of dengue fever in 1981 when its researchers found that it could combat the disease with Interferon Alpha 2B. The same drug became vitally important decades later as a potential cure for COVID-19. Interferons are signaling proteins which can respond to infections by strengthening anti-viral defenses. In this way, they decrease complications which could cause death. These interferons have also shown their usefulness and safety in treating viral diseases including Hepatitis B and C, shingles and HIV-AIDS.

A Tale of Two Technologies

There are marked differences between corporate biotechnology for food and Cuba's medications for health. First, corporations produce food that fails to be healthier than non-engineered food which it replaces. Cuba's biotechnology improves human health to such a degree that dozens of nations have requested Interferon Alpha 2B.

Second, corporate food production drives people off of their land while making a few

investors very rich. No one loses their home due to Cuban medical advances.

Third, food imperialism fosters dependency but Cuba promotes medical independence. While corporate biotechnology drains money from poor countries by monopolizing genetically modified organisms (GMOs), Cuba strives to produce drugs as cheaply as possible.

Patents for its many medical innovations are held by the Cuban government. There is no impetus to increase profits by charging outrageously high prices for new drugs—these medications become available to Cubans at much lower cost than they would in a market-based health care system like that of the United States. This has a profound impact on Cuban medical internationalism. The country provides drugs, including vaccines, at a cost low enough to make humanitarian campaign goals abroad more achievable. Its use of synthetic vaccines for meningitis and pneumonia has resulted in the immunization of millions of Latin American children.

Cuba's other phase of medical biotechnology is also unknown in the corporate world. This is the transfer of new technology to poor countries so that they can produce drugs themselves and do not have to rely on purchasing them from rich countries. Collaboration with Brazil has resulted in meningitis vaccines at a cost of 95¢ rather than \$15 to \$20 per dose. Cuba and Brazil worked together on several



Graphic by xtock/Shutterstock.com

other biotechnology projects, including Interferon Alpha 2B, for hepatitis C, and recombinant human erythropoietin (rHuEPO), for anemia caused by chronic kidney problems.

In Perspective

The bigger picture is that technology of all types is not “value free”—it reflects social factors in its development and use. Nuclear plants require military forces for protection from attack, making them attractive in any society dominated by those who employ a high degree of violence to suppress dissent.

Market forces within capitalism select technologies that are profitable, even if they are destructive to human welfare. Of course, medicine such as antibiotics benefit humanity even if their original goal was profits for pharmaceutical giants.

At other times, products that damage society as a whole are pursued because they augment corporate profits by weakening labor unions. Planting and harvesting equipment have been

used to undermine organizing efforts of agricultural workers. In the mid-1880s, Chicago McCormick adopted new molding machines which could be run by unskilled workers. The company used them to replace skilled workers of the National Union of Iron Molders.

Expensive technologies can destroy small competitors so that large companies with more capital can better control the market. No case is clearer than the use of GMOs in agriculture. By use of market control (making non-GMO seeds unavailable), financial terrorism (such as lawsuits against resistant farmers), and the pesticide addiction treadmill, GMO giants such as Bayer/Monsanto have increased the cost of food production. This destroys the livelihood of small farmers across the globe while transforming the large farmers who remain into semi-vassals of these multinational lords of seeds and pesticides.

Though a century separated them and they affected different types of labor, actions by McCormick and Bayer/Monsanto had something in common. They both utilized novel technology which resulted in less desirable products but increased profits.

Patents for its many medical innovations are held by the Cuban government. There is no impetus to increase profits by charging outrageously high prices for new drugs—these medications become available to Cubans at much lower cost than they would in a market-based health care system like that of the United States

Because they were an invaluable weapon against the union, McCormick used molding machines that produced inferior castings and cost consumers more. GMOs in agriculture result in lower-quality food. Since two-thirds of GMOs are designed to create plants that can tolerate poisonous pesticides such as Roundup, pesticide residues increase with GMO usage.

GMOs are also used to increase the production of corn syrup which sweetens a growing quantity of processed foods, and thereby contributes to the obesity crisis. At the same time, food engineered to be uniform, survive transportation, and have a longer shelf life contains less nutritional value. The use of GMOs in corporate agriculture is one of the largest contributing factors to the phenomenon of people simultaneously being overweight and undernourished.

Cuba's use of biotechnology to create medications is in sharp contrast to both McCormick and Bayer/Monsanto. Its drugs, especially Interferon Alpha 2B, are used to help people overcome illnesses. They are created to share throughout the world rather than drive people into worse poverty. Making a distinction between the biotechnology of Bayer/Monsanto and Cuba requires understanding the difference

between bioimperialism and biosolidarity. Imperialism subdues. Biosolidarity empowers. **Z**

Don Fitz (fitzdon@aol.com) is on the editorial board of Green Social Thought where a version of this article first appeared. Portions of this article are from his forthcoming book, *Cuban Health Care: The Ongoing Revolution*, to be published by Monthly Review Press in June, 2020.

Feature



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Policing and the Sanctity of Life

By Robert C. Koehler

This is so much bigger than personal accountability.

Yes, the four police officers present at the Memorial Day killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis were fired the next day. The

case is being investigated by the FBI. And the mayor of Minneapolis and lots of other politicians are talking about “values.”

But later that night, police fired teargas and rubber bullets into a crowd of protesters,

showing us that the national divide remains deep and wide and nothing has changed. The nation is split—racially, economically, politically—into us versus them, and only one side (which is armed to the hilt) gets to be boss.

As long as this paradigm remains intact, occasionally chastising, or even prosecuting, a police officer for committing murder, or some other blatant act of racist overstepping, accomplishes virtually nothing. The instilling of “values” in the armed enforcers of a racist social order will result in, at most, superficial change. And the world will not be any safer.

George Floyd died on May 25 because he was deprived of his right to breathe. He—or someone—was accused of using a counterfeit bill to buy groceries. Four officers responded to the call of a “forgery in progress” and, on arriving at the scene, ordered a suspect to get out of his car. He “resisted arrest” and may have been “under the influence,” a police spokesman said later, all of which resulted in one of the officers, after a scuffle, keeping Floyd flat on the ground and immobile by kneeling on his neck. This lasted for seven or eight minutes; Floyd cried out in pain, cried that he couldn’t breathe, then eventually passed out. The officer continued kneeling on the neck until an ambulance arrived. Floyd was pronounced dead at the hospital.







Shortly afterward, the Minneapolis Police Department issued a statement that George Floyd had died of a “medical incident.” How forgettably abstract. And that would have been that—incident forgotten, let’s move on—except for the horrific ten-minute video that went public, showing a murder in progress as passers-by cried out to the officers to let the man breathe. The public outrage over the video led to official “action”—the four officers were fired—but . . . now what?

As we know, Floyd’s death is only the latest hell inflicted on a community of color somewhere in this country, either by police officers or armed white vigilantes, in recent weeks and months. But of course this goes back decades, centuries—to the arrival of Europeans on the North American continent and their determination to claim the land as theirs and start importing slaves to make it productive.

This is not history. This is the present moment: Officer Derek Chauvin kneeling with his full weight on George Floyd’s neck, until the man dies. All that has changed in the last 300 years—the progress we’ve made—is that today a race-based murder can get you fired.

I’m sure we’re at a point where the majority of Americans recognize the terror and insanity of this, e.g.: “Being black in America should not be a death sentence.” These are the words of Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey, putting the matter about as clearly as possible. “What we saw is horrible, completely and utterly messed up.”

And the police chief, Medaria Arradondo, put it this way in a public statement: “When Mayor Frey appointed me as chief of the Minneapolis police department, I was very steadfast and strong on what our department vision, values and culture change would be moving forward. One of those pillars is sanctity of life.”

So, as I say, now what? I assume these words are spoken sincerely, and I also un-

derstand that no one individual, no matter his or her level of power, can declare lasting and far-reaching social change on a moment’s notice. All they, and we, can do is put something into motion: the creation of social order truly and honestly (unlike, say, the Declaration of Independence) based on the sanctity of life.

What could this mean?

This is social change at a level that is almost unimaginable, and certainly not limited to America’s police departments. It requires an ongoing national conversation: a unity of purpose—a sense of patriotism—that is the equivalent of, and also the opposite of, waging a world war. It’s nothing short of participatory evolution.

But let me scale the matter back to the level of policing, and make note that effective, compassionate policing exists right now and simply needs to expand beyond the reach of militarism and racism, which invade police-work like a virus.

Here’s something that happened to me many, many years ago. One Saturday afternoon a neighbor called and said some guy was out in the alley, opening my car door. I went out to check and saw a huge, drunk guy who turned when I spoke and heaved a beer bottle at me, then stumbled toward me through my yard mumbling obscenities. My daughter, then about 5 years old, had come out to see what I was doing. I scooted her back into the house and we shut, and locked, the door. The big guy pounded on the side of our house for five minutes, then collapsed backwards into a bed of poppies. My wife called the police.

Two petite female officers arrived. They opened a popper under his nose, restored him to consciousness and escorted him through the yard to the squad car. The drunk easily

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had 100 pounds on each of the women. He was an incoherent, BB-eyed hulk, but they approached him with a complete absence of aversion or moral judgment.

As I later wrote: “They addressed a certain basic dignity of his personhood, even though he wasn’t showing it himself. They went straight to it, like experts in applied psychology, emotional jujitsu: ‘Sit up, sir. That’s right.’ Looking on, I could see the words hit their mark; he straightened up and began pulling himself together. It was a deft, fearless display of peacekeeping.”

No one was “them” in this incident. The lost soul who was causing the havoc was restored to his humanity in the process of preventing

harm from occurring. Social order requires complex understanding of the human condition, far, far more than it requires a tough-guy swagger, handcuffs and a gun. Police need to be highly trained and thoroughly multi-racial. They need, indeed, to be the ones who take the lead as we rebuild our social system based on the sanctity of life. **Z**

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IN JUSTICE
ANYWHERE
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