

THE OKLAHOMA Observer

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WASTED VOTES



*Currently, Politicians Pick Their Voters
– Not The Other Way Around. How
Oklahoma Can Ensure All Votes Matter.*

Special Report begins on page 6

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OUR MOTTO

To Comfort the Afflicted and Afflict the Comfortable.

OUR CREDO

So then to all their chance, to all their shining golden opportunity. To all the right to love, to live, to work, to be themselves, and to become whatever thing their vision and humanity can combine to make them. This seeker, is the promise of America.
- Adapted from Thomas Wolfe

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Observations

In Search Of Sanity

Thirty-one innocents slaughtered in one weekend in El Paso and Dayton. Permitless carry set to become Oklahoma law Nov. 1 unless a veto referendum petition is successful.

This is a time that cries out for reflection – and action.

Will it, like so many others, pass quietly? Just thoughts and prayers? And the usual bromides about the gun lobby's power at NE 23rd and Lincoln Blvd. or how protective Okies are of their 2nd Amendment rights?

If past is prologue, the answer, sadly, is yes. But know this: the uber-conservative Oklahoma political landscape is hardly static when it comes to the great gun debate these days.

Moms Demand Action's red-shirted activists made their presence felt at the state Capitol last session. Even before El Paso and Dayton, they had 13 meetings scheduled in the Oklahoma City area, Tulsa and Stillwater between August and early Sept. 4.

Rep. Jason Lowe's petition drive to force a statewide vote on permitless carry helped an already well-oiled machine kick into higher gear. Moms Demand Action was seemingly everywhere, gathering signatures.

It was a tall order – 59,000 in only two weeks. Even if they weren't successful, they sent a message that the gun lobby may rule the statehouse but people power is potent. And activists seeking common-sense gun control aren't going away.

[Note: The deadline for submitting the SQ 803 petitions was just after we went to press with the September Observer.]

The pushback against Oklahoma's return to the Wild West also is evident in the Sept. 27 grand opening of Oklahoma City's new Scissortail Park, thanks to state law that allows anyone with a valid license to carry a handgun in any public park.

At least one Oklahoma City Council member, Ward 5's JoBeth Hamon, intends to skip the festivities, citing the recent violence in El Paso and

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THE OKLAHOMA Observer

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Observerscope



Sept. 12's Observer Newsmakers features House Democratic Leader Emily Virgin discussing the governor's new executive powers and their impact on state agencies, services and employees. See back cover for details.

Dart: To Gov. Kevin Stitt, trying to bully Chancellor Glen Johnson into early retirement. Johnson is a top-notch leader for higher ed. Stitt is Donald Trump with a smile.

This bud's for you: In the first year since medical marijuana was legalized, the state issued licenses to 178,173 patients, 1,277 caregivers, 4,287 growers, 1,848 dispensaries and 1,173 processors.

Laurel: To state Rep. Jason Lowe and Moms Demand Action, leading the charge to block the dangerous permitless carry law set to take effect Nov. 1. Their around-the-clock efforts long will be remembered, no matter how the petition drive turns out.

Here's why the Corporation Commission is oft-derided as the "Cooperation" commission? Oklahoma industrial users pay only 4.55 cents per kilowatt hour while residential customers pay 11.17 cents. h/t former Gov. David Walters.

Dart: To U.S. Rep. Tom Cole, balking at Cherokee Nation's decision to send a delegate to Congress. Could it be because new Cherokee Chief Chuck Hoskin Jr. is from a rock-solid Democratic family?

The latest Sooner Poll shows 56% of likely Oklahoma voters currently support Medicaid expansion. You only have until Oct. 28 to sign the SQ 802 petition to get the issue on next year's ballot.

Laurel: To Labor Commissioner Leslie Osborn, whose department recently awarded \$928,309 in unpaid wages, benefits and liquidated damages to Oklahoma workers – nearly double last year's total.

Log Cabin Republicans once worked to open the GOP's tent to the LGBTQ community. What's left of the long-marginalized group now has endorsed Donald Trump for re-election. Their exec director quit in disgust.

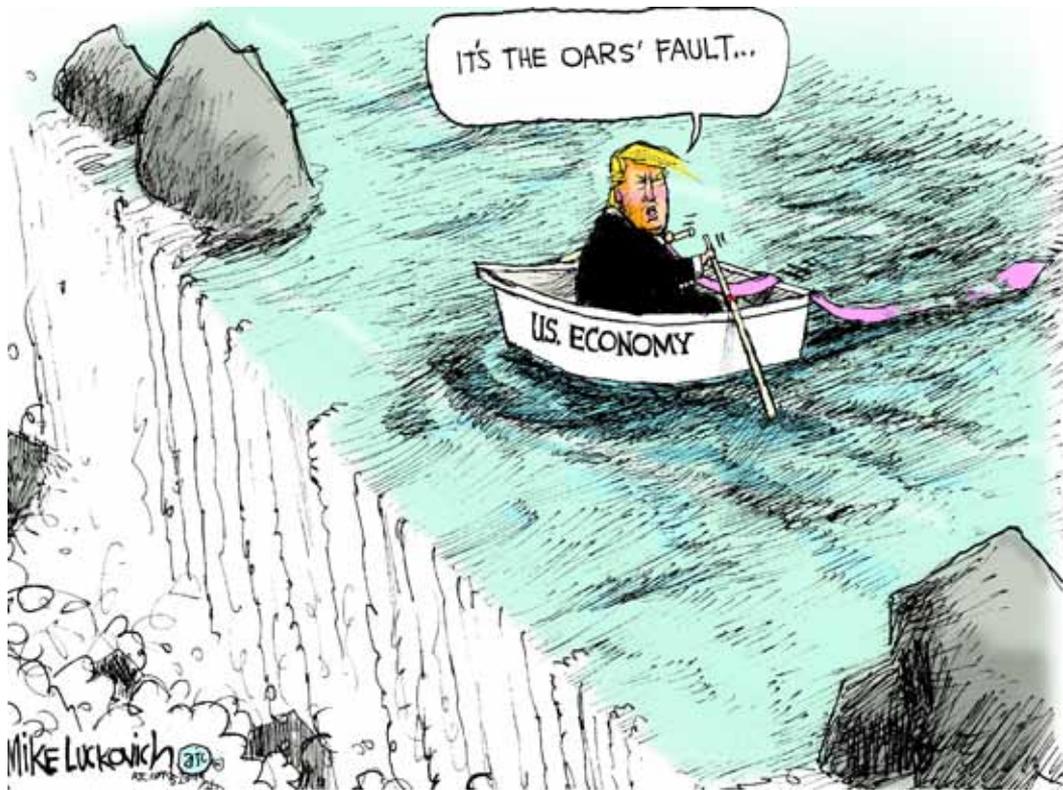
Dart: To Gov. Kevin Stitt, dismissing the permitless carry veto referendum because "the people have spoken." Hardly. The powerful gun lobby spoke. And its legislative lapdogs delivered.

Laurel: To Democratic stalwart Kalyn Free, selected as the party's new national committeewoman from Oklahoma. She succeeds the late Betty McElderry.

Kudos to new Chief Chuck Hoskin Jr. and the Cherokee Nation, exercising their rights under a 200-year-old treaty to send a delegate to the U.S. House. Kim Teehee, a former adviser to President Obama, is an excellent choice.

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Letters



Editor, The Observer:

The rich get richer and the poor get poorer. In the mean time, in between time, aren't they having fun?

They have always wanted to privatize everything, including Social Security which means putting your security that you paid for in the hands of wealthy white gamblers on Wall Street.

Trump says no GOP health care plan until after 2020 because they know it will not be a winning plank in their platform. They are dismantling anything that will help the working class, including collective bargaining.

They are already talking about more tax cuts for the wealthy and corporations, but they are not talking about a living wage for the rest of us.

Keep America Great is worse.

Karen Webb
Portland, OR

Editor, The Observer:

Golfing with Trump is a joke
His score is full of smoke

With help from his caddie
And tricks that are shabby
He outscores all contenders by a stroke.

Tom Birbilis
Tulsa

Editor, The Observer:

Americans nervous the Trump administration might wage war on Iran in a desperate attempt to win re-election demand that Congress invoke the War Powers Act to ensure that the president not launch war on his own. Congress must approve going to war.

Perhaps we should also demand that any military action or war be a pay-as-you-go operation, funded by whatever "revenue enhancement" is required, so as not to increase the deficit, or pass on the debt.

The G.W. Bush administration launched the Iraq War and implemented a tax cut almost simultaneously, ensuring support for the war as nobody was being asked to pay for it [hardly anyone objected to waging the Iraq War on credit

cards]. Its \$3 trillion or \$4 trillion cost was simply passed on as deficit spending.

With the global environmental, population and refugee challenges all heating up, the notion of war has become a truly obsolete relic of past eras, though much of humanity does not realize it yet.

Nathaniel Batchelder
Oklahoma City

Editor's Note: Nathaniel Batchelder is director of the OKC Peace House.

Editor, The Observer:
Gov. Kevin Stitt is a killer wannabe.

On Dec. 7, 2018, he told OKC's Fox 25 that he supports the death penalty "for the worst of the worst."

Here are a few facts for him to consider before he orders his first execution of one of the 50 inmates left on his death row:

Fact No. 1: The death penalty does not deter crime or rehabilitate.

Fact No. 2: It is racially biased.

Fact No. 3: In a number of cases, the wrong man is executed.

Fact No. 4: It violates all standards of human rights and decency.

Fact No. 5: The only reason left to justify the death penalty is vengeance, which is a horrible lesson for our children. God said, "Vengeance is mine."

Fact No. 6: Psalm 102: "For the Lord looked down from his holy place on high; from the heavens he beheld the earth; that he might hear the groan of the captive and set free those condemned to die."

Fact No. 7: There is only one who has the authority to take human life and that is the one who created and gives life.

Virginia Blue Jeans Jenner
Wagoner



Luring Teaching Pros Back To The Classroom

Teachers descending on the state Capitol by the thousands last year were clear to emphasize the two-week walkout wasn't solely because of a decade without an across-the-board pay raise.

They were there to represent their students, too – casualties of the Legislature's misplaced priorities that favored tax cuts for the wealthy and corporations over tax investments in vital state services for the masses.

And they were there to demand r-e-s-p-e-c-t for what should be one of society's most honored professions: educating future generations, giving them the tools necessary to compete for a slice of the American dream.

If statehouse leadership didn't clearly grasp the situation then, they surely do now. Two years of pay hikes were not enough to coax many teaching professionals back into the schoolhouse.

Way too many classrooms remain staffed by emergency certified teachers who may know the subject but don't have the hundreds of hours of training in what it takes to educate a diverse student population with varying abilities and learning styles.

Throwing money at teachers and hoping the problems go away – or at least are muted – isn't smart politics or wise public policy. It's the ingredients for a ticking time bomb sure to produce more walkouts and ballot box revolutions.

Which makes Gov. Kevin Stitt's obsession with eventually amassing a \$2 billion Rainy Day Fund all the more stupefying.

At present, Oklahoma's finances are in solid shape – best, frankly, since the fallout from the 2008 recession.

The Legislature's pre-Stitt era hike in gross production taxes coupled with an improving economy yielded a state-law-mandated \$354.6 million savings account deposit – boosting the fund to more than \$800 million.

That wasn't enough for Stitt. He insisted on leaving another \$200 million unspent, creating a \$1 billion cushion. Lawmakers capitulated – no

doubt because it was easier than deciding who'd reap the spoils. So many needs after a decade of financial mismanagement, so many constituencies to potentially disappoint.

It is true economic storm clouds are building [did you gobble Tums by the fistful during recent stock market tumult?]. It also is true the state's budget remains too dependent on volatile oil and gas revenues.

As in all things in life, though, balance is the key. You don't prioritize extra savings when the house is falling down around you. Oklahoma's needs are great after a decade of Draconian budgets.

Public education isn't the only vital state service that cries out for investment. But it is the state's highest priority. This week's Oklahoma Teacher Pipeline Summit in Tulsa highlighted several creative ideas for reducing the unconscionable number of emergency certified teachers pressed into duty – 3,038 last year, up from 32 in 2011-12.

How about providing state-funded scholarships, forgiving student loans, waiving teacher certification test fees or offering signing bonuses for university-prepared educators in exchange for a commitment to teach in Oklahoma public schools?

How about restoring the stipend for educators who complete National Board Certification – \$5,000 a year for 10 years? Norman Rep. Jacob Rosecrants, himself a former teacher, authored legislation this spring to fund the program – the gold standard for the best and brightest teachers – at a cost to the state treasury of just \$5 million annually. House budget-writers said no.

“If we were to do just a few of them – for a fraction of the \$1 billion we've put back into savings – we'd not only stop the teacher exodus, we'd begin to attract highly certified teachers from all over the dang country,” Rosecrants notes.

“When we invest in the folk who educate our future, we invest in the future of our state. And we can finally move our state into the Top 10 [and beyond] in public education.”



ENDING THE FIX

*With Next Redistricting On The Horizon,
How Can We Ensure All Voices Are Heard At Ballot Box?*

BY JOHN WOOD

When I was on the Guthrie City Council in 2012, I led the charge to redistrict our small town because the population grew and our three wards shifted somewhat over the last 10 years. I found an OU political science doctoral student who possessed strong GIS skills hired to not only help state legislators draw lines, but also city and county officials.

The term “gerrymander” originates from the former 19th century Massachusetts Gov. Elbridge Gerry. His

administration enacted an 1812 law defining unique state senatorial districts, thereby squeezing Federalist representation down to only a few voices. In effect, it threw the majority vote to the Democratic-Republicans. The most famous district from this time resembled a salamander, stretching across the state. A Boston Gazette cartoon at the time, dubbed it a “gerrymander.”

Today you can even find “Goofy Kicking Donald Duck,” since its shape resembles the Disney charac-

ters shaping Pennsylvania's 7th District. Interestingly, "Ugly Gerry" is a new typeface where each letter conspicuously resembles a gerrymandered congressional district hopefully bringing awareness to this issue.

As a political scientist, the process is fascinating, but it can make even the best of our eyes glaze over.

In Guthrie, I sat down with representatives from the three wards and we came up with three different maps. In the end, the council chose the map I recommended, which changed the lines the least. It was a positive experience, but I surmise it was only because council seats are nonpartisan in nature and we focused solely on balancing district populations within plus or minus 3%.

Partisan legislative and Congressional seats, however, are a different story.

In their book *How Democracies Die*, authors Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt argue that today the two parties represent "not just different policy approaches but different communities, cultures, and values" – exacerbated by reflexively partisan cable news and political gerrymandering.

Likewise, Norman Ornstein and Thomas Mann find that gerrymandering gives incumbents an unfair advantage: "Redistricting is a deeply political process, with incumbents actively seeking to minimize the risk to themselves [via bipartisan gerrymanders] or to gain additional seats for their party [via partisan gerrymanders]."

They find that gerrymandering ends up costing candidates more and increases partisanship as the districts become more polarized, perpetuating gridlock. Seats are also less competitive and tend to be less proportional. They achieve less descriptive representation, too, meaning winners of these districts do not look, act, or even think like the respective district's average voter. Election winners are then determined more by incumbents who have too much of a hand in drawing them and less by the voters themselves.

And voters inherently know this to be true. A survey conducted by the Campaign Legal Center found that 71% of Americans would like the Supreme Court to define a standard that ends extreme partisan gerrymandering. Unfortunately, the court seems unwilling to do so at this time.

REPUBLICAN STRATEGIC DOMINATION

Currently, of the most gerrymandered districts in the United States, nine in 10 favor Republicans. What's more, in districts where politicians perceive that nearly 80% of their constituents favor a certain political party, there is little incentive to compromise, driving an increasingly stagnant and dysfunctional Congress.

Salon's editor-in-chief, Dan Daley, wrote a book called *Rat F**cked: The True Story Behind the Secret Plan to Steal America's Democracy* in which he recounts an intriguing tale before the 2010 election. It's about how GOP strategists and the Republican State Leadership Committee raised millions of dollars for

the Redistricting Majority Project, REDMAP.

Gerrymandering means politicians listen to party leaders and pressure from outside interests, rather than the people. While the former Massachusetts governor gave gerrymandering its name, Thomas Hofeller is the architect who brought the process into the modern era.

Between redistricting cycles, Hofeller travelled nationwide. He presented PowerPoint presentations to prepare legislators for the next round of redistricting in 2010. Friends said he was known for the one-liners – or Hofellerisms – that hinted at privacy and discretion, at a time when the results of redistricting processes often ended up being challenged in court.

REDMAP strategically steered Hofeller on where to spend to bolster Republican candidates in Democratic-controlled state legislatures from North Carolina to Pennsylvania, Michigan to Wisconsin, according to Daley. The strategy was simply to flip control of the state's legislative chamber, lock in redistricting, and thus control Congress for the next decade.

It worked, in the 2010 midterms, elections rode a "red wave" where the GOP captured 63 seats in the House of Representatives and 680 new seats in state legislatures across the country.

It was an effective strategy that the Democrats may have adopted had they thought it up first. As the 2020 elections roll around, expect a clash between the GOP's REDMAP 2.0 led by former Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker and the Democrat's first attempt at BLUEMAP 1.0 to catch up, led by former Attorney General Eric Holder and Barack Obama who has made this a post-presidency focus.

While the REDMAP architect died in 2018, his legacy lives on. In May, a lawsuit over the 2020 Census citizenship question cited Hofeller's analysis and other documents, saying "many striking similarities" existed between the unpublished Hofeller analysis and the Commerce Department's decision to seek a citizenship question on the Census. While Donald Trump lost in the courts, he had indicated that he will find a way to add this question if he can. Hofeller's legacy lives on.

It's not just outcomes but intention. For instance, North Carolina's Republican majority plan in 2016 included a criterion called "partisan advantage." This led to what had been a largely purple state transitioning to distinctly red, with Republicans winning 10 of 13 – or 77% – of U.S. House seats while only garnering 53% of the vote share in the state.

One North Carolina Republican lawmaker actually made his intentions clear.

"I think electing Republicans is better than electing Democrats," explained David Lewis, a member of the state General Assembly's redistricting committee, "So I drew this map to help foster what I think is better for the country."

He went on to say, "I propose that we draw the maps to give a partisan advantage to 10 Republicans and three Democrats, because I do not believe it's pos-

sible to draw a map with 11 Republicans and two Democrats.”

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Recently, courts explored multiple tests to deal with redistricting fairly.

In 2016, the Wisconsin Supreme Court, for example, decided on what they called the “efficiency gap.” It was a newly defined metric, created to appeal to the recently retired U.S. Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy, who was in search of a convincing methodology to create district lines.

Simply put, the “efficiency gap” counts the number of votes each party wastes in an election to determine whether either party enjoyed a systematic advantage in turning votes into seats. In addition, any vote cast for a losing candidate is considered wasted, as are all the votes cast for a winning candidate in excess of the number needed to win.

In addition, an amicus curiae brief filed by the Brennan Center for Justice in last year’s *Gill v. Whitford* case advocated for a “purpose-and-effects test,” which is a standard that “requires proof of both invidious intent and a partisan entrenching result that cannot be explained by neutral considerations.”

Unfortunately, the court ruled unanimously that the Wisconsin Democrats who sued failed to have standing because they hadn’t demonstrated that their own votes had been diluted because they were of the minority party.

In North Carolina the Legislature’s intentions seemed clearer: they had openly discriminated on the basis of partisan difference to draw line with a clear partisan advantage.

However, the recent Supreme Court’s most recent court cases show that the conservatives on the high court are not willing to define what constitutes partisan gerrymandering nor determine its legality, thereby permitting state legislatures to continue to redistrict with openly biased partisan intent. In June, the Supreme Court ruled 5-4 along ideological lines in a single court’s ruling on two consolidated cases – *Rucho v. Common Cause* and *Lamone v. Benisek* – stating that the issue of partisan gerrymandering is not judiciable; that is, it is a political issue and not something for the court to sort out.

Now it seems that federal courts are powerless to hear challenges to gerrymandering, “closing the door” to future challenges and leaving the matter solely in state legislative hands.

In a fiery dissent, Justice Elena Kagan penned: “The practices challenged in these cases imperil our system of government. Part of the court’s role in that system is to defend its foundations. None is more important than free and fair elections.

“Gerrymandering at its most extreme amounts to ‘rigging elections,’” Kagan said, quoting a 2004 opinion from now-retired Justice Kennedy. “The practice allows politicians to cherry-pick voters to ensure their re-election.”

The Supreme Court’s decision still allows cases

of partisan gerrymandering to be tried in the lower courts, but it also may decrease lower courts’ willingness to hear those cases in the first place.

SOONER-STYLE GERRYMANDERING

In Oklahoma, there have been various efforts to change the redistricting process. During the 2019 legislative session, Rep. Regina Goodwin, D-Tulsa, failed to make much progress with her bill to create an independent redistricting commission. Her bill, like many authored by members of the minority party, was assigned to the House Rules Committee, which has a reputation for being “where bills go to die.”

David Blatt, outgoing executive director of the Oklahoma Policy Institute, surmised in a recent *Journal Record* column that there are murmurs of activists planning an initiative petition campaign for the November 2020 election. While certainly admirable, any such effort faces the daunting task of collecting more than 178,500 signatures from registered voters within a tiny 90-day window to make the ballot. What’s worse, that’s 54,000 signatures more now because of the high turnout for the last governor race.

I recently spoke with Rico Smith, a vocal Oklahoma Democrat who unsuccessfully attempted to organize a ballot initiative related to independent redistricting earlier this year.

“One of the foremost rights we have is the right to vote and petition our government,” he said. “If our voice can’t be respected by process, we don’t really have that right.”

Andy Moore, founder of the Oklahoma nonprofit *Let’s Fix This*, told me, “While Oklahoma is not as heavily gerrymandered as North Carolina, creating an independent redistricting commission would still be the right thing to do. If [the legislature] draws the lines, essentially, they are allowed to pick their own voters. The way lines are being drawn now, red districts get redder and blue districts get bluer – which means there are a lot of wasted votes.”

On the bright side, at the University of Central Oklahoma, I’m part of a study called: “One Person – One Vote: Addressing Gerrymandering in Oklahoma Through Policy and Mathematics.”

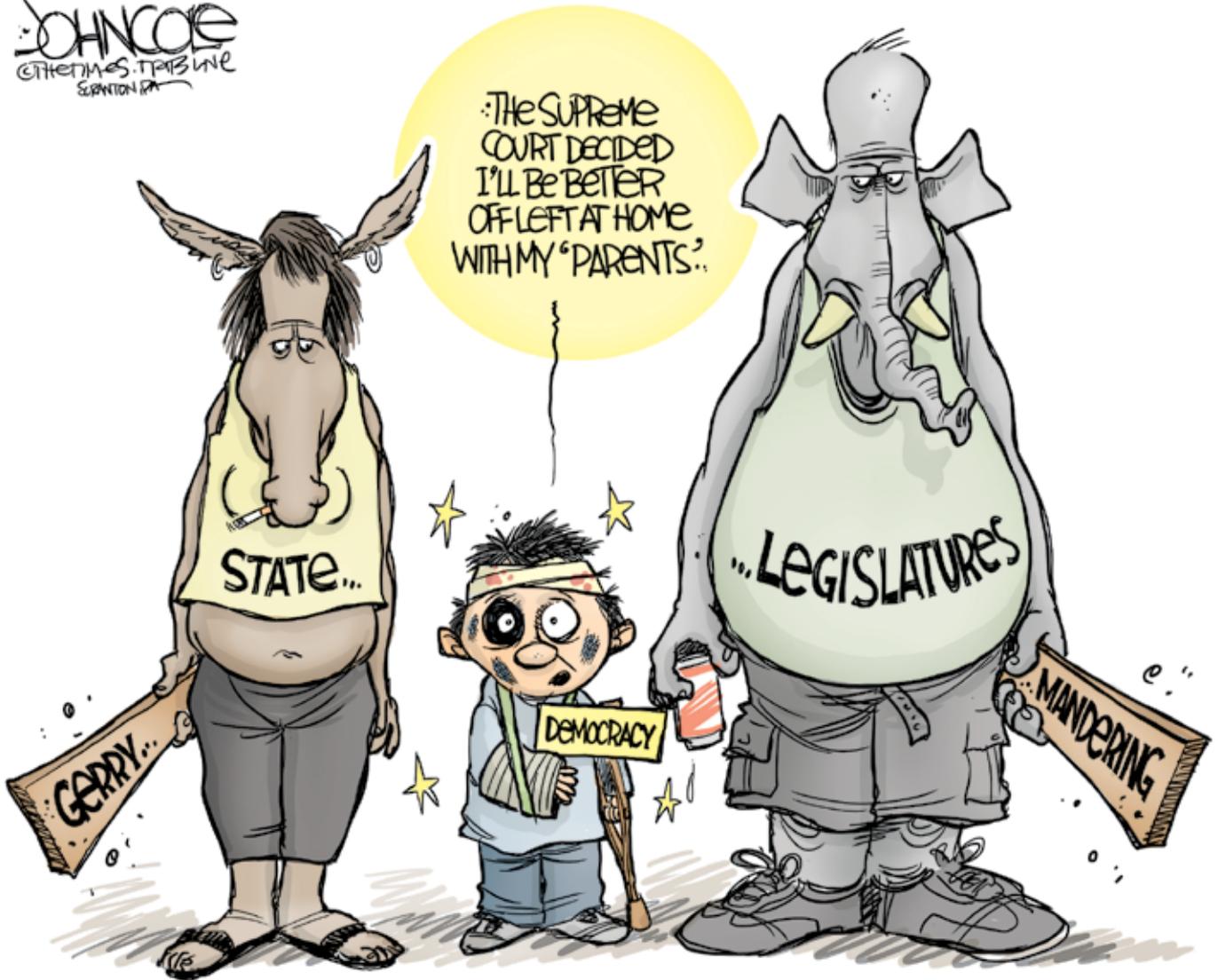
Over the next year, a group of five faculty members in both math and political science, as well as student researchers in both disciplines, are working toward developing mathematical techniques to minimize bias in districting.

As the political science expert, I will ensure these methods are informed by current and historical ideas on fairness as it relates to drawing lines and interpret their implications.

UCO’s group is motivated by the works of Tufts University Professor Moon Duchin, creator of the *Metric Geometry and Gerrymandering Group*, which focuses on applying cutting-edge mathematics to detect bias in districting with the goal of removing it as much as humanly possible.

Oklahoma, by the way, does have an ignored bipartisan redistricting commission available as a “backup”

JOHN COLE
OTHER TIMES THIS LINE
SPANTON PA



if lawmakers and the governor can't agree on a plan.

With the current Republican supermajority, the Legislature and governor can bypass the commission and draw the lines without anyone's input but theirs and to their specific advantage.

Part of Clean Missouri's plan that garnered support from 63% of the state's voters, creates a required independent redistricting commission among other reforms. We need this in Oklahoma, too – led by citizens who will not benefit in any way from partisan gerrymandering, allowing them to focus on fairness and transparency instead.

With the political preferences of fewer than half of Oklahoma's population reflected in the state's current districts, maybe a statewide petition or even ap-

plied geometry will make all of Oklahoma's voices relevant again?

John Wood is an associate professor of political science at the University of Central Oklahoma. The views he expresses are his and not necessarily the university's.

The American
Dream Starts
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Governor Or Emperor?

Stitt Takes Aim At Some Of State Government's Most Experienced Leaders

BY ARNOLD HAMILTON

If the first seven months of Kevin Stitt's reign as governor are any indication, it's going to be a bumpy ride.

The owner CEO turned elected official is clearly used to barking orders and getting his way. It doesn't work like that in government.

Oklahoma's founders not only set up separation of powers similar to the federal system, but also dif-fused control over state agencies – working to limit the power any one politician could wield.

The Legislature's poobahs, of course, gave Stitt vast new authority this year over five of the state's largest agencies, including firing and hiring their top lead-ers, no matter what duly appointed citizen-oversight boards think.

Result? Three highly-regarded leaders already are out: Corrections' Joe Allbaugh, Health Care Authori-ty's Becky Pasternik-Ikard and Transportation's Mike

Patterson. Allbaugh abruptly quit, the other two re-tired. Nudged? Shoved?

In late August, Stitt took aim at another experienced state leader, trying to stampede longtime higher edu-cation Chancellor Glen Johnson into retirement.

The State Regents, of course, make that decision, not the governor. But Stitt resorted to Trumpian tac-tics by publicly depicting Johnson as an under-per-forming hanger-on who needs to get out of the way of progress.

Clueless. And dead wrong.

Yes, Johnson's served for nearly 40 years in a pub-lic capacity – lawmaker, House speaker, Southeast-ern Oklahoma State University president and higher education chancellor. But he's done so with great skill and collegiality and without a whiff of funny business.

Indeed, his last 12 years as chancellor arguably have been his finest, helping keep the state's colleges and universities afloat – and accessible to as many students as possible – amid Draconian budget cuts, 26% since the 2008 recession.

Sadly, Stitt's broadside is yet another sign of who has his ear: deep-pocketed, anti-government ideo-logues [think: Charles Koch and his billionaire net-work] that despise any public program that doesn't socialize their private business losses or enhance their profits.

Taking aim at Johnson dovetails with a decades-old rightwing talking point: higher education is a bastion of – gasp! – liberal professors working around-the-clock to create a socialist utopia that would make Karl Marx proud.

Of course there are political liberals on college campuses, just like in Oklahoma neighborhoods. There are plenty of conservatives, too. And moder-ates. Not to mention an increasing abundance none-of-the-aboves.

Let's be real: Invoking the "L" word in red state Oklahoma is designed to frighten, not enlighten. And to conceal what's really happening: some corporat-ists and carbon barons don't want to encourage criti-cal thinking on campuses, they want to control the dialogue, including what's taught and how.

Stitt's bid to depose Johnson follows another ham-

Deborah Astley

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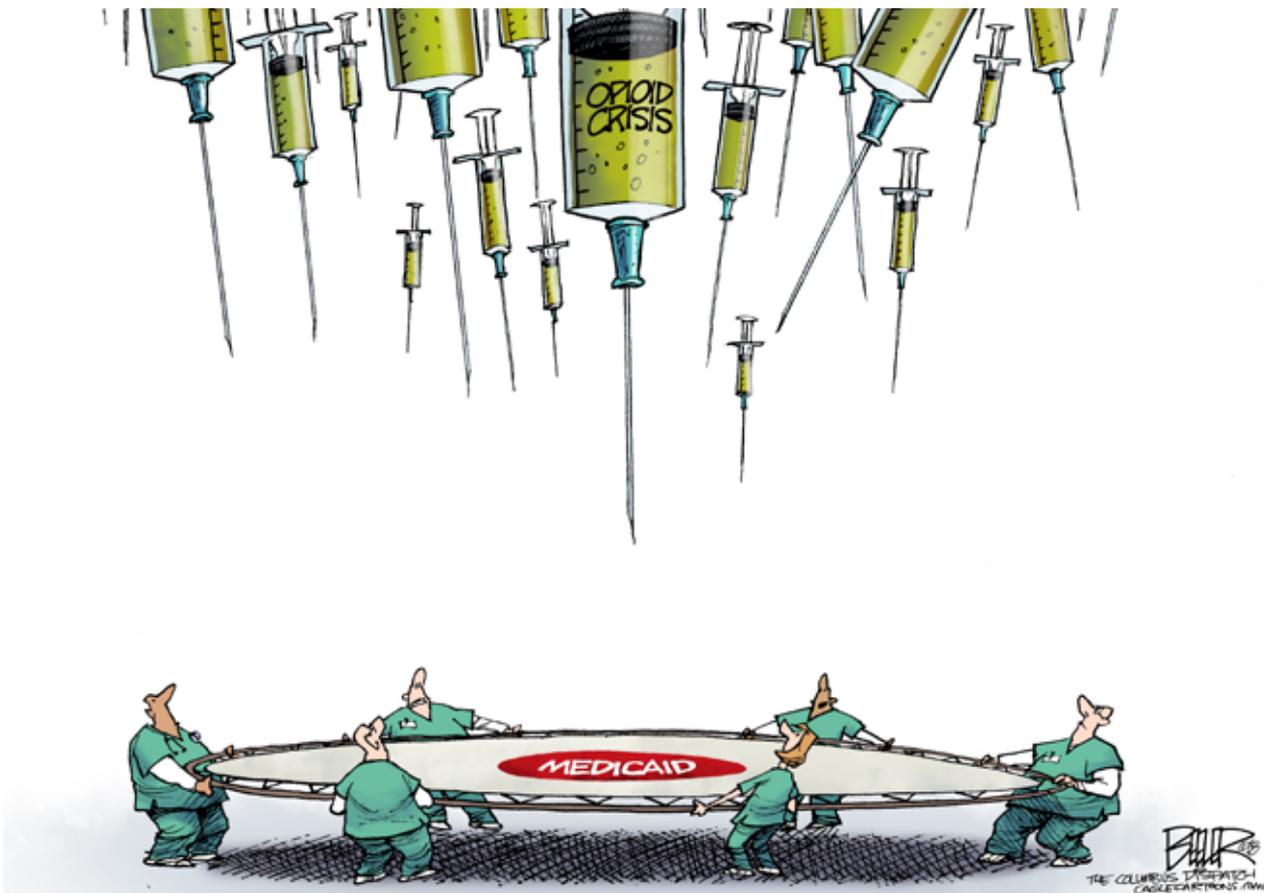
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Oklahoma, Opioids And Oil

BY MARK Y.A. DAVIES

In Oklahoma's case against Johnson & Johnson in relation to the opioid crisis, Oklahoma Attorney General Mike Hunter used an argument that could also be applied to Oklahoma's oil and gas companies and how they are deceiving us about the long term and lethal effects of their production processes and their product for Oklahomans and all of human civilization.

Like the pharmaceutical companies, the oil and gas companies have deceived us for self-profit that has led to grave societal harm.

They have deceived us about wastewater-induced earthquakes, supported merchants of doubt to lie to us about the reality of our climate crisis, and attempted to block any meaningful regulations on the environmental impact of their industry.

The oil and gas companies have even sought to weaken academic freedom at our colleges and universities by buying university and college presidents and in more than one case giving them millions of dollars in direct payments to serve as paid directors on their boards.

In other cases, oil and gas companies influence Boards of Regents and Boards of Trustees to simply place oil and gas company executives as the presi-

dents of the universities.

The oil and gas companies attempted to squash dissent by academics who were exposing and telling the truth about wastewater-induced earthquakes and who openly resist the lies being told by the fossil fuel industry about climate change.

The attorney general described Johnson & Johnson's conduct in misleading the public about the addictive nature of opioids as "devious and diabolical."

Attorney General Hunter, congratulations on your work to hold the pharmaceutical industry accountable for its role in the opioid crisis in Oklahoma. Congratulations on the verdict that Johnson & Johnson is to pay \$572 million for the damage it has done to the people of Oklahoma.

When will you be taking Devon Energy, Chesapeake Energy, Continental Resources, and others to court to hold them accountable for their devious and diabolical role in our climate crisis and for the millions of dollars of damages from earthquakes that their industry unleashed on our state?

Mark Y.A. Davies is the Wimberly Professor of Social and Ecological Ethics and director of the World House Institute for Social and Ecological Responsibility at Oklahoma City University.



**FOR CLEAN
WATER**



A Public Health Crisis That No Longer Can Be Ignored

BY BOB JACKMAN

Who would have guessed Oklahoma – the great state of Bob Kerr, Will Rogers, and presidential candidate Elizabeth Warren – would have three out of the five towns with lowest life expectancy in the U.S.?

Stilwell is lowest with 56.2 years, Checotah 58.1 and Eufaula 59.5 – compared with a national average life expectancy of 78.8 years.

Moreover, Oklahoma at 75.7 years has the nation's fourth lowest life expectancy.

These facts from the federal Centers for Disease Control and the Johnson Foundation were published last September in *The Observer*, the *Tahlequah Daily Press*, *Tulsa World* and nationally – yet little has been done since to address the crisis, according to Stilwell's mayor.

Not one state public health doctor or water or air chemist has shown up.

Quite a contrast to how Oklahoma reacts when

seeking to stay competitive in football. The head coaches' salaries at OU and OSU are a combined \$10 million for the 2019 season.

Epidemiologists aren't certain what is causing the extraordinary levels of premature deaths. Scientists concede, however, polluted air, land, and surface and subsurface waters might be part of Stilwell's public health puzzle. Wouldn't that demand immediate scientific, environmental investigations?

The public health crisis serves as a graphic reminder that special interests – Big Oil and Big Ag, just to name two – worked hand-in-glove with former state Attorney General Scott Pruitt to roll back environmental protections.

Rural Oklahoma's volunteer groups – Green Country Guardians fighting the poultry industry's invasion, southeastern Oklahomans battling to save pristine Kiamichi Basin waters and others – know that man-made toxic air and waters are part of our grow-

ing public health problems. Should death by environmental poisoning be classified second-degree manslaughter?

Polluters escape prosecution using – or misusing – laws and courts, and bought governments. Plus, complicit industries drive rural activists away by criminalizing resistance and tying legal opposition up in costly, lengthy court battles they cannot bear.

As one pollution victim put it, “You get the justice you can afford!”

Don’t expect help from first-year Gov. Kevin Stitt, embedded with Big Oil, Big Chicken and the right-to-harm Farm Bureau – three environmental blind mice that wield enormous political power. The governor has not uttered a word of concern about climate change.

So, is Oklahoma exempt from global warming? Or pollution?

Consider the case of Decatur, AR. It sits near the Oklahoma border, next to Spavinaw Creek ... which flows west, filling two of Tulsa’s main water sources: Eucha and Spavinaw lakes.

Recently, Gentry, AR, revealed that wastewater from Simmons Food’s new chicken processing plant – processing 420 chickens per hour – will be sent to nearby Decatur for disposal.

Was the city of Tulsa consulted? Will Simmons’ waste end up in Spavinaw Creek? Will Tulsa’s 2003 settlement agreement with Arkansas’ poultry producers regarding Spavinaw Basin’s clean waters be enforced?

Both Arkansas and Oklahoma farms spread thousands of tons of chicken litter on soil. Heavy rains rapidly leach the waste down into the Boone-Rubidoux [BR] freshwater karst aquifer.

This aquifer supplies many water wells in northeastern Oklahoma’s Delaware and Adair counties.

BR karst-aquifer’s ground water flows are interconnected with surface water streams and creeks shared by Arkansas, Oklahoma and Missouri – and help fill Spavinaw, Grand and Tenkiller lakes.

Scientific tests found the poultry producers’ chicken litter contains ammonia, arsenic, metals and other toxicants absorbable in plants and humans. Northwest Arkansas and Northeast Oklahoma together produce over 500,000 tons per year – and growing – of this feathered litter crap.

Its all but invisible dust particles settle in bodies of water, homes, schools and children’s lungs – not to mention bees and beasts.

Tulsa officials might ask whether Decatur’s wastewater treatment plant has EPA environment permits. But, hey, Big Ag is free and exempt from protective environmental regulations.

Want a new definition of hell? How about life downwind from eastern Oklahoma’s 600-by-60-foot poultry houses, each filled with 50,000 forever defecating chickens.

Meanwhile, the Flint Creek coal-burning power plant sits at Gentry’s edge, six miles from Oklahoma.

The plant has 31 groundwater monitoring wells, 29 of which were polluted above federal advisory levels, according to samples collected between Jan. 26, 2010 and Aug. 29, 2017.

From that evidence, be assured the coal burning plant’s unlined ash pond leaks into BR Aquifer ground water and into nearby Flint Creek Lake which flows down into scenic Illinois River Basin of Oklahoma.

The man-made toxicants endangering humans, air, land and water in northeastern Oklahoma are all but unregulated – supersized poultry houses, the Flint Creek power plant, and mercury from 10 regional coal power plants’ smokestacks.

Mercury, an airborne carcinogen carried by wind and rain, is suspected in Stilwell’s low life expectancy. Note: Power Plants converted to natural gas still leave polluted soil and ground water from years of burning coal.

Sadly and disconcertingly, Oklahoma lawmakers have not authorized the creation of county-managed “ground water districts” – a wise course of action taken by adjoining states.

This omission enabled special interest-controlled state agencies to rubber-stamp 250 permits in 2018 for massive new ammonia-producing poultry houses in Green Country.

This is symptomatic of state leadership’s approach to many rural Oklahoma issues. Think: Epic Charter Schools [under investigation]. Or a dismissive attitude that non-metro counties are just vacant lots that can be filled with unregulated industries, wrecking county roads and bridges and the environment. Or the fact five rural-regional hospitals closed since 2010.

Medicaid expansion is one smart solution to short-life expectancy issue, but it is not enough. Oklahoma also needs to aggressively address public health protection measures – taking on inhumane water, air and land polluters and their elected enablers.

Further, state leaders need to quadruple funding for community public health programs, and underwrite emergency high-tech chemical testing of water and air quality in rural counties with the poorest health outcomes.

This is a public health crisis that can no longer be ignored!

Bob Jackman is a Tulsa-based petroleum geologist.



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Battle Over Southeast Oklahoma Water Heats Back Up

BY MIKE W. RAY

A court hearing scheduled for early August in a pending lawsuit that contests a water-use permit the Oklahoma Water Resources Board [OWRB] issued to Oklahoma City almost two years ago was delayed until late September.

State District Judge Michael DeBerry re-set the hearing for 10 a.m. Sept. 25 at the Pushmataha County Courthouse in Antlers.

Seven individuals who own land or businesses along the Kiamichi River filed suit in Pushmataha County District Court on Nov. 8, 2017, asking the court to “provide judicial review of and overturn” the water-use permit that the OWRB granted to OKC on Oct. 10, 2017.

The permit authorizes the capital to siphon 115,000 acre-feet of water – almost 37.5 billion gallons per year – from the Kiamichi River and Sardis Lake, which is fed by a tributary of that river.

Representing Oklahoma City in the lawsuit are Idabel attorney Kevin T. Sain and special counsel Brian Max Nazareus from Denver, CO. The water board is represented by its deputy general counsel, Sara Gibson.

Representing the seven plaintiffs is Norman attorney Kevin Kemper, who held an impromptu public gathering outside the Antlers courthouse on Aug. 8 and accused the defendants of concealing research compiled by Oklahoma State University of in-stream water flows.

OKC HAS SIX LAKES

Oklahoma City has six sources of surface water: Lakes Hefner, Draper and Overholser in OKC, Canton Lake in Blaine and Dewey counties in northwestern Oklahoma, plus Atoka Lake and McGee Creek Lake in Atoka County in southeastern Oklahoma.

“Combined, we have 211,667 acre-feet of water available” annually, Chris Browning, director of Oklahoma City’s Utilities Department, said in a 2017 interview. That’s almost 69 billion gallons per year [an acre-foot is equivalent to 325,851 gallons]. “We believe our current supplies will be sufficient until at least 2060,” Browning said, adding that city officials anticipate metro-area population growth of 1.5% annually.

A WATER WHOLESALER, RETAILER

In the interview he gave 2½ years ago, Browning said OKC delivers water to a combined population of approximately 1.4 million people. Oklahoma City supplied more than 33 billion gallons of water in 2016 to 208,670 accounts that included residential, commer-

cial, industrial and wholesale customers inside and outside its city limits.

Treated water is distributed through 3,650 miles of waterlines ranging in size from two inches in diameter to 72 inches.

Besides its Oklahoma City utility customers, the city provides retail individual water service to residents of The Village and Warr Acres.

The Oklahoma City Water Conservation Plan for 2017 reported that wholesale drinking water service is provided to Bethany, Blanchard, Edmond, El Reno, Moore, Mustang, Newcastle, Norman, Piedmont, Yukon, Canadian County Water Authority, Deer Creek Rural Water Corp., and Tinker Air Force Base.

Private raw water service is provided to Oklahoma Gas & Electric Co. [for its Mustang and Seminole power plants], Lattimore Material Corp. and Cedar Valley Nursery.

Oklahoma City also supplies raw water to Atoka, Coalgate, Pottawatomie County Rural Water District No. 3, and to Shawnee.

In addition, the McGee Creek Authority sells raw water to Atoka Rural Water District No. 4.

The McGee Creek Authority is a public trust established on Aug. 1, 1977 to develop, operate and maintain the McGee Creek Reservoir and to provide a municipal and industrial water supply for participants of the McGee Creek Authority [MCA] in central and southern Oklahoma. Those include the Oklahoma City Water Utilities Trust [OCWUT], the City of Oklahoma City, the City of Atoka and Atoka County.

A MAJOR REVENUE PRODUCER

Oklahoma City’s water system is a major revenue producer for the municipality, the most recent annual report shows.

Total assets for the OKC Water Utilities Trust [Consolidated Trust] grew to \$1.7 billion, an increase of more than \$123 million, in Fiscal Year 2018 [July 1, 2017 – June 30, 2018]. Assets of the Consolidated Trust – which includes blended operations of the OCWUT and the MCA – increased \$110 million in Fiscal Year 2017.

Total liabilities for the Consolidated Trust reached \$803 million during FY ‘18.

Thus, Consolidated Trust assets exceeded liabilities by almost \$914 million, an increase in the Trust’s net position of \$21.65 million over the previous fiscal year.

FINANCIAL POSITION IMPROVED

“The overall financial position of the Consolidated

Trust improved” during FY ‘18, accountants reported. Current assets increased by \$41 million, cash and investments increased \$39 million, and accounts receivable increased by \$2.23 million “due primarily to rate increases and timing of customer payments.” [The Oklahoma City Council in November 2017 approved a four-year program that included a new tiered rate plan for residential and commercial utility customers that went into effect in January 2018.] In FY 2017, current assets increased by more than \$46 million, while cash and investments increased by more than \$37 million.

The OCWUT, which operates and maintains Oklahoma City’s water and wastewater utility systems, is self-supporting; it does not receive tax funding, the annual report states. Also, the OCWUT and the MCA both are, as a general rule, exempt from federal and state income taxes.

Operating revenues climbed to \$267.68 million in FY ‘18, an increase of \$9.65 million over FY ‘17 and \$17.29 million more than operating revenues in FY ‘16. Operating expenses last year totaled \$170 million. That resulted in net operating income of \$97.6 million.

Operational expenses increased 3.8% last year, largely because of higher maintenance and operation expenses, including higher electric costs on the 60-inch, 100-mile long pipeline that conveys water from Atoka Lake in southeastern Oklahoma to Draper Lake in Oklahoma City with the aid of six pump stations. A 17.2-mile pipeline extends from McGee Creek reservoir to the Atoka reservoir.

BOND DEBTS

The Consolidated Trust’s outstanding debt totaled \$669 million on June 30, 2018. That included \$483.66 million in revenue bonds, payable by the OCWUT and the MCA, that are supported by pledged water and wastewater revenues, plus \$173 million in notes payable to the Oklahoma Water Resources Board. The OWRB “provided partial funding to OCWUT for sev-

eral clean water and drinking water projects since 2009,” Browning related.

OCWUT bonds held a AAA credit rating from Standard & Poor’s, and a credit rating of Aaa from Moody’s, at the end of FY 2018.

WATER LOSSES QUANTIFIED

In its 2017 Water Conservation Plan, Oklahoma City indicated its water losses were 13.8%. The American Water Works Association encourages a standard of 10% or less for “non-revenue” water.

In an effort to reduce its water losses, OCWUT approved a \$1.16 billion capital improvements plan for fiscal years 2018-22. As part of that program, approximately 20 miles of small-diameter water mains are scheduled to be replaced each year.

SARDIS, ATOKA, LARA EXPENSES

Non-operating expenses of the OKC Water Utilities Trust in the past two years included \$5 million in contributions to the Sardis and Atoka conservation projects fund.

In 2017 the OCWUT made a pact with the Chickasaw and Choctaw nations and the state of Oklahoma to create the Atoka and Sardis conservation projects fund “for the benefit of Atoka and Sardis Lake areas,” the annual report explains.

As of June 30, 2018, the fund held \$5 million deposited by the OCWUT and a \$5 million receivable from the two tribes, according to the annual report.

The OKC Water Utilities Trust also reimbursed the Lake Atoka Reservation Association nearly \$481,000 during FYs 2017 and 2018 for unspecified expenses. LARA was created in 1974 “to administer use of the water reservoir, its resources and facilities.”

Mike W. Ray spent 45 years as a journalist on newspapers in Oklahoma and Texas, two years in public relations with Southwestern Bell Telephone, plus 19 years as a media director at the Oklahoma House of Representatives.

Editor’s Note: For more coverage of this legal showdown, see the July 2019 Observer.

Emperor?

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 10

handed effort at empire building by the first-year governor. He now wants to create a Washington, DC office to represent Oklahoma’s interests in the beltway.

This is nothing new, of course. Former Gov. David Walters did so back in the early 1990s, but his successor, Frank Keating, eliminated it.

There’s a compelling argument that opening an Oklahoma office is, in fact, duplicative because the state already has seven taxpayer-financed, full-time Washington-based representatives: two senators and five members of Congress. Each with a sizeable staff, by the way.

Still, Stitt’s idea to increase the state’s DC pres-

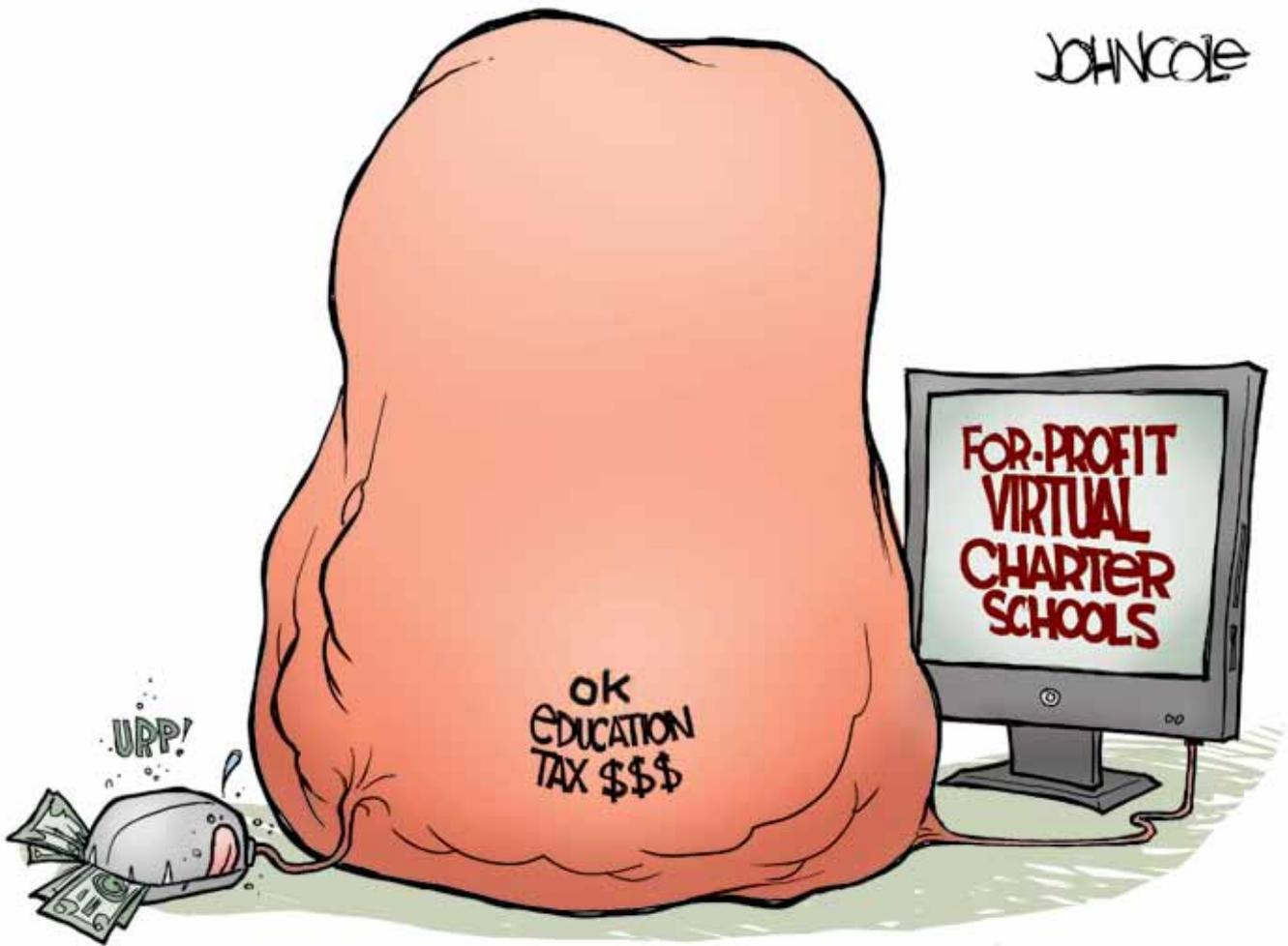
ence is not without merit. Remember, Oklahoma relies heavily on federal tax dollars – think: military installations, the FAA, the National Weather Center and highways, just to name a few.

What makes it harder to swallow, though, is that just last month he issued an executive order barring state agencies from hiring outside lobbyists.

Yet, now, he wants to deploy state tax dollars to lobby by the federal government? What’s good for the goose ...

Oklahomans concerned about too much power in too few hands should keep an eagle eye on this administration.

JOHN COLE



EPIC FAIL

BY DAVID BLATT

It has not, to put it mildly, been a good couple months for David Chaney and Ben Harris, co-founders of Epic Charter Schools, Oklahoma's largest virtual charter school.

Launched in 2011, Epic has enjoyed explosive growth. It enrolled over 21,000 students in 2018-19, making it larger than the state's fifth largest school district. It operates online programs statewide and three centers that blend virtual and in-person learning in Oklahoma City and Tulsa.

Epic's growth has been fueled by aggressive marketing campaigns, bonuses and gifts to help recruit students, and teacher contracts with bonuses that allow its highest-paid teachers to reach annual pay of over \$100,000. This growth has now attracted intense scrutiny of its business model and operations.

In June, Oklahoma Watch reported on a lawsuit filed by several Epic teachers alleging that the school has, for years, encouraged teachers to push for the

withdrawal of low-performing students to help improve its performance measures.

A week later, an Oklahoman article revealed that over one-quarter of Epic's students were automatically disenrolled for missing 10 consecutive school days, more than double the statewide average, a pattern that also artificially aids the school's assessment on annual A-F report cards. Even so, Epic high school received an F in overall performance on their 2018-19 school report card, while the middle school earned a C and elementary school earned a D.

Next came a press release from state Sen. Ron Sharp questioning why Epic's blended charter school received state funding allocations for grade levels the school has acknowledged it did not provide instruction for over two years.

Then most dramatically, in July, the Oklahoma State Bureau of Investigation filed an affidavit against Chaney and Harris alleging they embezzled more

than \$10 million between 2013 and 2018. The main accusations involve enrolling “ghost students,” some of whom are also home-schooled or attending private schools. Epic is also being investigated by the FBI and federal Department of Education.

Chaney and Harris have benefitted through their control of Epic Youth Services, a for-profit affiliate that receives 10% of Epic’s total revenue to provide its management services – an amount now exceeding \$11 million a year.

So far no criminal charges have been filed and Epic has strenuously denied all accusations of wrongdoing.

Until recently, the Legislature and State Department of Education have been slow to enact appropriate oversight and accountability over Epic and other virtual charter schools, but this year saw passage of HB 1395 that will hold virtual charter schools to the same financial reporting requirements as brick and mortar schools.

It also requires charter management organizations like Epic Youth Services to detail how it spends money on behalf of the school and adds some additional

safeguards.

We can expect the 2020 legislative session to include additional reform measures, including efforts to either abolish the Statewide Virtual Charter School Board or place it under the authority of the State Department of Education.

We are also seeing more public school districts develop their own virtual alternatives. Recently, the Cooperative Council for Oklahoma School Administration launched the Blended Learning Framework, which includes guidelines for selecting and training teachers, recommendations for identifying students likely to succeed in a blended/virtual environment, and guidelines for choosing beneficial technology resources.

High demand for virtual and blended education suggests they fill a need to serve students who don’t respond well in traditional classroom settings. But the lesson of Epic suggests that when schools are operated as profit-making ventures, the interest of students won’t come first.

David Blatt is Executive Director of Oklahoma Policy Institute; okpolicy.org.

The 411 On SQ 802 Petition Drive

BY CARLY PUTNAM

The initiative to extend health coverage for some 200,000 Oklahomans kicked off July 31. That’s when Oklahomans Decide Healthcare began collecting signatures for SQ 802, which would put Medicaid expansion to a vote of the people. If the group is successful, Oklahomans will get to vote in 2020 on whether the state will expand Medicaid.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

Oklahomans Decide Healthcare has until Oct. 28 to collect at least 178,000 signatures – 15% of the votes cast in the most recent gubernatorial election – and signatories must be registered voters in the state of Oklahoma. Organizers have said they intend to collect more than 200,000 signatures, giving themselves a cushion in case some signatures are thrown out.

Ballot initiatives in Oklahoma can change statute or amend the state Constitution, with the latter requiring more signatures to make it onto the ballot. Oklahomans Decide Healthcare wants to put Medicaid expansion in the state Constitution rather than simply changing statute. If enough signatures are collected and voters approve the measure, Medicaid expansion will be added to the Oklahoma Constitution, which will make it difficult for the legislature to tamper with it.

In the four states where Medicaid expansion passed via ballot initiative, the change was only statutory, and those states’ legislatures and governors were

able to limit or roll back the expansion passed by voters.

Once the signatures are collected, the Secretary of State, state Attorney General, and state Supreme Court will count the signatures to ensure they meet the state’s requirements and write the ballot title. There’s also a period for legal challenges. After that, Governor Kevin Stitt will determine which ballot SQ 802 will appear on, or call a special election.

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

Oklahoma is one of just 14 states that hasn’t expanded their Medicaid programs to include low-income working-age adults, who otherwise have virtually no health insurance options. Thirty-six states and Washington, DC have expanded Medicaid.

The Oklahoma Legislature seriously considered expansion for the first time in 2019, when SB 605 became the first Medicaid expansion bill heard in a legislative committee. Although the bill passed out of committee unanimously, it died when it was not heard before the next legislative deadline.

The ballot initiative process in Oklahoma formally began in April 2019 when two Oklahoma women, Kelly Smalley and Erin Taylor, filed a petition with the Oklahoma Secretary of State, which designated the petition SQ 802.

Although the Oklahoma Council for Public Affairs filed a legal challenge shortly thereafter, alleging that SQ 802 was unconstitutional and the gist was inad-

equate, the state Supreme Court disagreed. On June 19, the state Supreme Court cleared the way for a Medicaid expansion ballot initiative to move forward.

WHAT ABOUT GOV. STITT'S PLAN?

The ballot initiative may not be the only expansion effort under consideration in the fall of 2019 or in 2020. Gov. Kevin Stitt has said he expects to be able to unveil a customized Medicaid expansion plan in late summer or early fall 2019. The Legislature will then take up the plan in the 2020 Legislative session.

There is a possibility that both the initiative ex-

pansion and legislative expansion could pass. If the Legislature passes an expansion bill, the expansion initiative will still be put on the ballot if it gathers enough signatures and meets other legal requirements.

In this situation, if the initiative passes, it should supersede the legislative expansion because the initiative is a constitutional amendment and the legislative expansion would be statutory.

Carly Putnam is Policy Director at Oklahoma Policy Institute; okpolicy.org.

Interim Studies Tackle Children's Issues

BY JOE DORMAN

Over the summer months, Oklahoma lawmakers are dedicated to preparing for the upcoming legislative session. One way they do this is through the interim study process.

Each lawmaker can request an official hearing through a legislative committee to review a law or policy that impacts the state. The hearings are scheduled through the committee chair most closely associated with the issue and time is dedicated to hearing presentations from speakers who are experts on the subject matter.

The Oklahoma Institute for Child Advocacy [OICA] is pleased to have worked directly with lawmakers to request several different interim studies. We are awaiting a final confirmation from Senate committee chairs on which studies will be heard, but we are confident that many will proceed.

Two subject-areas where OICA is excited to have an active role in are child nutrition and laws that impact both adult and child victims of domestic violence.

I was happy to sit down recently with the staff from Hunger Free Oklahoma to delve into the topic of child nutrition and summer feeding programs, issues I have discussed in previous columns. We are hoping to have organizations that engage on these subjects participate in interim studies addressing why Oklahoma ranks last in the nation on feeding children who qualify for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program [SNAP], what improvements have been made, and what more can be done. My thanks go out to Sen. Paul Scott, R-Duncan, and Rep. Toni Hasenbeck, R-Lawton, for requesting discussions on this important issue.

Another study, requested in the House by Rep. Tammy West, will look at "failure to protect" laws and legislation in Oklahoma and other states. "Failure to protect" laws are used to prosecute parents or guardians of children who witness child-abuse but do not stop it.

This is an important concept – no adult should pas-

sively allow a child to be abused. However, the law can often ignore the reality of an abusive household where, for instance, a mother is abused and essentially terrorized by a husband or a boyfriend.

Furthermore, there have been some instances where the actively abusive adult receives a lighter sentence than the parent witnessing the abuse and failing to protect the child. Currently, the "failure to protect" statute allows a lifetime sentence to be brought against a person, which is usually more than twenty years of incarceration.

This is a complicated issue and we do not currently have enough research in Oklahoma to fully grasp how this law is being used. It is estimated that a few dozen individuals, mostly women, have been charged with "failure to protect" and been sentenced.

We would first call upon funding to be delivered to the Department of Corrections to update their system and provide a clear picture of who these people are and under what circumstances they were prosecuted. For those who have received a punishment under this and other domestic abuse crimes, we will call on policy changes to better fund counseling for inmates. For those who have turned their lives around, we support reuniting them with their children when that is safe to occur. We also want a fair timeline on the sentence to be given in association with counseling.

Of course, we will continue to remind parents of their moral responsibility to protect their child from abuse, even at the risk of their own safety. Sometimes, the only solution is to leave a bad situation. If you or someone you know is a victim of abuse, call the Oklahoma Safe Line 1-800-522-SAFE [7233] to speak with an advocate. The first step to securing safety is to get help and into a safe location.

We hope these studies will lead to positive changes for Oklahoma. We will keep you posted about their progress.

Former state Rep. Joe Dorman is CEO of the Oklahoma Institute for Child Advocacy.



Fuels From Hell

BY BOB ROUNSAVELL

If you've not read Thomas Friedman's *Hot, Flat, and Crowded*, I highly recommend it – and do it as soon as possible. We were fortunate in getting a copy at a library book sale, a primary source for us. Friedman is an excellent writer, because he's full of insights on the current world. Hence, he makes profound statements for us to consider.

In pages 28 and 29 appears the following: "The Industrial Revolution gave a whole new prominence to what Rochelle Lefkowitz, president of Pro-Media Communications and an energy buff, calls 'fuels from hell' – coal, oil, and natural gas. All these come from underground, are exhaustible, and emit CO₂ and other pollutants when they are burned for transportation, heating and industrial use. In contrast are 'fuels from heaven' – wind, hydroelectric, tidal, biomass, and solar power. These all come from

above ground, are endlessly renewable, and produce no harmful emissions."

The current Administration probably doesn't want to hear the following scientific observation. But here goes.

Scientists at the Pew Center on Climate Change studied the precise relationship between expanded greenhouse gas emissions and global warming and issued their report entitled "Climate Change 101."

According to them, global average temperatures have experienced natural shifts throughout recorded history. In the Northern Hemisphere the climate has varied from a relatively warm period between the 11th and the 15th centuries to a period of much cooler temperatures between the 17th and the middle of the 19th century.

Noting the rapid rise of global temps during the

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late 20th century, they conclude that natural variability, however, cannot account for it. There is a new factor – the human factor, i.e. human activity.

We are largely responsible for vastly increased emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases, principally due to the burning of fossil fuels coal and oil, as well as deforestation, large-scale cattle-grazing and our grilled steaks, agriculture and our high incidence of obesity.

In their report, “scientists refer to what has been happening in the earth’s atmosphere over the past century as the ‘enhanced greenhouse effect.’”

According to David Rothkopf, an energy expert and visiting scholar at the Carnegie Endowment, “We re-invented ourselves as a continental industrial power in the 20th century and then as a global information society in the 21st century.” He goes on to emphasize that the present situation is requiring America for its own sake, as well as the world’s, to reinvent ourselves one more time.

According to him, making America the world’s

greenest country will not be a selfless act of charity or naive moral indulgence because it is now a core national security and economic interest.

There is a mental exercise we can go through. We ask ourselves the kind of America we’d like to be – one addicted to oil, thereby fueling the worst autocracies in the world; a country with a government that relaxes energy and efficiency standards on cars? I think not.

How about the America Donald Trump is creating for us? An America spotlighted as the last holdout at international environmental conferences, losing the world’s respect.

We haven’t far to go before we will be completely out of the good loop. Therefore I believe we better get back into the good loop because the world is in great need of our help at this moment in history.

Bob Rounsavell currently serves as chair of the Eastern Flyer Coalition of communities between Tulsa and Oklahoma City. His wife Maria serves as his editor.

Bad Joke On Farmers Who Supported Trump

BY GARY EDMONDSON

Last month, Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue proved himself tone deaf at a “listening session” where he was hearing complaints from Minnesota farmers whose existence is threatened by the Trump Trade War.

As Mary Papenfuss of Huffington Post reported, Perdue decided to lighten the mood with some humor: “‘What do you call two farmers in a basement? A whine cellar.’”

“As he pounded the table in mirth, some of the thousands of farmers at the event laughed nervously – which was followed by boos.”

The reaction from farmers was predictable: “‘It was definitely not an appropriate thing to say,’ Minnesota Farmers Union President Gary Wertish told HuffPost. ‘It was very insensitive. It took everyone by surprise. He doesn’t understand what farmers are dealing with, and he’s the head of the Department of Agriculture. He’s supposed to be working for farmers.’”

The HuffPost story continued, “Rep. Angie Craig, D-MN, who attended Farmfest, was taken aback by Perdue’s characterization of farmers as whiners.

“‘I’m sitting down with farmers across my district and I know for a fact that they are not whining ...

They’re stressed and they’re scared. Family farmers are experiencing the real consequences of an escalating trade war and rapidly disappearing markets.’”

More to the point was a tweet directed to the president and circulating last week from a Lexington, NE, farmer, as reported by KNOP-TV in North Platte.

In a detailed outline of Trump farm failures, Don Batie’s fourth suggestion was for Trump to maybe let his Ag secretary know “that farmers are not in a joking mood when facing financial ruin because of YOUR government’s action. Most farm operators [actual farmers, not landowners] are, or will be, having difficult discussions with their banks.”

Christopher R. Martin, pointed out in an April issue of People’s World that, “Trump’s misguided tariff wars and scuttling of NAFTA have exacerbated crop prices that were already slumping, especially corn, soybeans, and wheat. This year, farm loan delinquencies have hit a nine-year high.”

Jason Easley of Politicus USA wrote in June, “Trump’s trade war has become a president-made disaster for red states as Sen. Mike Rounds, R-SD, said South Dakota had lost \$500 million” in the trade war.

These dire conditions were before Trump’s pre-G7

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outburst ratcheted up the trade war with China – the status of which varies according to scary inconsistencies. [Some suggest Trump’s trying to crash the economy to make the Fed lower interest rates so that he can pay less on his own loans.]

Batie’s tweet from the Heartland takes on even more urgency:

“1. Fix the trade issue with China today! Not soon, TODAY!

“2. Rejoin the [Trans Pacific Partnership], now the [Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership]. While I know you do not like multilateral trade agreements, they are better than no trade agreements.

“3. Tell the oil industry to take a hike and stop issuing [Renewable Fuel Standard] waivers. And tell EPA to reassign the waivers already granted to other refiners, like the law says to do. In other words, FOLLOW THE LAW!” [What a concept for our scoff-law prexy!]

This refers to waivers Trump granted to refineries in order to cripple the bio-fuel industry in favor of his fossil fuel favorites.

Batie’s fourth suggestion referred to that comedian [or just plain joke] Sonny Perdue. Number Five tried to inform the uneducable Donald Trump, “All

the farmers left today are shrewd small independent businessmen and businesswomen. Treat us that way, don’t pander to us. All we ask is an even playing field. Don’t tell us one thing and do another. Listen to us, not the folks inside the beltway.”

Midwestern Republicans have yet to stand up for their constituents, some of whom are reaching the end of their patience.

More recently Reuters reported, “The U.S. Agriculture Department said on Wednesday it had pulled all staff from an annual crop tour after an employee was threatened, and three sources said the threat came over the phone from an angry farmer.

“Farmers have complained this month that a government crop report did not reflect damage from historic flooding this spring. They are also frustrated over unsold crops due to the trade war with China, falling farm income and tighter credit conditions.”

I understand the frustration. Someone lies to you to get your vote and then sets about destroying your livelihood.

But being a Democrat, I neither condone nor incite violence. That is another trait of our lying Republican president.

Duncan resident Gary Edmondson is chair of the Stephens County Democratic Party.

Trump’s Dependency On Racism

BY MARK Y.A. DAVIES

There seems to be at least three forms of racism that are fueling Trump’s current hold on power:

First, you have the hardcore racist white supremacists. Not every Trump supporter is a hardcore racist white supremacist, but every hardcore racist white supremacist is a Trump supporter [these are the David Dukes, Richard Spencers, Steve Kings, and Stephen Millers of the world and their followers].

Second, you have those who primarily express their racism through a willingness to use race, racial divisions, xenophobia, and racism in general to gain power. These persons may not understand themselves to be white supremacists, but they are more than willing to use racism as a political tool to gain, maintain, and expand political power [Trump himself and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell are at the very least representatives of this form of racism].

Third, you have those who may reject white supremacy and who may not like Trump’s overt use of racism and xenophobia to gain and maintain power, but they have decided that Trump’s policies on taxes, regulations, abortion, and perhaps some other social issues are enough to make up for his use of racial division and unwillingness to consistently

denounce white supremacy and his use of racist and xenophobic rhetoric.

Those in the third category likely do not view themselves as racist, but their continuing support of Trump and his agenda that is supported by white supremacists is, in effect, racist in that it perpetuates experiences of injustice and violence for immigrants, refugees, and persons of color in general. Included in this third form of racism are many corporate supporters of Trump who overlook or tolerate his racism in order to continue to reap the rewards of low taxes and fewer regulations.

These three forms of racism – the first overt, the second crassly utilitarian and Machiavellian, and the third more covert and silent, all worked together to bring Trump to power, and Trump needs all three forms of racism to remain as president.

Persons who express the first two forms of racism are for the most part a lost cause in terms of potential conversion, but there may be some hope that some persons in the third group may have had too much of the overt and utilitarian forms of racism to remain silent much longer.

Even if that is not the case, as long as Democrats

and progressive independents stay united in their resistance to Trump, there is a path that leads us beyond Trump and his racist agenda.

Mark Y.A. Davies is the Wimberly Professor of Social and Ecological Ethics and director of the World House Institute for Social and Ecological Responsibility at Oklahoma City University.

We Are Children Of Our Earth

BY VERN TURNER

The principles of evolution do not include the phrase *survival of the fittest*. These principles – now greatly supplemented, proven and accepted since Charles Darwin first wrote *On the Origin of Species* – require that features of an organism that promote its ability to reproduce offspring that survive matter the most.

Sudden catastrophes, fast-moving disease and short-term climate change are all major threats to an organism's "fitness" to survive. Plants and animals cannot adapt to a comet crash, or a quickly occurring drought, or a volcanic explosion. If they have the bad luck to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, they will become extinct irrespective of their adaptations to more "normal" times.

Humans are the most adaptable animals the world has yet seen – as far as we know. We have and can manage to survive dramatic changes in our environment because we observe those changes, understand the threat to our existence [hence our ability to reproduce] and adapt ourselves to avoid dangers.

We made weapons to defend ourselves against predators [and each other, often the same thing], we relocated to more favorable areas for food and we eventually invented medicines to overcome most diseases.

The question is why are we building so many weapons for killing?

Most of today's peoples grow their own food. There are but a few remnants of civilizations where hunting is the primary activity for meat acquisition. Most humans farm their meat as well as their vegetables. Similar to bears and pigs, humans are omnivores among larger mammals. Rodents are often omnivorous, but most specialize in a food type.

Today's "modern" man hunts for sport with food a secondary consideration. Fortunately, the killing of wild animals for trophies or hide commerce is great-

ly reduced, but still rapacious in its own rite. But the sheer volume and sophistication of the weapons we produce are still astounding.

We are very, very good at finding new ways and new mechanisms to kill one another. But as a sportsman, I couldn't imagine hauling a 105mm field artillery piece out to my deer stand.

I'm not going to get into a moral discussion about killing. We humans have always behaved like my father-in-law's goats: we all keep finding new ways to kill ourselves. I accept that because we have always done it. All of recorded history highlights war as the most significant activity of a society.

Wars are mass killings brought about by organized bands of humans brandishing weapons of death to other humans. That's it. The band with the most soldiers with the most effective weapons wins. Rarely do the meek survive.

We know all too well the reasons for war: religion, race, tribe identity, territory, resources, food and water. Political power that launches wars is predicated on one or more of these things.

What if we made robots so sophisticated that they only needed us humans to maintain their systems, keep them lubricated and repaired? What if we programmed them to keep us alive so that we could continue their maintenance; if not they would become heaps of rusting junk?

I wonder if these robots would have sufficient cognition from intelligence programming to prevent us from killing ourselves off in order to ensure *their survival*. Maybe they would drop their agrarian duties of feeding us to prevent us from killing each other via wars; a robotic rebellion, if you will. After all if we, their keepers, survive, they do.

Well, right now the planet Earth is our keeper. We humans are exploiting its resources at rates and using methods that were not even imagined even 100 years ago. In my lifetime the human population has more than doubled and may add another 50% before I die.

We "evolved" as the most rapacious organism to ever walk the planet. Even world wars haven't stemmed the tide of overpopulation.

The point to all this is that we must adapt once again to a major threat to our existence: ourselves. We are most complex and the answers to our survival are also complex.

Two things we can start doing right away is stop killing each other and control our population growth. We must give the planet a chance to support us further; otherwise it will be worn out from us and we will be gone.

Denver resident Vern Turner is a regular contributor to The Oklahoma Observer. His latest book, Why Angels Weep: America and Donald Trump, is available through Amazon.

What Walsh And 'The Mooch' Are Saying Is Significant

BY DAN RATHER

I have refrained, until now, from commenting on what has become a spectacle on cable news, and more generally, of former Trump acolytes and attack dogs, namely Anthony Scaramucci and Joe Walsh, now turning on the president in harsh rhetoric that calls into question not only his fitness for office, but his general fitness of mind and morality.

The response from the press and the public has been what is to be expected. Both of these men make for good television, if by good television you mean bold statements uttered without irony. They can fill news cycles with no shortage of provocative source material and consequently hours of pundit pontificating.

Meanwhile, many remember these men for the outrages they peddled over the years and thus react with understandable revulsion at what can easily be dismissed as naked self-interest.

I do not know what lies in these men's hearts. And I don't really care to judge their motives. The more important consideration is what do their roles in the drama of our times say about the larger political landscape. Are they just bit players to be ignored? After all what they are saying has already been said by many. Or is there any reason to pay heed?

I would argue that what these men are saying is significant. And it doesn't matter what drives them. If they are merely political opportunists, it only enhances the importance of their message. Because what their voices mean is that Donald Trump is losing the battle for the soul of this nation.

That doesn't mean he can't win reelection. But it does mean that many who are reading the currents of history sense he occupies a place of weakness.

In a world where Donald Trump was winning, where his power was fearsome, where the future was bending to his will, I don't think men like Walsh and Scaramucci would be betting their futures on calling him out. Look at how authoritarians throughout history have consolidated power and squelched dissent. President Trump is doing the opposite.

And in a world where criticism of Donald Trump was difficult to focus, amorphous, and without a strong foundation of truth, the lines of attack from these men would not land with such force and precision.

They are further reinforcing many of the denuncia-

tions of President Trump that are defining his public image for tens of millions of Americans: his immorality, recklessness, corruption, narcissism, incompetence, and so on.

What newly minted antagonists like Scaramucci and Walsh are saying is that Donald Trump is deeply flawed and it's not hard to point to countless reasons why.

Now these men should not be allowed to crowd out other voices. They must answer for their previous statements. Their actions in the past and in the future should not be graded on a curve. But those who see themselves as the resistance, who are dismayed by what President Trump has done and fear deeply the damage yet to come, should be heartened by voices like Scaramucci and Walsh.

They represent cracks in the foundational belief that this president will hold on to his base no matter what and that he is not bound by the realities of political physics.

Perhaps these men have really had a change of heart and have, as they both have said, seen the damage of their past selves. But even if they are more like weathervanes spinning around their own axes of personal aggrandizement it still means the winds of fate for Donald Trump are shifting. And that is important.

Veteran journalist Dan Rather is author most recently of What Unites Us: Reflections on Patriotism.

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We Don't Want To Be Stupid Twice ... Do We?

BY CAL HOBSON

"The public appears disposed to be amused even as it is being deceived."

That admonition is credited to the creative and calculating mind of circus maestro P.T. Barnum who lived from 1810-1891. It also could have been said yesterday, today or tomorrow by our 45th president, Donald John Trump.

I was unaware of that Barnum quote when I wrote a column for The Oklahoma Observer in September 2015 about the then-real estate hustler and former TV huckster who was contemplating, for the third time, a run for the presidency. I did not predict he would win in 2016 because of his track record of exaggerations, outright lies, racist commentary, questionable personal finances and other traits that, in normal times and circumstances, would end most campaigns before they even get the slightest momentum. Obviously I underestimated Trump's ability to sell his snake oil and overestimated my fellow

citizens' ability to resist it.

In other words these apparently are not "normal times."

As I have watched with growing disdain, now turning to abject disgust, our president's conduct, I began to examine history for someone of similar behavior. Through the miracle of Google, I discovered many such characters prominent in American lore but one stood out for his likeness to Trump through both word and deed. That fellow is Phineas Taylor Barnum, showman, politician, author, occasional philanthropist and loquacious liar.

During Barnum's long and illustrious lifetime of self promotion he took great joy insulting others, denigrating minorities, making fun of cripples and "freaks." using his deceitfulness to enrich himself at the expense of others and thusly is best remembered for being a bore, crook, clown and con man. Sound familiar?

Midway through his life, Barnum declared, “I am a showman by profession ... and all that gilding shall make nothing else of me.” Thanks to gaining his wealth the old fashioned way – by inheriting it – our 21st century version of P.T. privately, and most likely, recognizes he is nothing more than the creation of a doting, dollar-driven, dominating father and coddling mother. Handsome, a bully larger in size than most, born into wealth but lacking “old money” status, D.J. has always tried to even the playing field by manipulating people’s fear of those different from themselves.

Another fixation of both men was, and obviously is, money. It is said frequently of Barnum that “to put money in his own coffers” was his highest priority and the same can truthfully be attributed to Trump. Our 21st century three-ring circus-master has left a trail of failed ventures, including an airline, several casinos, a specialty vodka that was not so special, production of forgettable beef steaks, money losing golf courses, hotels, vineyards, etc., and did so while not paying contractors or even the hourly help.

Although Trump has established various charities, their financial records reveal he and his family members have been the major beneficiaries including using duped donors’ money to buy, among other things, a portrait of himself.

Along with treasuring the almighty dollar both philanderers married young, had several children by first wives and then later repeated the vows of matrimony with much younger ones. Both egomaniacs eventually sought elected office, Barnum at the lowly city and state level while Trump tumbled into the White House via the vagaries of something known as the Electoral College. In the popular vote, which he continues to question, No. 45 lost the White House by over three million ballots. Regardless, this president governs as though he has the popular mandate of a Reagan, Eisenhower or Roosevelt when in fact his rock solid, unshakable and worshipful base of supporters fluctuates between 38% and 41% and currently registers 36%.

Demographically, it is populated mostly by caucasians, especially less-educated, middle-age males who are often devoted to Rush Limbaugh and Fox News. Additionally, heading into the 2020 election, it also appears his dominance among the evangelical electorate remains strong and dedicated to him. When polled, the religious right stalwarts invariably respond that they don’t like his language, tweets or personal traits but stay with him due to hot button issues such as abortion and judicial nominations.

A century and a half before The Donald became famous for real estate recklessness in New York City, The Phineas went busted in the same community and in the same business. Bad investments, years of litigation followed by bankruptcies and stiffing creditors were/are the trademarks of both men and should have besmirched their names forever.

So how did these un-cautious characters, after leaving mountains of debt and unpaid bills, recover financially?

Barnum became an ardent and vocal opponent of demon rum as Trump has been all his life, perhaps due to his older brother’s death from alcoholism. P.T. was so spellbinding a speaker he became wealthy by sermonizing at temperance rallies while D.J. may or may not be the fiscal wizard he claims. No one knows because he refuses to release his tax returns, contrary to what every other presidential candidate over the last 50 years has done. His excuse? The documents, he says, are in audit now going on three years. Perhaps true, perhaps not. A more important point is we do not know and thus cannot make informed decisions about possible conflicts of interest, self dealing and personal aggrandizement not just for himself but family members as well. That behavior alone would normally be a bar to re-election but as a reminder these are not normal times.

Clearly both men were/are notorious liars, exaggerators, gossipers and tellers of tall tales. Time after time in the 19th century, Barnum created businesses that attracted and later skinned investors until he finally hit the mother lode as a circus ringmaster. Our current tempestuous tweeter doubles as president of the United States, undoubtedly the most powerful man in the world, which should give pause to friend and foe alike.

Amazingly, the Barnum and Bailey Circus, formed in 1881 in partnership with one James Bailey, lasted until 2017, the same year the longest of Republican long shots moved into the White House. The B&B Circus drew record crowds for generations while President Trump claims to have attracted one on a particularly very cold and politically important Jan. 20.

Like so many other baseless boasts Trump and his press toadies – led by new *Dancing With The Stars*



socialite Sean Spicer – were caught lying about the inauguration attendance. The response from his base was classic Beatle Bailey who often opined, “What? Me worry?”

Well, Beatle aside, I’m worried going forward. All of us have the right to our own opinions but not our own facts. Former New York Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan is generally given credit for that wise admonition so widely ignored today. Therefore, without some consensus on “truthiness” how can this country, or just our state, find solutions, even partial ones, for our most intractable challenges? The truth here is ... not easily.

I believe this “failure to communicate” to us from politicians has led average citizens – just plain folks – to turn inward for answers and in Oklahoma that clearly has meant voter generated initiative petitions. These efforts over the last several years have received approval on such diverse and controversial issues as criminal justice reform and legalization of medical marijuana.

Conversely, ballot measures – at least important ones – placed before voters by lawmakers have often failed. These include proposals to encourage corporate farming and the expenditure of public money for religious purposes.

Perhaps one lesson to be learned by these examples is that when citizens go to the expense, time and trouble, which is considerable, to place an idea on a ballot, success often follows. Conversely, it is much easier for lawmakers to offer the plebiscite ideas that are doomed to fail. For example nine of 10 state questions proposed in 1968 were defeated. The only one approved turned out to be a Trojan Horse scheme to raise lawmakers’ salaries which was promptly done several times.

Along this line, eligible voters are currently being asked to sign two new initiatives. First is a constitutional question to expand Medicaid and second is a statutory one to repeal the Legislature’s vote on “constitutional carry.” One would result in more health care in our state and the second is pushing for fewer guns. Both reflect a desire of voters to more directly decide matters affecting the future for themselves and their families.

In summary the trend to distrust elected officials, especially at the state level but growing federally, is accelerating and the double-talking Trump is but one part of the problem. His proclivity to lie with impunity is more than tiresome, but actually now is expected and accepted by most Americans.

Our president’s conduct could prove to be fatal to democracy because without trust and confidence in our leaders the Constitution is but a set of mere words crafted in the 18th century for 13 colonies and a select group of citizens ... white men.

It’s correct that only one other time in the last half-century has America truly been on the doorstep of democratic implosion – caused by a president who lied until caught by his own tape recorder. Rich-

ard Nixon jeopardized our country’s freedoms due to his obsession with personal power, his proclivity to lie and deceive. He only stepped aside when confronted by a handful of great men, including Oklahoma’s U.S. Sen. Henry Bellmon, R-Billings, who knew RMN had violated his oath of office.

So here we are, some 15 months before the 2020 presidential election. Americans then will decide with their ballots whether to retain or retire a very flawed man in the world’s most powerful position: the U.S. presidency.

Forty-four white males and one black man have earned the title of president. None have been perfect. Their flaws were many, some bordering on flagrant. Think: incompetent Democrat Andrew Johnson, impeached by the House and retained in office by only one vote in the Senate, or wayward Republican Warren Harding, who died during his scandal-plagued administration. They were, generously speaking, terrible leaders who should have never held the job.

Americans, and hopefully only Americans, will decide soon whether to keep Donald Trump as president. His direct accomplishments are few and his flaws – some domestically, others internationally – border at least on high crimes and misdemeanors.

All polls show we are bitterly divided racially; treaties and agreements have been unilaterally reversed and/or ignored; the national debt is \$22 billion and soaring; our allies are now criticized while dictators receive praise; the judicial branch is frequently held in contempt; trade imbalances regularly reach record highs; and Russia unquestionably tried to impact our 2016 elections for which it received as punishment no more than a wink and a nod from the Oval Office.

Having watched and participated in politics now going back 60 years, I recognize the presidency is a herculean task. The day Nixon resigned in 1974 is the same day I completed my tour of duty in the Pentagon. I served in the Air Force three years overseas in several countries during the Vietnam War and saw first hand their people’s love and admiration for America. I had the honor to wear the uniform of my country for more than three decades. I have been elected to four different public offices at the city and state levels and have lost elections for two others.

As I age, the fragility and vulnerability of democracy becomes more obvious to me and, therefore, more treasured and valued.

Having said all that let me now say this: No candidate for any office is perfect but it doesn’t mean we have to re-elect the most imperfect one who has held the most important position in the world. If we do, the problem is not Donald John Trump.

As Stephen King admonished “Fool me once, your fault; fool me twice, my fault.”

We don’t want to be stupid twice ... do we?
Cal Hobson, a Lexington Democrat, served in the Oklahoma Legislature from 1978-2006, including one term as Senate President Pro Tempore.

Democrats Need A Smarter Nominating Process

BY FROMA HARROP

Is anything really wrong with Jay Inslee? Was John Hickenlooper not qualified to be president? And is Steve Bullock a weak candidate? The answers are no, no, no and for all three, “on the contrary.”

Any of them could be a remarkably attractive Democratic nominee for president. In a general election, they might do better than the two firebrand senators trailing Joe Biden in the polls: Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders. But their campaigns never took off. Something in the Democrats’ nominating process isn’t working for their kind of candidacy.

Inslee, governor of Washington state, distinguished himself by seriously addressing the crisis of global warming. He’s left the race. So has Hickenlooper, former governor of Colorado. He is now running for the Senate. Early polls give him a solid lead against the Republican incumbent, Cory Gardner.

The only one still in is Bullock, governor of Montana. Bullock’s main argument to Democrats is his ability to win elections in red parts of the country. In 2016, Donald Trump took Montana by 21 points, but Bullock won the governorship by four.

As far as Bullock is concerned, defeating Trump should make 2020 a one-issue election for Democrats. And “if we can’t win back places that we lost,” he said, “we’re not going to win this election,” he told a recent CNN town hall meeting.

Yet the latest Democratic polls put Bullock’s support at a meager 1%. One of his problems might be that some of the very stances a Democrat needs in a red state are not deemed adequately progressive for party activists.

In Montana, many still work in coal, and hunting is part of life. So Bullock finesses his views on climate change and gun control in ways that may bother those wanting more aggressive approaches. [Note, however, that when he ran for governor, the billionaire Koch brothers poured their fossil fuel riches into supporting his Republican opponent.]

Bullock insists he is progressive. “I’m a pro-choice, pro-union, populist Democrat that’s actually gotten things done.”

As governor, Bullock pushed through an expansion of Medicaid. He lists publicly funded preschool as a top priority. An outspoken environmentalist, he has helped lead the charge against the Republican crusade to transfer public lands to private interests. Being a hunter helps his credibility.

Bullock is outspoken about other handicaps that

campaigns like his face. Governors, he insists, have a harder time because they actually have to govern. That often means compromising with Republicans.

Democratic senators in Washington, particularly now that they are in the minority, accomplish little. “DC is now set up to have grand speeches, but not actually get anything done,” he told *The Atlantic*.

The three Democratic front-runners – Biden, Warren and Sanders – are or were senators.

As governor of purple-hued Colorado, Hickenlooper also worked with Republicans. And given the relentless partisanship of the age, that meant coaxing even moderate Republicans who perpetually fear attacks from the right.

Some Democratic Party rules are also tough on non-celebrity candidates from the heartland. Bullock is angry that billionaire Tom Steyer may have bought himself a spot on the next debate stage – something he has not achieved.

“Tom Steyer just spent \$10 million to get 130,000 donors,” Bullock said on MSNBC. That number of unique donors is a threshold for admission into the Sept. 12-13 debate. So is 2% support in four approved polls by the end of August.

“We’re getting to the point where we’re spending money online as opposed to actually talking to voters,” Bullock complained, not without reason.

In any case, what an interesting presidential candidate Bullock or Hickenlooper or Inslee would or would have been. But don’t rule out vice presidential running mate.

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American Workers Are Not Happy

BY LEO GERARD

Americans are not happy. And for good reason. They continue to suffer financial stress caused by decades of flat income. And every time they make the slightest peep of complaint about a system rigged against them, the rich and powerful tell them to shut up because it is all their fault.

One percenters instruct them to work harder, pull themselves up by their bootstraps and stop bellyaching. Just get a second college degree, a second skill, a second job. Just send the spouse to work, downsize, take a staycation instead of a real vacation. Or don't take one at all, just work harder and longer and better.

The barrage of blaming has persuaded; workers believe they deserve censure. And that's a big part of the reason they're unhappy.

If only, they think, they could work harder and longer and better, they would get ahead. They bear the shame. They don't blame the system: the Supreme Court, the Congress, the President. And yet, it is the system, the American system, that has conspired to crush them.

Yeah, yeah, yeah, unemployment is low and the stock market is high. But skyrocketing stocks benefit only the top 10% of wealthy Americans who own 84% of stocks. And while more people are employed than during the Great Recession, the vast majority of Americans haven't had a real raise since 1979.

It's bad out there for American workers. Last spring, their ranking dropped for the third year running in the World Happiness Report, produced by the Sustainable Development Solutions Network, a UN initiative.

These sad statistics reinforce those in a report released two years ago by two university professors.



Reviewing data from the General Social Survey, administered routinely nationally, the professors found Americans' assessment of their own happiness and family finances has, unambiguously, declined in recent years.

But if Americans would just work harder, everything would be dandy, right?

No. Not right. Americans work really, really hard.

A third of Americans work a side hustle, driving an Uber or selling crafts on Etsy. American workers take fewer vacation days. They get 14, but typically take only 10. The highest number of workers in five years report they don't expect to take a vacation at all this year. And Americans work longer hours than their counterparts in other countries.

LABOR DAY 2019

Americans labor 137 more hours per year than Japanese workers, 260 more than Brits, and 499 more than the French, according to the International Labor Organization.

And the longer hours aren't because American workers are laggards on the job. They're very productive. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics calculates that the average American worker's productivity has increased 400% since 1950.

If pay had kept pace with productivity, as it did in the three decades after the end of World War II, American workers would be making 400% more. But they're not. Their wages have flat lined for four decades, adjusting for inflation.

That means stress. Forty percent of workers say they don't have \$400 for an unexpected expense. Twenty percent can't pay all of their monthly bills. More than a quarter of adults skipped needed medical care last year because they couldn't afford it. A quarter of adults have no retirement savings.

If only Americans would work harder. And longer. And better.

SYSTEM STACKED AGAINST WORKERS

Much as right-wingers have pounded that into Americans' heads, it's not the solution. Americans clearly are working harder and longer and better. The solution is to change the system, which is stacked against workers.

Workers are bearing on their backs tax breaks that benefited only the rich and corporations. They're bearing overtime pay rules and minimum wage rates that haven't been updated in more than a decade. They're weighted down by U.S. Supreme Court decisions that hobbled unionization efforts and knee-capped workers' rights to file class-action lawsuits. They're struggling under U.S. Department of Labor rules defining them as independent contractors instead of staff members. They live in fear as corporations threaten to offshore their jobs – with the assistance of federal tax breaks.

Last year, the right-wing majority on the U.S. Supreme Court handed a win to corporatists trying to obliterate workers' right to organize and collectively bargain for better wages and conditions. The court ruled that public sector workers who choose not to join unions don't have to pay a small fee to cover the cost of services that federal law requires the unions provide to them. This bankrupts labor unions. And there's no doubt that right-wingers are gunning for private sector unions next.

This kind of relentless attack on labor unions since 1945 has withered membership. As it shrank, wages for both union and nonunion workers did too.

Also last year, the Supreme Court ruled that corporations can deny workers access to class-action arbitration. This compels workers, who corporations forced to sign agreements to arbitrate rather than liti-

gate, into individual arbitration cases, for which each worker must hire his or her own lawyer. Then, just last spring, the right-wing majority on the court further curtailed workers' rights to class-action suits.

In a minority opinion, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg wrote that the court in recent years has routinely deployed the law to deny to employees and consumers "effective relief against powerful economic entities."

No matter how hard Americans work, the right-wing majority on the Supreme Court has hobbled them in an already lopsided contest with gigantic corporations.

TRUMP'S ANTI-WORKER ADMINISTRATION

The administrative branch is no better. The Trump Labor Department recently issued an advisory that workers for a gig-economy company are independent contractors, not employees.

As a result, the workers, who clean homes after getting assignments on an app, will not qualify for federal minimum wage [low as it is] or overtime pay. Also, the corporation will not have to pay Social Security taxes for them. Though the decision was specific to one company, experts say it will affect the designation for other gig workers, such as drivers for Uber and Lyft.

Also, the Labor Department has proposed a stingy increase in the overtime pay threshold, that is, the salary amount under which corporations must pay workers time and a half for overtime. The current threshold of \$23,660 has not been raised since 2004. The Obama Administration had proposed doubling it to \$47,476. But now, the Trump Labor Department has cut that back to \$35,308. That means 8.2 million workers who would have benefited from the larger salary cap now will not be eligible for mandatory overtime pay.

It doesn't matter how hard they work, they aren't going to get the time-and-a-half pay they deserve.

Just like the administration and the Supreme Court, right-wingers in Congress grovel before corporations and the rich. Look at the tax break they gave one percenters in 2017. Corporations got the biggest cut in history, their rate sledgehammered down from 35% to 21%. The rich reap by far the largest benefit from those tax cuts through 2027, according to an analysis by the Tax Policy Center. And by then, 53% of Americans – that is workers not rich people – will pay more than they did in 2017 because tax breaks for workers expire.

The White House Council of Economic Advisers predicted the corporate tax cut would put an extra \$4,000 in every worker's pocket. They swore that corporations would use some of their tax cut money to hand out raises and bonuses to workers. That never happened. Workers got a measly 6% of corporations' tax savings.

In the first quarter after the tax cut took effect,

workers on average received a big fat extra \$6.21 in their paychecks, for an annual total of a whopping \$233. Corporations spent their tax breaks on stock buybacks, a record \$1 trillion worth, raising stock prices, which put more money in the pockets of rich CEOs and shareholders.

That's continuing this year. Workers are never going to see that \$4,000.

No wonder they're unhappy. The system is working against them.

Leo W. Gerard is a steelworker and a Canadian and American labor leader. He was elected president of the United Steelworkers in 2001, and is the second Canadian to head the union. He is also a vice president of the AFL-CIO.

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The 5-Step CEO Pay Scam

BY ROBERT REICH

Average CEO pay at big corporations topped \$14.5 million in 2018. That's after an increase of \$5.2 million per CEO over the past decade, while the average worker's pay has increased just \$7,858 over the decade.

Just to catch up to what their CEO made in 2018 alone, it would take the typical worker 158 years.

This explosion in CEO pay relative to the pay of average workers isn't because CEOs have become so much more valuable than before. It's not due to the so-called "free market."

It's due to CEOs gaming the stock market and playing politics.

How did CEOs pull this off? They followed these five steps:

First: They made sure their companies began paying their executives in shares of stock.

Second: They directed their companies to lobby Congress for giant corporate tax cuts and regulatory rollbacks.

Third: They used most of the savings from these tax cuts and rollbacks not to raise worker pay or to invest in the future, but to buy back the corporation's outstanding shares of stock.

Fourth: This automatically drove up the price of the remaining shares of stock.

Fifth and finally: Since CEOs are paid mainly in shares of stock, CEO pay soared while typical workers were left in the dust.

How to stop this scandal? Five ways:

1. Ban stock buybacks. They were banned before 1982 when the Securities and Exchange Commission viewed them as vehicles for stock manipulation and fraud. Then Ronald Reagan's SEC removed the restrictions. We should ban buybacks again.

2. Stop corporations from deducting executive pay in excess of \$1 million from their taxable income – even if the pay is tied to so-called company performance. There's no reason other taxpayers ought to be subsidizing humongous CEO pay.

3. Stop corporations from receiving any tax deduction for executive pay unless the percent raise received by top executives matches the percent raise received by average employees.

4. Increase taxes on corporations whose CEOs make more than 100 times their average employees.

5. Finally, and most basically: Stop CEOs from corrupting American politics with big money. Get big money out of our democracy. Fight for campaign finance reform.

Grossly widening inequalities of income and wealth cannot be separated from grossly widening inequalities of political power in America. This corruption must end.

Former Clinton administration labor secretary Robert B. Reich is Chancellor's Professor of Public Policy at the University of California at Berkeley and Senior Fellow at the Blum Center for Developing Economies.

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The True Dope On Clothes Pollution

BY FROMA HARROP

Do you worry that the clothes you buy pose an environmental hazard? The idea never crossed my mind until serious news sources started talking about it. The central claim was that the fashion industry is the world's second biggest source of pollution, the first being oil.

The story circulated so widely because few of us imagine that our T-shirts and track shoes could be hurting the environment big time. We'll get to the scientific consensus on its accuracy shortly.

But one of more fascinating aspects is how this No. 2-polluter rap against clothes began. No one seems to know. It seems to have become a "truth" through the magic of internet laundering.

Fashion websites bounced the story back and forth, providing links to supposedly authoritative



voices. And where did their links lead? To one another.

Passed around enough, the idea that clothes are the second biggest polluter became a “fact.” Fashion designer Eileen Fisher, known for her environmentalism, got sucked in. She began making a big thing of clothes pollution, citing the above assertion.

When asked for her source of information, she referred to websites that referred to other websites. And she quoted the 2015 documentary about the fashion industry “The True Cost,” which turned out to be not as dependable a font of knowledge as one might believe.

The documentary-maker said he found the claim through people running the Copenhagen Fashion Summit, a respected conference on sustainability. The fashion summit people said they believed it came from a report by the Deloitte consulting firm. Guess what. No one can find the report.

When professional journalists jumped on the matter, they swatted away some of the more exaggerated assertions. The global clothing industry is not the No. 2 offender, they concluded, but it is highly dirty.

What makes it polluting? Here are some of the factors:

- Nearly 60% of all clothing is discarded within a year of being made. This astonishing revelation is not a reflection of flighty consumer behavior. It’s not that you and I throw out 60% of the new clothes we buy. Rather, it’s that mass producers get rid of wares that don’t leave the racks right away. The fast fashion retailer H&M, for one, reported last year that

it had \$4.3 billion of unsold merchandise and had started incinerating it to provide energy.

Fast fashion is definitely a villain here. Its business model relies on women buying lots of clothes at low prices, wearing them a few times and then throwing them out or giving them away. No one has to go naked, but the environmentally conscientious know not to run wild at Target and H&M.

- Up to 25% of the world’s chemical compounds are used in textile dyeing and finishing. Fashion plays a big part here, but bear in mind that textiles are not just clothes. They are bedsheets, curtains, napkins, upholstery and toys.

- About 10% of global greenhouse gas emissions are produced by the clothing and footwear industries. This came from the United Nations secretariat on climate change. The reasons are long supply chains and energy-intensive production.

How polluting *your* clothes consumption is depends, of course, on how many clothes you buy and how long you wear them. “Sustainable fashion” is an interesting concept, because it can include sturdy, inexpensive jeans or high-priced designer clothes. What’s most important is that the clothes don’t have to be replaced often.

One last amazing statistic that seems to have stuck: Over the past two decades, Americans have doubled the amount of clothing they discard every year. It’s now about 80 pounds a person. Is that possible?

Don’t look at me.

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Jim Hightower



Decoding Afta-NAFTA

“Keep your eye on the ball” is a core principle not only for baseball players but also for us commoners trying to assess exactly what the spinmeisters of global trade are hurling at us. Their deals are and always have been large-scale hustles, filled with hypocrisy, deceit and greed. Promoted as fair and good for all, they’re invariably rigged with profiteering schemes that lock into law advantages for corporations over the common good of consumers, the environment, labor, independent businesses, governments and all other democratic forces.

Further, they are works of deliberate deception, drafted in strict secrecy and couched in page after page of arcane legalese that intentionally obscures the corporate thievery so We the People don’t know that we’ve been had until it’s too late.

They hide the ball to keep you, me and even Congress from seeing specifically who’ll profit and who’ll pay. So, heads up, for here comes another sucker pitch.

“A historic transaction,” Trump grandiloquently hailed his Afta-NAFTA handiwork in an April tweet, lauding the 1,809-page United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement as “the most important trade deal we’ve ever made by far.”

Backed by a coalition of some 200 corporate and Wall Street powerhouses, Trump demanded that Congress quickly ratify the USMCA “so we can bring back our manufacturing jobs in even greater numbers, expanding American agriculture, protecting intellectual property.”

“Once again,” swooned Fox personality Laura Ingraham, “Trump delivers.”

Yes, but *what* ... and for whom?

BIG PHARMA: If the USMCA passes as currently drafted, it would *require* the governments of the U.S., Mexico and Canada to guarantee – and even extend – Big Pharma’s monopoly price-setting power. Specifically, the deal gives drugmakers 10 years of exclusive marketing for critical “biologic” meds that millions of people need – in addition to the 20-year monopoly that U.S. patent laws already grant. Trump’s deal would prevent generic competitors from offering cheaper versions for an extra decade while also shackling Canadians and Mexicans to the pricing racket that Pharma already runs in the U.S.

BIG OIL: Although the USMCA largely eliminates

the anti-democratic and unjust system of dispute-deciding corporate-run “courts,” seven oil behemoths [including Shell, ExxonMobil and Chevron] would retain their NAFTA-granted access to these odious tribunals. One particular concern is that the giants will use these kangaroo courts to block Mexican efforts to strengthen environment and health protections and address the climate crisis.

BIG BOSSES: The USMCA would finally outlaw Mexico’s notorious company-run “unions” that allow workers no control or even participation. While the deal prohibits these fraudulent labor units, it provides no way to monitor, much less enforce, corporate compliance.

BIG FOOD: The original NAFTA included a literal gag rule. It allowed cheaply produced Mexican beef and other meat to be sold in the U.S. – even if it didn’t meet our food safety standards. Trump’s “fantastic” redo of NAFTA keeps this rule prohibiting our supposedly sovereign government from setting our *own* health standards for meat sold to *our* consumers.

Congress must obviously kill this thing, right?

Hmmm ... not so fast. Even with all the uglies and absurdities in the USMCA, progressive strategists see enough pretties and potential for fixes that it could become one of the only positives to emerge from Trump Hell. As Lori Wallach, head of Public Citizen’s savvy band of trade jujitsu artists puts it, “Improbably, things are going quite well.”

Prettiest of all is the USMCA’s whacking down of NAFTA’s most repugnant component: “investor-state dispute settlement” tribunals. These autocratic, plutocratic, corporate-controlled “courts” empower multinational corporations to obtain unlimited taxpayer dollars through specious lawsuits claiming that their special NAFTA privileges are restricted by the people’s democratically enacted laws – laws intended to protect consumers, workers, the environment and other social/economic interests. The investor-state dispute settlement provision is an anti-democratic abomination, and gutting it would truly be a huge step forward – one worth taking while we can.

Further, if we can strengthen the USMCA’s labor and environmental standards – and make them strictly enforceable – they might counter corporate

America's race-to-the-bottom outsourcing that converts middle-class U.S. jobs into Mexican sweatshop servitude. And of course, the absurd goodies for Big Pharma must be removed. But the fight, then, is not simply to reject the USMCA but instead to expose its flaws, democratize it and force improvements. That's not easy, but it's doable.

Yes, trade fights can be complex and tedious, but

pay attention to this one. The USMCA is a momentous battle that's more about people's democratic power than trade. It unites folks across the left-right political spectrum, it's worth the fight, and it's winnable – if we team up to wrangle our Congress critters to oppose Trump's corporatized version and add essential democratizing improvements. Let's do it!

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If You Drain The Swamp, Where Do Swamp Critters Go?

Donald Trump bragged in June that “we’re draining the swamp,” declaring victory over “the unholy alliance of lobbyists and donors and special interests who made a living bleeding our country dry.” Bravo!

But wait ... where did all those swamp critters go? Don't look now, but – psssst – they've been brought right into Trump's corporate-cozy administration to continue serving the same old interests that are bleeding our country dry. For example, just hours before gloating about draining the swamp, Trump named Mark Esper – former head lobbyist for the giant military contractor Raytheon – to head the Pentagon. There, Esper will oversee the doling out of hundreds of billions in tax dollars each year to such corporate powers as ... Raytheon!

If you wonder why Trump's government sides even more than usual with corporations over workers, the environment, consumers and the common good, it's because none of them are on the inside. Meanwhile, the corporate executives, lobbyists and hired apologists have *become* Trump's government. His interior secretary was an oil and coal lobbyist. His Treasury chief came straight from Wall Street. His EPA honcho lobbied for Big Coal. His Health Department is headed by a drug company executive. And on down the line to undersecretaries, bureau directors, etc., etc.

About the grossest example of Trump Inc. being owned by the moneyed interests it's supposed to regulate is the Education Department, headed by billionaire heiress Betsy DeVos. Having swallowed the ideological effluent of the corrupt for-profit college industry, which has ripped off millions of students – along with billions of our tax dollars – DeVos has twisted law and logic to try to bail out and resurrect the Wall Street-backed for-profit model. Her investors-first perversion of public education's mission, backed by her political patron Trump, has brought great cheer to those who profiteer from young people trying to better themselves.

A lawyer for the profiteers even penned an ode to The Donald, hailing him as a corporate savior of his

sleazy industry:

*“We've got a friend in Trump
He's lifting us out of our slump
We were down – and life was rough
Too many regs, were way too tough
After so many years
We'd just had enough, but
Now, we've got a friend in Trump.”*

As Lily Tomlin once put it, “No matter how cynical you get, it's almost impossible to keep up.”

Ahh ... consider the grandeur of America's great outdoors, our rich and often awe-inspiring expanses of irreplaceable public lands we share with each other and future generations! Thank goodness our country has demanded over the years that government be Mother Nature's steward, protecting these public properties for posterity. But what if these lands and natural resources suddenly got a “steward” who was a predator rather than a protector?

Meet William Perry Pendley. For more than 40 years, he's been a fringe political operative and lawyer for a network of loopy, anti-environmental extremists intent on helping corporate predators grab and plunder our national assets for their private profit. And now – holy Teddy Roosevelt! – Developer in Chief Donald Trump has named Pendley acting head of the Bureau of Land Management.

Yes, a guy who favors the wholesale privatization of America's public lands is to oversee their future. Indeed, Pendley has been lost in the ultra-right-wing weeds for years, screeching that the “Founding Fathers intended all lands owned by the federal government to be sold.”

That's nuts, but Pendley's zealotry carries him even deeper into paranoid nuttiness. He lists a sextet of villains he believes are “at war” with western civilization: radical environmentalists, federal bureaucrats, the media, academia, Hollywood and “ignorant” Americans who are “easily panicked” into believing in things like climate change.

Pendley's views are so twisted that he literally tries to dehumanize the environmental movement, proclaiming that its millions of adherents “don't be-

lieve in human beings,” that “they’re not concerned about human health and well-being.”

Also, with funding from the Koch brothers and Big Oil, Pendley has been a fanatical fossil fuel proselytizer, even declaring in a moment of rapture that fracking is “an energy, economic, AND environmen-

tal miracle!”

Don’t just keep an eye on this corporate extremist – don’t even blink! For updates, contact Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility at peer.org. – *Jim Hightower*

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Government For The Rich, The Poor Be Damned

Donald Trump looooooves farmers. We know this because he says so. “Farmers, I LOVE YOU!” he declared in December. And we’ve learned that whenever The Donald says something, it’s true – even when it’s not.

These days, he’s loving farmers to death. Trump has ignored the obvious need to get monopolistic price-fixing bankers, suppliers and commodity buyers off their backs. And he’s ineptly playing tariff games with China and other buyers of U.S. farm products, causing exports and farm prices to tumble. The result is that our ag economy is tumbling into a deep ditch, slamming farm families and rural America with a rising tsunami of bankruptcies.

Adding crude insult to economic injury, Trump’s doofus of an ag secretary, Sonny Perdue, laughed at farmers, branding them “whiners” for opposing his majesty’s disastrous policies.

So, needing a political “I love you” gesture, Trump has been sending big bouquets of money to some of his beloved farmers. *Our* money. Lots of it – \$28 billion so far, in what he cynically [and comically] calls the Market Facilitation Program, otherwise known as a taxpayer bailout.

But TrumpLove turns out to be highly selective, with more than half of the government payments going to the biggest farm owners. The Department of Agriculture initially announced a \$125,000 limit on the amount any one farm could get, but every Trump deal seems to have a gimmick in it to give a special break to the slickest operators. The slickum in this deal is that assorted members of a family can claim to be owners of the same farm and be eligible for bailout money, even if they do no actual farming and live in New York City! Thus, one Missouri farm family got \$2.8 million worth of subsidy love from Trump, and more than 80 families topped half a million in payments.

Meanwhile, the great majority of farmers – 80% of eligible grain farmers – got zilch from Donald the Dealmaker. The smaller producers who are most endangered by his export collapse got less than \$5,000. So Trump’s “Market Facilitation” is squeezing the many who are most in need while helping a few of the largest get even bigger.

While the Trumpistas are presently trying to plow

a multibillion-dollar subsidy into big grain farms, they’re shockingly stingy when it comes to our society’s moral responsibility to make sure the least-wealthy among us get an adequate level of food. Their latest effort in the practice of mass minginess is to try literally taking food off poor children’s plates. Using a tangle of federal red tape, Trump ideologues and bureaucratic minions are intervening to prevent states from providing food stamp assistance to millions of their people.

According to federal rules, to qualify for food aid, a family of three should have an income under \$27,000 a year. But with rents, utilities, health care and even food prices constantly rising, millions of Americans can’t make ends meet on such a low income. Thus, 40 states have stepped in to loosen that income restriction so families at least get the minimum nutrition humans need.

Far from being welfare moochers [as far-right-wing extremists screech], these recipients overwhelmingly are working families, children, the elderly and Americans with disabilities. The benefit is hardly lavish; it averages only \$127 a month, but even this modest outlay has proven enormously successful in mitigating poverty.

Congress actually authorized states to make such pragmatic income adjustments in a 1996 revamp of the law. But look out! Here comes Sonny Perdue again, rising up on his hind legs to proclaim that naughty state officials are using that authority as a “loophole” to circumvent Trump’s federal authority. So Sonny and Donnie are demanding that a whole new bureaucracy of food stamp “eligibility police” be set up to monitor the assets of hard-hit people who’re just trying to get adequate food on their tables.

This nonsense will cost tens of millions of our dollars to harass the poor in an autocratic hope of nabbing a couple of hungry families who have a dime more in assets than miserly Trumpistas claim they should have.

What we have here is government by plutocratic authoritarians who’ll gleefully dole out millions to a wealthy family and then just as gleefully go out of their way to deny food to millions of poor families. – *Jim Hightower*

When It Comes To U.S. Health System, The System Is The Problem

The British people have been widely admired for their steady demeanor in times of adversity – stiff upper lip and all that. Until Donald Trump, that is.

In June, our presidential popinjay descended on London with a bombastic proposition that caused the upper lips of the entire British population to quiver at once. There as a guest, and treated to the full pomp of a state visit, The Donald blurted out what he hailed as a “phenomenal” gift in the form of a new U.S.-U.K. trade deal: He offered to bring in America’s health care profiteers to start privatizing Britain’s National Health Service.

It’s possible Trump was simply ignorant, unaware that Brits love their NHS because its socialized plan provides quality care to all without families fearing they’ll be bankrupted or priced out of treatment by private insurance giants, hospital chains or Big Pharma.

Or maybe he was hornswoggled by the right-wing pontificators of Fox News [Trump’s most trusted policy advisors] and their steady stream of lies about anything with the word “social” in it.

Last year, after seeing a Fox News segment [what else?] reporting that thousands of Brits were marching in protest of their health system, Trump smugly trumpeted that they were fed up with care-for-all socialism. But – *oops* – the uproar was actually in support of the NHS, demanding that the miserly Tory government strengthen it with “more staff, more beds, more funds.”

Trump aside, no country that’s even quasi-advanced is going to throw its people into a health care future modeled on the USA’s care-denying medical industry. Our for-profit system amounts to plutocrat care, providing concierge attention and top-notch treatment to moneyed elites [such as the Trump clan] who therefore perceive it as a marvel of free-market efficiency.

They never witness the harsh realities that most U.S. working stiffs, middle-class families, students, the poor and others routinely experience from the most expensive, worst performing health scheme in the developed world.

Karla Diederich, an intensive care nurse in California, bluntly calls the U.S. industry “barbaric.” She told *The New York Times* about her friend Nelly Yap, also a nurse, who had cancer and was scheduled for chemotherapy – until her hospital changed owners. She lost her job, her insurance and her cancer treatment. “Nelly spent most of her life taking care of other people,” Diederich says, “and when she needed that care herself, it was not there.”

Another nurse, Melissa Johnson-Camacho, recalls: “I had just finished explaining [to a cancer patient] how important it was to take this medication faithfully. ‘Every day you skip it is a day that the cancer has to potentially spread,’” she told him. “And then we had to send him home without it” because the insurer wouldn’t cover the cost.

Similar nightmare stories abound, and most Americans dread they may be next. A nation that only 40 years ago boasted a world-class system of care has been sickened by a corporatized network that treats patients as bookkeeping entries and reduces doctors and nurses to functionaries on the medical assembly line. The hard numbers paint an embarrassing picture:

- The U.S. ranks 34th worst among developed nations for the percentage of people without coverage [44 million Americans, including four million children] – lower than Chile, Greece, Kuwait, Slovenia and Turkey.

- As many millions of “insured” Americans learn the hard way, high deductibles and copays can make treatments unaffordable, i.e., unusable.

- Price gouging by drugmakers puts essential medicines out of reach; surprise bills from hospitals and clinics drown families in medical debt; and – most commonly – insurance bureaucracies assiduously work their fine print to deny payment for your condition, injury, medicine, surgery or rehab.

- Our country spends the most [more than \$10,000 per year per person] on a system that often delivers the least. [U.S. life expectancy has fallen to the bottom among wealthy nations.]

- Most shamefully, roughly a third of the \$3.5 trillion we pay into the U.S. system each year is sucked up by corporate paper shuffling, advertising, executive pay and perks, expensive headquarters and other non-care charges. Canada runs its full-coverage programs with less than half [12%] those administrative expenses.

The problem with the system is – hello – the system!

While our doctors and other providers have top-level skills and knowledge, they operate within a fundamentally flawed corporate structure that measures success not in care delivered to the many but in profits extracted for the few: the investor elites.

– *Jim Hightower*

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Why Do Nonbelievers Face Prejudice In America?

BY RANDOLPH M. FEEZELL

There is a form of prejudice in America directed toward persons who don't believe in God. I call it "Godism" in order to suggest that this kind of prejudice is analogous to more familiar "isms," such as racism, sexism, and anti-Semitism.

Each type of discrimination directs antagonistic attitudes and discriminatory actions toward members of groups who share characteristics that are the basis for prejudice and the denial of equal moral worth and respect: race, sex, sexual lifestyle, Jewishness, age – lack of belief in God.

Godism is well-documented in our country's past and present, and powerfully described in a recent book, *Godless Citizens in a Godly Republic: Atheists in American Public Life*, by R. Laurence Moore and Isaac Kramnick. Godism is expressed in state constitutions, officially sanctioned practices, private orga-

nizations, and personal relationships.

Eight state constitutions still require a public office holder to believe in God, despite a 1961 unanimous Supreme Court ruling in *Torasco v. Maryland*, holding that such religious tests are unconstitutional. Some examples:

Arkansas: "No person who denies the being of a God shall hold any office in the civil departments of the state."

Mississippi: "No person who denies the existence of a Supreme Being shall hold any office in this state." [The South Carolina and Texas constitutions contain similar language.]

The Tennessee constitution requires an additional condition for holding "any office in the civil department of this state." No person can deny belief in a "future state of rewards and punishments."

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It's Easy To Be A ...

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Prejudice

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Clearly these religious tests for public office are unconstitutional, thus unenforceable, yet they remain on the books.

The presence of religious tests in state constitutions is an outrage. Imagine the reaction if some state constitutions still contained these types of unconstitutional restrictions for groups that have faced discrimination in our history: African Americans, women, religious minorities.

It would be a sign of social progress if state constitutional requirements linking citizenship and belief in God were quaint relics of a less enlightened time in America. Polling and social research have shown that antagonistic attitudes towards nonbelievers are still prevalent. And politicians continue to attempt to impose their religious worldviews in the public sphere.

A new state law in South Dakota requires that all public schools display in a prominent place the national motto, “In God We Trust [a Godist displacement of “E pluribus unum”]. In Kentucky a similar law, sponsored by a Republican legislator who is a Christian minister, will take effect as students return to school this fall.

Why are atheists, agnostics, and other nontheists disliked and disrespected? What are the reasons for antagonism toward religious skeptics?

First, there is in the minds of many people a necessary connection between God and morality. It’s important to distinguish two different claims about this relation: there can be no morality without the existence of God; and no one would have the motivation to be morally good without belief in God [or, belief in God is required to do morally right actions]. The first is a claim about the foundations of morality; the second claim is about moral motivation. Both are demonstrably false.

I suspect that most critics of nonbelievers are more worried by the question of moral motivation, because tests and comments are put in terms of belief, the presumption being that belief in God and acting morally are necessarily connected. Religious tests for holding public office, and in at least one instance, for giving testimony in court, are really moral tests. It is assumed that public officials should be trustworthy, morally good people – and nonbelievers can’t be morally good or can’t be trusted, because they lack the internal economy that would make moral goodness possible. Why do Godists believe a claim that is obviously false?

The assumption may be based on ignorance – a narrowness generated by being unacquainted with religious skeptics who proclaim their nonbelief. Personal experience can cause transformation, like an anti-gay legislator whose views about homosexuality and same-sex marriage dramatically change when a

son or daughter comes out.

Another kind of ignorance is more historical: being unaware of great figures from the past who were atheists, agnostics, or nontheists: Churchill, Golda Meir, Einstein, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Luther Burbank, Mark Twain, Jane Adams, John Dewey, and others [discussed in the book by Moore and Kramnick].

An assertion about believing in God and being morally good might be more theoretical, based on an insufficient grasp of some basics of moral psychology or a lack of awareness about what a secular morality might look like. Surely Godists have heard of the old moral truism: virtue is its own reward. Morality might be better understood in terms of virtue and moral character than a set of divine commands. Having good moral character – being just, honest, kind, courageous – doesn’t depend on belief in God.

Aristotle argued that moral virtue is an essential component of a flourishing life – and virtuous conduct and character are satisfying as well. Many philosophers have claimed that morality provides an opportunity for any human being to achieve an important kind of excellence in life, independent of whatever material conditions a person might confront. The pursuit of excellence can be motivational.

Kant, a theist, held that moral goodness [a will that acts solely from duty, the desire to do the right thing] is intrinsically good. According to Kant, doing the right thing because it advances one’s self-interest [the honest businessman whose honesty is good for business] isn’t morally praiseworthy. Neither is virtue or conscientiousness motivated by the prospect of future rewards.

People who believe that nonbelievers are necessarily immoralists seem incapable of imagining persons motivated by anything other than self-interest. Their view of human nature is misperceived and constricted. They apparently believe that without God to dole out punishments and rewards no one would be motivated to do the right thing. Their notion of human nature is tainted by the view that creatures act well only in order to please, obey, and enhance their future prospects, instead of seizing the opportunity to do the right thing ... simply because it’s right.

The book by Moore and Kramnick offers quintessential Godist views of moral motivation. A Boy Scout leader: “Anyone who doesn’t believe in God isn’t a good citizen ... If an atheist found a wallet on the ground they [sic] would pick it up, plunder the money, and throw the wallet back on the ground.”

A critic of an atheist mathematics professor who ran for governor in South Carolina says he “must be free to rape, murder, and commit any atrocity he can get away with.” No. The atrocity is the worldview ex-

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Good For The Jews?

BY SUSAN ESTRICH

Years ago, Frank Rich, the legendary New York Times columnist, wrote a piece – channeling his grandmother – on the first question her generation used to ask when big news broke: Is it good for the Jews? Or [more often] is it bad for the Jews?

You could hardly blame them. Living through the Holocaust makes the question painfully relevant.

But a habit is a habit.

I will never forget my mother's first words when John Kennedy was shot: "Thank God it wasn't a Jew." And young as I was, I understood.

After all, I had already been told in kindergarten that I couldn't play Mary in the school play [even though I had the

longest hair, the usual qualification] because I was Jewish. I wasn't old enough – or brave enough – to point out that so was Mary.

As I got older, I adopted my own refrains. Was it good for the Democrats? Good for women?

There was a time – albeit a very brief one – when I even wondered if my children would ever appreciate the fear and uncertainty my mother lived with and I grew up with.

I need not have worried.

No one stood on the morning of 9/11 and wondered if Canadian separatists had taken over the skies.

That year, the High holidays has almost as many security guards as Jews.

Hate crimes are on the rise.

Anti-Semites sit in the United States Congress [oh, I know, they just love Jews. They just hate the only Jewish state in the world, even though most of the states they admire do things like dismember journalists, deny human rights and kill judges. But at least they're not Jewish].

Trump knows a publicity stunt when he sees one. Who better? Rep. Rashida Tlaib was so desperate to see her grandmother [not] that she changed her travel plans to Israel because she couldn't play politics on her trip.

Sorry, but I would give Heaven and Earth to see my mother again – or my grandmother – without a word of politics.

Does she really expect sympathy from anybody?

These women could play a valuable role in bringing peace to the Middle East. Instead, they'd rather



bring war and suffering. Fine. Don't go. We already have enough of that.

But don't blame the Israelis. This was a Trump deal, first and foremost. This wasn't about protecting Israel.

This was about painting Jewish Democrats as a bunch of cowards for not standing up to the boycott of Israel.

Far from improving Israel's standing as the only democracy in the Middle East, Trump put the screws on Prime Minister Netanyahu, leaving Netanyahu little choice but to ban the Israel haters and earn the enmity of the world for denying access to elected members of Congress.

Tlaib got all the publicity she wanted without ever stepping foot on the airplane. Am I the only one who thinks she could have accomplished far more for the cause of humanitarian aid by actually bringing the press to see her grandmother, maybe even bringing her medicine or food she might need?

Am I so wrong to wonder whether this whole thing was about politics or love?

Make no mistake: There are many American Jews who are deeply troubled by the suffering of Palestinians in the Middle East. War serves nobody but the other Arab nations who want to keep the Palestinians out. But members of Congress who refuse to accept Israel's right to exist in peace are, like Trump, part of the problem, not the solution.

And I can't help but wonder if that's what they really want.

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Reckoning With The Fallout From Monetizing America's Public Services

PRIVATIZATION OF AMERICA'S PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS

The Story Of The American Sellout

By Lawrence Baines

Peter Lang Inc./International Academic Publishers

172 pages, \$40.95

BY JOHN THOMPSON

I was driving to an education conference in Texas which would document the damage done by corporate school reform. I didn't realize I was on a turnpike until a bill arrived in the mail. That was just one question that was answered in Larry Baines' excellent *Privatization of America's Public Institutions: The Story of the American Sellout*.

After Baines took such a road, he received \$20 bill for driving four miles, and here's why. Gov. Rick Perry had sold formerly public roads to a Spanish company, Cintra, which abandoned the project in 2016. So, the way that the system was supposed to run was for local police departments, funded by American tax dollars, to serve as Cintra's "enforcers." But the privatization's failure "left taxpayers in a lurch with a \$1.2 billion bill and a complicated bureaucratic mess," not to mention the interest payments.

That is just one example of how privatization has become the "go-to" solution for cutting government spending, taking flawed systems and making them much worse.

Privatization of America's Public Institutions combines analyses of the assaults on four public sectors – the military, corrections, public schools, and higher education – to reveal the scale of privatization and its dangers.

Dr. Baines, Associate Dean of Education at the University of Oklahoma, shows that "privatization is no longer an occasional strategy to help improve efficiency of a particular public service." It "has become an automatic response to any perceived governmental inefficiency." Baines carefully documents the ways that "privatization is changing the nature of America's public institutions and consequently the

character of the country."

In the first chapter, "Privatizing the Military: Profiting from the Carnage of War," Baines reports that private contractors in the Mideast would outnumber soldiers by a 3-1 margin by 2015. By that time, 44% of Department of Defense spending went to contractors. As one military analyst said, contractors had become "the fifth branch of the military."

Baines explains how the inability to hold contractors accountable leads to an unknowable amount of killings, meaning that we can't evaluate the human and moral costs of military privatization any more than we can calculate the true financial costs.

Baines explains that we have reached the point where ROTC officer training is contracted out. Since the program acculturates the young people who will become the leaders of our democracy's armed forces, an analyst says, this form of privatization may produce "longer-term effects on the overarching values that motivate military service."

Given Oklahoma's status as No. 1 in the world in incarceration, the second chapter, "Privatizing Corrections: Making Money from Misery," is especially pertinent. As in the case of Texas turnpikes, when a privatized operation goes broke, taxpayers are left with the bill. But the contractors can still make billions of dollars in profits off the failed private prisons.

As the demand for adult prison cells decreased, privatizers moved into even more disgusting systems for making big bucks, juvenile detentions. More than half of incarcerated juveniles are locked up for non-violent crimes; 21% committed no crime. They are locked up due to "technical violations," and "status offenses." So, an institution profits from detaining

a 13-year-old who didn't show for a hearing about a fight he didn't witness and a 15-year-old girl who ridiculed an assistant principal on social media." The median time for a juvenile for status offense is 128 days.

Then the story grows more horrific. As states like Oklahoma over-incarcerate on the cheap, fees and fines become an essential funding source. I knew how cruel the situation is in Oklahoma, but I had no idea that 48 states have gone down that path.

And since fees and fines are a doomed method of funding the overgrown incarceration complex, monitored release of inmates is growing. That creates another market for privatizers, electronic bracelets to oversee parolees. And – surprise! – the lucrative, private market for monitoring those devices is “subject to virtually no judicial oversight.”

The story became even more unconscionable as private prisons moved into another growing market. For instance, since 2003, 176 immigrant deaths have gone largely unreported by for-profit institutions. And private prisons enable Trump's brutality towards immigrant families.

Chapter Three, “Privatizing K – 12 Public Education: How the Profit Motive Is Changing Schools,” explains how the use of privatization as a tool for corporate school reform has denigrated teacher quality and fostered dumbed-down instruction. It uses technology to reduce number of teachers needed in the culture of data-driven competition it created.

It has gotten to the point where 5,000 emergency certificates were issued in Oklahoma in 2017 and 2018. Next door, Texas adjudicated 222 cases of teacher misconduct in 2016, with most involving sex acts with minors. The backlogged caseload is over 1,100.

Privatization also has increased inequality and segregation. I know many sincere and constructive charter school advocates who recoil at the use of the word privatized to describe their schools,

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and some try to deny that charters and other privatized schools have increased segregation and inequality. But Baines' evidence and characterization of charters are solid.

He explains, “Most minority students who attend privatized schools have few white class-

mates; most white students who attend privatized schools have few minority classmates.”

The next issue that Baines analyzes, higher education, is intertwined with the legacy of privatization by charters and vouchers, as

Prejudice

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 39

pressed in the statement.

It is ironic – but unsurprising, given my experiences with atheist friends – that there’s evidence showing the opposite of what religious moralists claim about immoral atheists. According to sociologist Phil Zuckerman, studies have shown that atheists and nonbelievers are “markedly less nationalistic; less prejudiced, less anti-Semitic, less racist, less dogmatic, less ethnocentric, less close-minded, and less authoritarian.”

Belief in God isn’t necessary for moral motivation. It’s also clear that theistic belief isn’t sufficient for doing morally right actions. Some priests are pedophiles; some preachers are adulterers. Some holy books have been used to justify morally repugnant actions and practices. There are pious murderers and corrupt, unctuous evangelical Christian politicians [and coaches].

If I met a stranger and found out that she didn’t [or did] believe in God, what could I infer about her moral character based on this fact about her system of beliefs? Absolutely nothing.

Moore and Kramnick claim that distrust of nonbelievers is sometimes an expression of dislike for “cultural elitists” who “think they know better than anyone else.” This claim is also ironic, given the cultural dominance of Godists who talk as if they know better than anyone else which “faith” claims are true and which should be imposed on nonbelievers in American public life.

Godist prejudices against nonbelievers are also related to patriotism. Newspaper reports about South Dakota’s new law requiring public schools to display prominently “In God We Trust” indicated that lawmakers wanted to inspire patriotism. To be a good American supposedly requires belief in God. They assume our history shows we are a godly nation.

This view may have something to do with a simplistic misapprehension of the founders’ religious beliefs. They weren’t all Christian theists. Many were deists, who produced a godless constitution. But the

error isn’t merely factual. The type of argument used is suspect.

We are supposed to believe this: since the founders were there at the birth of the nation their beliefs are normative – norms for all of us – for the rest of the history of the United States. The founders were not, however, morally perfect demi-gods. They were fallible persons who were wise in certain respects and unwise in others.

A reference to the views of the founding fathers as the method to define what it means to be a good American is a fallacious appeal to authority. The reasoning is similar to one who claims that being a good American requires belief in owning other human beings – because such a belief was held by the founding fathers.

One can cherry-pick founders’ beliefs in any number of ways – and whatever is picked will have the problem of being justified. Why is that claim supposed to define the vague notion of what it means to be a good American? We ought not to believe something just because it is asserted by famous historical figures. We should believe because there are good reasons for belief.

Here’s a ripe cherry, picked from Thomas Jefferson’s letter to one of his nephews.

“Fix reason firmly in her seat, and call to her tribunal every fact, every opinion. Question with boldness even the existence of a God; because, if there be one, he must approve the homage of reason than of blindfolded fear ... Do not be frightened from this inquiry by any fear of its consequences. If it end in a belief that there is no God, you will find incitements to virtue in the comfort and pleasantness you feel in its exercise and in the love of others which it will procure for you.”

South Dakota lawmakers, in virtue of defining in religious terms what it means to be a good American, stigmatize the school children of nonbelievers whose parents may have taught them a Jeffersonian lesson. Legislators define as outsiders people who want to think for themselves and whose conclusions about God are contrary to believers.

There is an unacceptable asymmetry in demanding respect for religion without a reciprocal respect for irreligion, a respect that is absent in our politics and in other venues of public life. Like other forms of prejudice, Godism is an affront to both morality and reason. We should pray for the death of Godism, as well as other irrational prejudices in American public and private life.

Randolph M. Feezell, PhD, grew up in northwestern Oklahoma and is professor emeritus of philosophy at Creighton University in Omaha, NE.

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Observations

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Dayton.

“... [E]specially since it has been widely publicized that you can bring guns into the concert, any chance I have to stay away from that is safer and better for me,” she told Oklahoma City’s KFOR-TV.

Thankfully, Oklahoma has escaped a mass shooting on the scale of El Paso, Las Vegas or Orlando. But we well know terror’s toll after the 1995 Murrah bombing.

And we experience more than our share of gun-related fatalities – No. 5 nationally in 2016 with nearly 20 for every 100,000 residents.

That’s what Democratic Reps. Jason Dunnington of Oklahoma City and Melissa Provenzano of Tulsa hoped to address with HB 2457 that would create the Oklahoma Extreme Risk Protective Order Act – a so-called “red flag” law already enacted by 17 other states.

The measure would give state district judges the authority to issue protective orders that empower authorities to temporarily confiscate firearms from those deemed to be a danger to themselves or others. Requests for the protective orders would most likely come from relatives or friends alarmed that a loved one is threatening suicide or to harm others.

“I believe 2nd Amendment rights and common sense gun reform,” Dunnington said, “are not mutually exclusive.”

In the wake of the El Paso and Dayton shootings, President Trump embraced “red flag” laws. So did South Carolina Sen. Lindsey Graham. But DC’s partisan gridlock makes federal action unlikely.

In Oklahoma, there is a knee-jerk antipathy to almost any gun restriction, of course. But if Republicans truly believe gun violence is a mental health issue, why wouldn’t a red flag law be a reasonable response? Yes, it could temporarily seize guns – but it also would require mental health treatment.

Two more thoughts on this contentious subject:

First, why wouldn’t the Legislature’s GOP supermajority be willing to require that gun owners carry liability insurance – just in case someone is injured or killed? We already require drivers to insure their motor vehicles for just that reason. Isn’t this capitalism with a capital C?

Second, maybe it’s time for Attorney General Mike Hunter to regard some weaponry in the same legal vein as opioids – a public nuisance. After all, Oklahoma reported 766 gun deaths in 2016, including 517 suicides.

State leaders clearly have common sense, reasonable options available when it comes to reducing gun violence.

Will they be prepared – and have the courage – to act when the next session begins Feb. 3?

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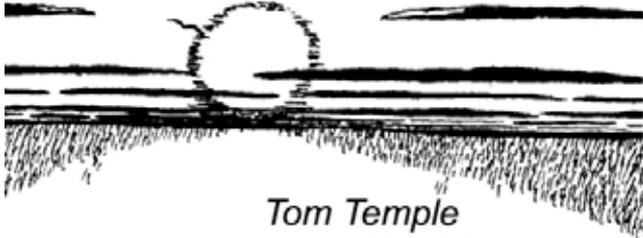
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Observerscope



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

Gov. Kevin Stitt swears he still wants a better deal on tribal gaming compacts, but he sure was quick to hand off the mess he created to Attorney General Mike Hunter. Can Hunter help the governor save face?

Thanks to lawmakers' decision to hike gross production taxes last year, the critically understaffed Corrections Department is better positioned to fill nearly 600 guard positions – offering \$15.74 an hour to start, along with benefits and overtime.

Laurel: To Oklahoma Tax Commission Executive Director Tony Mastin, retiring Sept. 1 after 35 years with the agency. He will be sorely missed!

Too bad Stillwater Central failed to deliver on plans to test passenger rail service between OKC and Tulsa. Connecting the state's population center and leveraging their economic power could help spur an economic boom.

Yikes! One in 10 older adults binge drinks [five or more in a sitting for men, four or more for women]. This is especially troubling since people become more alcohol sensitive as they age. – Journal of the American Geriatrics Society

Epic Charter Schools' woes aren't confined to Oklahoma. Its plans to expand into Texas were derailed – at least temporarily – by an OSBI probe into allegations that include embezzlement and racketeering.

Could another Dossett be headed to the Oklahoma Senate? Owasso Sen. J.J. Dossett's sister Jo Anna is seeking the Democratic nomination in south Tulsa's SD 35 – an open seat next year because incumbent Republican Gary Stanislawski is term-limited.

A Fidelity Investments survey found 72% of Baby Boomers prioritize improved health over improved finances. With age comes wisdom?

An AARP survey finds one in 10 Americans have been victimized by robocall scams – at a cost of \$429 million in 2018 alone, according to FTC. Our rule of thumb: If you don't recognize the number, don't answer.

Fracking States Still Building Fracking Infrastructure

BY JEN DEERINWATER

Fracking bans have begun to sweep across the world, with Ireland, France, Germany and Bulgaria declaring a moratorium on the deadly fossil fuel process. While the U.S. is lagging behind in the effort to stop the ill effects of global climate crisis, states like Vermont, Washington, Maryland and New York have passed bans. Both Georgia and Florida have attempted these bans as well.

Banning fracking isn't enough, though. Fracking infrastructure is being built in states with bans and is continuing the fossil fuel industry's race to drain the remaining dirty energy sources from the Earth.

The Cornell Policy Review defines hydraulic fracturing as the "propagation of fractures in a layer of rock called shale, using pressurized fluid pumped thousands of feet below the surface through a drilled well." There are three types of hydraulic fracturing: water; the use of water and a proprietary blend of chemicals, and frac sand or proppant; and matrix acidizing. A mixture of water, proppants and chemicals is pumped into the shale, creating fractures by injecting gases, such as propane or nitrogen, and sometimes acidizing involves pumping acid (usually hydrochloric acid) into the formation to dissolve some of the rock material to enable gas and fluid to flow more readily into the well. No state has banned all three forms of fracking.

The fossil fuel industry claims that fracked gas is a cleaner energy source than coal, but in this assessment, it neglects to account for the emissions that come from transporting the gas. Noelle Picone, the Williams Pipeline campaign lead from the New York City chapter of the Surfrider Foundation, told Truthout that from the beginning process through transport, fracked gas is "84 times more potent a climate actor than other fossil fuels."

Methane emissions from fracking account for one-third of all U.S. methane emissions and more than 3% of the total U.S. greenhouse emissions. Community engagement coordinator for the Sane Energy Project Lee Ziesche told Truthout that from the fracking well head to the point of use, there is a 5% to 12% leakage of methane.

Fracking also poisons the water and wildlife, and contributes to climate change. Areas with high levels of fracking have also experienced earthquakes, flooding, cancer clusters, and fires and explosions



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at compressor stations and on the trains and ships transporting the fracked gas.

More than 90% of the water injected underground to frack gas wells never returns to the surface, removing it from the water cycle and contributing to water scarcity. Meanwhile, as fracking has expanded, so has the volume of waste generated. Between 2010 and 2011, fracking waste went up by 70% in Pennsylvania. Thanks to a regulatory gap often referred to as the Halliburton Loophole, fracking is exempt from several pieces of federal regulation that protect the environment: the Safe Drinking Water Act, Clean Water Act, Clean Air Act and National Environmental Policy Act, to name a few.

Maryland was the first state with known oil and gas reserves to pass a ban on fracking. The state passed a 1.5-year moratorium on fracking in 2015. A permanent ban was passed in 2017.

Privatization

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 41

well as the budget-cutting that has devastated public education in Oklahoma and many other states.

Early in the chapter, “Privatizing Public Education: Selling Off the Alma Mater,” Baines lists the 10 states that have cut higher education by 26% to 54% from 2008 to 2017. Oklahoma is sixth, with cuts of 34%.

In 1996, higher education privatization was basically limited to five support services. By 2017, there were 17 categories of privatized services, culminating with academic programs. Moreover, one third or more of universities outsource their online programs.

Today, 70% of higher education instructors are adjuncts. The university’s mission of service has been de-emphasized. College is supposed to be a transformational experience – “a rush of unfamiliar people, cultures, knowledge, relationships, and interactions.” But now, the “collegiate experience is becoming commercialized, standardized, and monetized.”

Baines wraps up his account of the human and financial costs of privatizations by illustrating ways that the military, prisons, public schools, and higher education are being undermined by interrelated forces.

For instance, Baines explains that “privatization is happening so quickly and on such a colossal scale in higher education that it is difficult to stay current.” To take one example of how it is interconnected with K-12 schools, he shows how teacher certification is “being transmogrified into a product traded on the open market, teachers are circumventing universities and teacher preparation completely and moving straight into the classroom.”

This has led to unqualified teachers being rushed into many states’ classrooms, pushing down student performance, and enabling privatizers to blame the public schools.

Baines emphasizes the danger of privatization com-

It wasn’t easy to pass a permanent ban, according to Rianna Eckel, senior organizer with Food and Water Watch Maryland. State Senate President Thomas Mike Miller and atate Sen. Joan Carter Conway, both Democrats, held a bill in committee from being voted on in the Maryland Senate until Gov. Larry Hogan came out in favor of the ban. Incidentally, Conway is close friends with lobbyist Lisa Harris Jones, who lobbies for the American Petroleum Institute. The oil and gas industry spent over \$1 million to stop the fracking ban.

Even after the ban’s passage, Maryland has continued to support fracking through the buildup of fracking infrastructure. Despite Hogan’s support of the ban, he still supports the industry. Hogan appointed Ben Grumbles secretary of the Maryland Department of the Environment. Previously, while serving in the George W. Bush administration, Grumbles wrote the

promising universities’ commitment to public service, and that brings me to a final concern I’ve had but that I hadn’t understood well enough.

The Oklahoma State Department of Education and scholars like Dr. Baines have long had hard-earned reputations for excellence. I still see some of their experts, as well scholars from the OU Health Science Center, testifying in legislative hearings.

Today, however, much or most of the legislature’s information comes from “experts” hired by corporate reform think tanks. Many of their witnesses are equally smart as traditional scholars, and some have some real-world experience in public education. And they bring compelling power point presentations!

But these witnesses don’t know what they don’t know about schools.

Unfortunately, today’s government officials tend to listen to these “astroturf” advocates for privatization. Too often, legislators don’t realize that they do not conduct research according to scholarly principles, such as peer review. Their methodologies typically ignore the social science conducted in traditional universities. And their recommendation’s come from their think tanks’ public relations departments, not an objective review of the evidence.

So, privatization has run up unconscionable human and financial costs. But the worst of these interrelated tragedies might be the long-term damage to our democratic, educational, and moral values.

The first step towards reclaiming them is wrestling with Privatization of America’s Public Institutions.

John Thompson is an award-winning historian who became an inner-Oklahoma City teacher after the “Hoova” set of the Crips took over his neighborhood and he became attached to the kids in the drug houses. Now retired, he is the author of *A Teacher’s Tale: Learning, Loving, and Listening to Our Kids*.

Halliburton Loophole. Governor Hogan also approved the use of tax dollars for the Canadian corporation AltaGas to build fracked gas infrastructure and for TransCanada's Potomac Pipeline.

Meanwhile, Maryland is home to Dominion Energy's Cove Point. Cove Point is a liquified natural gas [LNG] import and export hub that moves fracked gas to India, China and other international markets. LNGs are highly explosive and unstable. The environment and the residents in the area are at risk of water contamination, air pollution, pipeline and well leaks, as well as explosions and fires. Communities are absorbing this risk while those in power can earn profits off fracked gas that doesn't even stay in the U.S.

A similar situation is currently playing out in New York, which passed a fracking ban in 2014. As in Maryland, New York's fracking ban hasn't brought an end to fracking infrastructure in the state. The proposed projects of the Danskammer gas-powered plant, the enormous Cricket Valley gas power plant, and Williams's Northeast Supply Enhancement project (NESE) are all a part of the fracking infrastructure boom that's being built across New York. And it's not difficult to see why the infrastructure is being built even in the wake of a fracking ban: In 2016, Joseph Percoco, a top aide for Gov. Andrew Cuomo, pled guilty to six counts of extortion and soliciting bribes from Competitive Power Ventures.

Kim Fraczek, director of Sane Energy, pointed to controversial fracking projects happening in New York, such as the Manheim compressed natural gas

station and the Northern Access Pipeline expansion (NAPL) as evidence that fracking-related activity hasn't ended, even though the actual process of fracking is no longer allowed to take place in the state. National Fuel's NAPL would move gas from Pennsylvania to Canada, directly crossing the Seneca Nation's land. The New York State Department of Environmental Conservation originally denied necessary permits, but the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission [FERC] overruled the decision. Construction is slated to begin in 2020.

Rubber-stamping at the federal level makes bans not only on fracking, but also on related infrastructure, crucial at the state and local level.

"FERC doesn't really listen to the public" said Ziesche. Indeed, many activists view FERC as a body that approves almost every pipeline application that comes its way. This rubber-stamping at the federal level makes bans not only on fracking, but also on related infrastructure, crucial at the state and local level.

North Carolina lifted its fracking ban and even went so far as to make it illegal for anyone to reveal the chemicals used.

In Florida, a fracking ban appears to be on the horizon. During the 2018 gubernatorial race, every candidate, including Gov. Ron DeSantis, went on record supporting a fracking ban.

Governors Hogan, Cuomo and DeSantis did not respond to Truthout's requests for comment.

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