

Trump's Nihilism on Healthcare

Petulant bombast is a dangerous approach to governance – what the Founders associated with the British crown – but now President Trump has brought that style to U.S. policymaking on healthcare, as Michael Winship observes.

By Michael Winship

A couple of things observed after successful surgery and a week in the hospital: For reasons seemingly unrelated to your operation, you will find bits of surgical tape attached to odd parts of your body for days after your return home. While confined to your hospital bed, you will hear and say the words “urine” and “urinate” more than you have in your entire previous life.

Most important, time and again you will be amazed and comforted by the dedication, competence and patience of virtually every doctor, nurse, nursing assistant, physical therapist and cleaner you meet – especially the nurses and nursing assistants, who clearly are in charge of the joint.

Which is why it's so infuriating to compare the true public service of these men and women to the man who is supposed to be our public-servant-in-chief – he who insists on trying to torpedo Obamacare and on running our country and government into the ground by fomenting policies fueled not by duty or patriotism but by incompetence, ego and petty vindictiveness.

It's a given that our health care system, one-sixth of our nation's economy, is a nightmare. And that despite my encomiums of praise for the medical profession stated above, there also are stinkers out there quick to abuse the system and make a big fast buck, especially in the pharmaceutical and health insurance industries.

Yet while Obamacare is a deeply flawed program – ultimately, single-payer is the way we must go or face economic and social ruin – it still has been a step in the right direction (“the end of the beginning of the reform we need,” in the words of advocate Wendell Potter), and could in some ways be patched until we yield to the obvious and make universal health care a right for every one of us.

But no. Dear Leader, frustrated by the Republican congressional majority's repeated inability to repeal and replace Obamacare, decided to take matters into his own hands and issue executive orders that make a mockery of medicine's guiding principle: First, do no harm. And all to take revenge on his predecessor, whose name he believes must be expunged and thrown down the memory hole.

One executive order allowed cheaper policies but fewer protections and benefits. The other cut subsidies to health insurers that help cover the costs of medical insurance for low-income individuals and families, resulting in projected premium increases of up to 25 percent by 2020 and, according to the Congressional Budget Office, costing the government \$194 billion over the next 10 years. Genius.

Helping Nobody

As Sarah Kliff at Vox observed, “This is a policy that helps nobody and hurts millions.”

But at his Monday Cabinet meeting, Trump brayed, “Obamacare is finished. It’s dead. It’s gone. You shouldn’t even mention it. It’s gone. There is no such thing as Obamacare anymore.

Yet like so much of Trump’s bragging, it wasn’t so. Or so we thought. Democratic Sen. Patty Murray and Republican Sen. Lamar Alexander came forward with a bipartisan compromise that restores the subsidies for a couple of years but also yields to conservatives and gives states more leeway in regulating health plans. Trump seemed to say he supported it. And then he didn’t. What’s more, many conservatives, especially in the House, are opposed. So... more mayhem.

All of this is reflective of what commentator Andrew Sullivan calls “nihilist, mindless reactionism.” The President, Sullivan writes, is “a reactionary fantasist, whose policies stir the emotions but are stalled in the headwinds of reality. He can’t abolish Obamacare because huge majorities prefer it to any Republican alternative, so he is sabotaging it.”

On the campaign trail, Trump bragged how he would immediately “terminate” Obamacare and replace it with something “really, really great that works.” But if for some reason you don’t know by now, he’s all radio talk show bombast and no substance. To fix our health care system requires hard work, study and a solid determination to create something that serves the collective need and protects each of us at our most vulnerable. There’s no evidence of that hard work happening in the White House or on Capitol Hill.

As I’m recovering from my time under the knife, I’ve been reading Keeping On Keeping On, the latest volume of diaries and other ephemera from the English playwright and essayist Alan Bennett. Now in his 80s, one of his *bête noires* is conservative attacks on Britain’s National Health Service.

“The word patient means a sufferer,” Bennett writes, “and when someone comes to the doctor they are coming not because they want to buy something but because they want help. Structure and restructure the Health Service how you will

doctors are not shopkeepers, patients are not customers and medicine is not a product.”

A hospital stay has a way of making you focus and realize things about yourself and the structures that keep us alive and well. Proper medical care for all should be a boon to our society, a miracle of public policy that sustains and protects. Mindless cant and empty braggadocio are not policy. They’re a disease that threaten the health of the nation. And Mr. Trump, you’re the Typhoid Mary spreading the contagion.

Michael Winship is the Emmy Award-winning senior writer of *Moyers & Company* and *BillMoyers.com*. Follow him on Twitter: @MichaelWinship. [This article first appeared at <http://billmoyers.com/story/obamacare-trump-sickness-and-health/>]

Busting Upward the Military Budget

The Trump administration and Congress are in accord on one thing: the budget constraints on military spending must be busted to sustain overseas bases and to fund local pork projects, writes Ivan Eland.

By Ivan Eland

Although the Senate and House of Representatives have both passed the National Defense Authorization Act for fiscal year 2018 at the gargantuan sum of \$700 billion, most of the largesse has little to do with defending the United States and much to do with policing the informal American overseas empire. Thus, at least some trimming to the huge amount is possible.

Of the \$700 billion, about \$640 billion is the Pentagon’s base budget and another \$60 billion dollars is allocated to fight simultaneous wars in Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq and elsewhere. This whopping amount exceeds last year’s \$619 billion, thus flouting the “sequestration” spending caps in the 2011 Budget Control Act. Trump and the Republicans want to use budget savings from domestic spending to finance the defense spending increases. However, they will need Democratic votes to break the sequestration caps; the Democrats’ price for doing so is a logrolling that would also require increases in domestic spending.

Yet the Budget Control Act has helped control federal spending, budget deficits, and debt accumulation and should be retained. Apparently, when conservatives tout slimming down government, they don’t seem to think the Defense Department is part of the federal bureaucracy.

The idea is preposterous that a country which alone accounts for about half the world's defense budget needs more money to keep the readiness of its forces high and to rebuild a military that has been depleted by long, senseless wars in the Middle East and South Asia. The Defense Department is already slathered with over \$600 billion a year and just needs to reallocate some of its funds to improve readiness and conduct rebuilding.

Yet members of Congress always propose amendments adding extra weapons systems, such as ships and aircraft, to the budget that the Defense Department doesn't request. Not coincidentally, all this wasteful and unneeded pork spending just happens to be in these members' home states. Such pork is a regular occurrence in defense budgeting and explains why the Defense budget is so massive, yet force readiness and equipment depletion remain problems.

Other wasteful spending perennially occurs on stateside military bases that even DoD would like to close, but members of Congress like to keep open because it subsidizes local economies they represent. The Pentagon offered a useful proposal that would have opened another round of base closures to save money. These savings could have been put toward readiness and rebuilding. Both the House and Senate rejected it for the aforementioned parochial reason.

Overseas Bases

To save even more money, the United States should close some overseas bases and decommission military units at those bases. Essentially, the military is like a fleet of expensive sports cars that is short on money for gas, repair, and maintenance. The overseas bases and forces need to be pruned so that the remaining forces at home have enough money for operations and support. With a \$20 trillion debt, the United States is overextended in the world; the U.S. half of global defense spending is paid for out less than a quarter of the world's GDP. Pruning the U.S. overseas footprint will help reduce the overextension.

Another way to save money would be to end unneeded and counterproductive wars in the Middle East and South Asia, which lead to increased blowback anti-U.S. terrorism. Sen. Rand Paul, R- Kentucky, laudably proposed repealing outdated congressional authorizations for the Afghanistan and Iraq Wars, passed in 2001 and 2002. Congress was so scared of the proposal that it didn't even get a vote.

These two authorizations for the use of force should have been terminated. Going even further, one could question counterproductive (for the same reason as the Afghanistan and Iraq Wars), congressionally unapproved, and therefore unconstitutional air and drone wars in Pakistan, Somalia, Yemen, Syria, and Libya. Lives and even more money could be saved if they were also ended.

Therefore, eliminating pork spending, unneeded and counterproductive wars overseas, and excessive bases and forces at home and around the world could free up more money for military readiness and any post-war rebuilding necessary without ending the sequestration limits on defense spending needed to control budget deficits and debt accumulation, which are dragging the U.S. economy and preventing higher economic growth rates.

Ivan Eland is Senior Fellow and Director of the Center on Peace & Liberty at the Independent Institute. [This article also appeared as a blog post at HuffingtonPost.]

Human Anxiety in Late-Stage Capitalism

Superficial explanations for today's social anxiety and political discontent miss the underlying reality: the crisis of late-stage capitalism in its frantic death throes, explains poet Phil Rockstroh.

By Phil Rockstroh

A number of recent press articles, including an over 8,000-word feature piece in The New York Times have asked, to quote the Times' headline, "Why Are More American Teenagers Than Ever Suffering From Severe Anxiety?"

Although the question was proffered, the reporters and editors responsible for the articles remain resolutely obtuse to the obvious: The bughouse crazy environment of late-stage capitalist culture evokes classic fight-or-flight responses attendant to episodes of severe anxiety and panic attacks.

The word panic has its derivation in reference to Pan, the Greek god of wilderness and wildness, of the animal body encoded within human beings and its attendant animalistic imperatives. To wit, deracinate an animal from its natural habitat and it will evince, on an instinctual basis, a fight-or-flight response.

If caged, the unfortunate creature will pace the confines of its imprisonment, chew and tear at its fur and flesh, become irritable, enervated, languish and even die from the deprivation of the environment it was born to inhabit. A caged animal, even if the unfortunate creature endures captivity, is not the entity nature conceived; the living being has been reduced to A Thing That Waits For Lunch.

Human beings, animals that we are, respond in a similar fashion. Experiencing

anxiety is among the ways our innate animal spirits react to the capitalist cage. Inundate a teenager with the soul-defying criteria of the corporate/consumer state, with its overbearing, pre-careerist pressures, its paucity of communal eros, its demands, overt and implicit, to conform to a shallow, manic, nebulously defined yet oppressive societal order, and insist that those who cannot adapt, much less excel, are “losers” who are fated to become “basement dwellers” in their parents’ homes or, for those who lack the privilege, be cast into homelessness, then the minds of the young or old alike are apt to be inundated with feelings of angst and dread.

Worse, if teenagers are culturally conditioned to believe said feelings and responses are exclusively experienced by weaklings, parasites, and losers then their suffering might fester to the point of emotional paralysis and suicidal inclinations.

No Real Remedies

What does the capitalist state offer as remedy? Obscenely profitable, corporately manufactured and widely prescribed psychoactive medications. Treatment, which, at best, merely masks symptoms and bestows the illusion of recovery.

As R. D. Laing observed: “What we call ‘normal’ is a product of repression, denial, splitting, projection, introjection and other forms of destructive action on experience. It is radically estranged from the structure of being.”

In short, it is insanity to be expected to adapt to socially acceptable insanity. Yet we are pressured to adapt to, thus internalize odious, groupthink concepts and tenets. To cite one such groupthink example: homelessness is natural to the human condition and is a communally acceptable situation.

Closer to fact: The problem of homelessness is the result of a societal-wide perception problem – the phenomenon is the very emblem of the scrambling, twisting, dissociating, and displacing of perception that capitalist propagandists specialize in. Homelessness would be considered a relic of a barbaric past if this very simple principle was applied: Having access to permanent shelter is a human right and not a privilege.

What kind of a vile, vicious people would deny that simple proposition? Those conditioned by a lingering Puritan/Calvinist mindset to believe: Punishment for resisting the usurpation of the fleeting hours of one’s finite life must be severe. If the over-class can no longer get away with, as was once common practice in the Puritan/Calvinist tradition, public floggings to whip the labor force into line, then those who will not or cannot comply will be cast onto the

cold, unforgiving concrete of a soulless cityscape.

It comes down to this, societies that are ridden with vast wealth inequity, due to the machinations of a rapacious over-class, create the obscenity known as homelessness. Moreover, the situation is only one of the numerous obscenities inherent to state capitalism. Obscenities that include, events that are dominating the present news cycle, e.g., the predations of a lecherous movie mogul, to the sub-cretinous doings and pronouncements of a Chief of State who is a bloated, bloviating, two-legged toxic waste dump.

Trump, No Aberration

How is it then, liberals fail to grasp the fact that the Trump presidency is not an aberration; rather, his ascension to power should be regarded as being among the high probability variables of late-stage capitalism and empire building? The psychopathic, tangerine-tinged clown Trump is the embodiment of the Second Law of Thermodynamics, a development that is concomitant to over-expanded empires. Thus he will continue to flounce deeper into the quagmire of crash-engendering, economic legerdemain and perpetual war.

Empires are death cults, and death cults, on a subliminal basis, long for their own demise. Paradoxically, the collective mindset of imperium, even as it thrusts across the expanse of the world, renders itself insular, cut off from culturally enhancing novelty, as all the while, the homeland descends into a psychical swamp of churning madness.

A draining of the swamp of the collective mind cannot come to pass, for the swamp and citizenry are one. Withal, the likes of leaders such as Trump rise from and are made manifest by the morass of the culture itself. In a swamp, the gospel of rebirth and redemption is heard in the song of humus. New life rises from its compost.

In the presence of Trump's debased mind and tombified carcass, one is privy to arias of rot. While Hillary Clinton's monotonous tempo was the dirge of a taxidermist – cold, desiccated of heart, and devoid of life's numinous spark – Trump's voice carries the depraved cacophony of a Célinean fool's parade ... its trajectory trudging towards the end of empire.

As liberals new BFFL (Best Friend for Life) George W. Bush might ask, "Is our liberals learning."

In a word, no. For example, the collective psyche of U.S. culture as been enflamed by the revelations that actresses were coerced into sexual encounters with a movie mogul whose power in the industry was only matched, even enhanced, by his sadistic nature. The staff of his company assisted, was complicit in, or

remained silent about his lechery, as did the whole of the movie industry and the entertainment press. All as NFL athletes are being threatened with expulsion from the League if they kneel during the national anthem.

The Great Unspoken

Yet the great unspoken remains: The enabling of and submission to the degradation, exploitation and tyranny, and the lack of resistance thereof share a common and singular factor: The careerism of all concerned. The cultural milieu concomitant to capitalism is at the rotten root and noxious blossoming of the situation.



Jean-Luc Godard's 1967 cinematic barnburner "Two or Three Things I Know About Her" should be required viewing for those unaware or in denial of the acuity of the film's theme i.e., becoming enmeshed within the psychological landscape of dominance, degradation, and submission inherent to and inseparable from capitalist/consumer culture will cause one to become party to societal sanctioned prostitution. When life is negotiated within a collective value system that devalues and deadens the individual's inner life thus warps every human transaction, anomie descends, the worst among a people ascend to positions of power.

"Panic is the sudden realization that everything around you is alive." – William S. Burroughs, from Ghost of Chance

When friends visited me in New York, where I lived for decades, I would take them on walking tours through the city. We would cross the Westside Highway and stroll the pedestrian walk along the Hudson River, or cross the East River by walking across the Brooklyn Bridge.

The effect of these excursions on people was often profound ... the combined

elements of the elemental beauty of the rivers and vastness of the city's architecture and scope, clamor, and the dense interweaving of traditional ethnic customs and ad hoc social codes of New Yorkers often would heighten the visitors' senses and open them to larger, more intricate awareness of themselves and extant reality ... the freeways of the contemporary mind (conditioned to be constantly engaged in manic motion, with one's mind either frenzied by an obsession with performing (ultimately futile) maneuvers directed to saving time – or stalled at a frustration inducing standstill) were replaced by the exigencies of life at street level, i.e., novel situations that had to be apprehended and negotiated.

The possibilities of life seemed greater. The crimped eros of insular suburban thought became loosened before the city's intricacies and expansiveness. Although: Not all, or even a scant few, New Yorkers can maintain the state of being. Few of us can live by Rilke's resolve to "make every moment holy." Life, in the city, becomes grotesquely distorted ... High rents, inflicted by hyper-gentrification, in combination with the deification of success and its cult of careerism overwhelm one's psyche ... There is so far to fall.

Angst (the word originally can be traced to the ancient Greek deity Ananke, the immovable by prayer and offering bitch Goddess of Necessity and the root word of anxiety) clamps down one's sense of awareness. Ananke dominates the lives of the non-privileged citizenry while Narcissus, Trump's, the Clintons', et.al. and their financial and cultural elitists' patron God rules the day. The pantheon of possibility has been decimated, a cultural cleansing has been perpetrated, by the egoist caprice of the beneficiaries of the late capitalist dictatorship of money.

Hence, we arrive at the primal wisdom tacitly conveyed by anxiety-borne states of fight or flight. Due to the reality that capitalism, on both an individual and collective basis, drives individuals into madness, all as the system destroys forest and field, ocean and sea and the soul-scape of all who live under its rapacious dominion, our plight comes down to this: We either struggle and strive, by and any and all means, to end the system – or it will end us.

Phil Rockstroh is a poet, lyricist and philosopher bard living, now, in Munich, Germany. He may be contacted: philrockstroh.scribe@gmail.com and at FaceBook: <http://www.facebook.com/phil.rockstroh>

Trump's War for Coal Raises Risks

Exclusive: President Trump's war for coal is threatening progress on alternative energy while creating hazards both in the weather effects from global warming and in health risks from breathing dirty air, writes Jonathan Marshall.

By Jonathan Marshall

When Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Scott Pruitt proudly declared "The war against coal is over," as part of his Oct. 9 announcement of plans to repeal the Obama-era Clean Power Plan, he neglected to mention the thousands of Americans whose lives will be sacrificed so coal producers and utilities can declare victory in the nation's environmental wars.

As Sierra Club Executive Director Michael Brune said in a statement, "Donald Trump and Scott Pruitt will go down in infamy for launching one of the most egregious attacks ever on public health, our climate, and the safety of every community in the United States. He's proposing to throw out a plan that would prevent thousands of premature deaths and tens of thousands of childhood asthma attacks every year."

Coal burning produces deadly particulates, toxic metals, and other pollutants that have a ruinous effect on public health, even with current controls on smokestack emissions. A 2015 analysis by the EPA of the Clean Power Plan, which proposed flexible measures to curb carbon pollution from power plants across the country, noted that associated cuts to smog and soot would "bring major health benefits for American families."

By 2030, when its provisions fully kicked in, the plan would result in "up to 3,600 fewer premature deaths; 90,000 fewer asthma attacks in children; 1,700 fewer hospital admissions; and avoiding 300,000 missed days of school and work."

Those numbers reflected only the projected impact of the Clean Power Plan, not the total impact of coal burning. Carnegie Mellon professor Jay Apt recently cited a vast scientific literature that supports estimates of premature deaths from U.S. power plant emissions at between 7,500 and 52,000 annually – roughly comparable to total fatalities from car crashes.

Switching electric utilities completely from coal to natural gas would slash those emissions and lower human health costs by upward of \$50 billion a year, Apt and a team of fellow scientists calculated in a 2016 paper.

That process is already underway for economic reasons. Thanks to cheap natural gas prices, nearly half of U.S. coal-fired power plants have shut down or

announced plans to retire in recent years—including nearly a dozen since Trump took office.

A recent study issued by the Center on Global Energy Policy at Columbia University noted, “A surge in US natural gas production due to the shale revolution has driven down prices and made coal increasingly uncompetitive in US electricity markets. Coal has also faced growing competition from renewable energy, with solar costs falling 85 percent between 2008 and 2016 and wind costs falling 36 percent.”

Unless those basic economic facts change, it declared, “US coal consumption will continue its decline despite Trump’s aggressive rollback of Obama-era regulations.”

War on Renewable Energy

This March, for the first time ever, wind and solar produced 10 percent of all electricity in the United States, reflecting their growing challenge to coal and their rapidly declining cost. The Trump administration is looking for ways to reverse that trend, even if that means ending the tremendous job boom in alternative energy industries.

At EPA, besides attempting to kill the Clean Power Plan, Trump apparently hopes to roll back costly regulations of mercury emissions and coal ash from power plants by appointing former coal company lobbyist Andrew Wheeler to serve as deputy administrator of the agency.

EPA’s Pruitt has also publicly urged repeal of federal tax credits for wind and solar power – without noting that they are scheduled to disappear by 2020 and 2022, respectively, and without acknowledging that extensive federal subsidies for coal for years tilted the playing field in favor of fossil fuels. (President Trump is said by West Virginia Gov. Jim Justice to be “really interested” in providing a lavish new federal subsidy for Appalachian coal.)

Meanwhile, over at the Department of Energy, the White House has asked for cuts of nearly 70 percent in the department’s programs for renewable energy and energy efficiency, including its much-acclaimed advanced research program.

Energy Secretary Rick Perry last month asked the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission to ram through new economic regulations favoring ailing coal and nuclear plants. His transparent attempt to interfere with energy markets ran into determined opposition not only from wind and solar representatives, but members of the gas industry. One of Trump’s own appointees to FERC objected, saying “I did not sign up to go blow up the markets.”

The Interior Department has weighed in, too, with Secretary Ryan Zinke declaring during National Clean Energy Week that solar companies should stop looking for sites to produce energy on federal lands. To date, his department has approved only one solar project, compared to the 60 approved by the Obama administration over eight years.

Zinke's anti-solar stance conflicts with the opinion of two-thirds of adult Americans, who believe the United States should give priority to renewable energy over fossil fuels.

Perhaps the Trump administration's biggest threat to renewable energy is its potential support for a new ruling by the U.S. International Trade Commission, which found that cheap Chinese solar panels have hurt U.S.-based manufacturers. The Solar Energy Industry Association, the main industry lobby, has decried the ruling and warned that punitive tariffs would raise panel prices, slam the breaks on solar adoption, and cost nearly 90,000 U.S. jobs.

The ruling was also opposed by the conservative Heritage Foundation, at least two Republican governors, and a group of retired military energy experts.

"But for Trump," observed the *Washington Post's* Dino Grandoni, "the commission's decision presents a rare opportunity for him to penalize two of his favorite punching bags – China and Mexico, which was also named in the ITC ruling . . . – without Congress getting in the way." Just as important, it would allow Trump to land another blow for the coal industry.

By waging war against renewable energy industry, the Trump administration isn't just putting hundreds of thousands of good jobs at risk. In the long run, it is jeopardizing efforts to slow the pace of global warming, which has contributed to the vast scale and devastation of recent natural disasters ranging from hurricanes to fires.

Just as significant, the administration threatens to condemn to misery or death thousands of Americans who will be forced to breathe dirtier air in order to line the pockets of Trump's coal-industry supporters. By fighting for coal, Trump is waging war on our very lives.

Jonathan Marshall is a frequent contributor to Consortiumnews.com.

Catalonia and the 'Europe of Regions'

Exclusive: Catalonia's bid for independence from Spain had a curious twist, a readiness to take its place within the supranational European Union, a further challenge to traditional nation-states, observes Andrew Spannaus.

By Andrew Spannaus

Political debate across Europe has been shaken by the clash between the pro-independence faction in the Spanish region of Catalonia, and the national institutions of Spain, raising thorny issues about autonomy, national sovereignty and the European Union.

The Catalans, who organized a referendum on independence that was formally prohibited and partially repressed by national authorities, are in fact just one of the regional groups around the continent which have consistently sought to lessen their ties with their respective national governments, with schemes that go from greater financial independence to outright secession.

Until just a few decades ago, such aspirations would have barely been considered realistic in the Western world, as nation-states have been the dominant political entity for centuries, with no intention to give up power over their territory or population.

Several factors have intervened to change the political environment since the beginning of the 1990s. First, there has been the promotion of the notion of ethnic self-determination by Western democracies. This has generally been used to urge political change in other areas of the world, often with geopolitical aims such as weakening strategic adversaries; there are numerous examples, from the former Soviet bloc and the Balkans, to East Timor and Tibet. Support for such breakaway movements in the name of democracy and human rights has opened the door for people in Western Europe to demand their own right to self-determination.

Second, is the strategy adopted by architects of the modern European Union to encourage acceptance of the abandonment of national sovereignty. This entailed a departure from the original form of the E.U. that was begun in the 1950s as a system of economic cooperation among Western European countries with a strategic aim.

In that initial phase, it was considered essential to foster a close alliance in order to counter the Soviet Union, and the United States even made increased European cooperation a condition for disbursement of Marshall Plan funds shortly

after World War II.

At the end of the Cold War though, the E.U. underwent a significant transformation, adopting the goal of gradually ceding national prerogatives to the supranational structures in Brussels and Frankfurt, ultimately seeking a sort of European-wide “United States of Europe.” This idea was promoted by the political elites, but garnered only limited public support, repeatedly being rejected when actual votes were taken among the population, for example.

It’s not difficult to understand why: countries would have to voluntarily give up their sovereignty to a political structure that, while formally managed by representatives sent from each single area, risked being led mainly by a permanent bureaucracy with little connection to, or understanding of, the diverse populations around the continent. The impression, still present today, is that the transatlantic political and financial establishment would centralize control, catering to the needs of only a small portion of the population.

A ‘Europe of Regions’

One of the solutions that emerged was to promote the notion of a “Europe of Regions,” i.e. along with the centralization of power on certain matters at the supranational level, there would also be a devolution of powers towards local authorities in other fields. The idea of emphasizing regional characteristics on an ethnic basis was not new, but it received renewed attention in the 1990s as avenues were sought to advance E.U. integration.

This had an effect on political movements that focused on local issues. An example comes from Italy, where the idea was trumpeted by Gianfranco Miglio, an Italian jurist and political scientist who was a leading proponent of regional autonomy. Miglio was a long-time supporter of a reorganization of nations into smaller entities based on different ethnic groups, in a situation where the state and borders would ultimately disappear, as he put it.

Miglio became the philosophical leader of the Italian “Northern League” for a time in the 1990s. The League began as a movement calling for secession of the wealthier regions of northern Italy from the center and south, cast as corrupt, inefficient and impossible to reform. Representatives of the League were elected to political positions throughout the North, but eventually also took on roles in the national government.

As the notion of secession proved to be unrealistic, the political world did however embrace the idea of greater federalism, understood as allowing regional governments more financial and administrative autonomy, for better or for worse.

Now the two largest regions of Italy’s North, Lombardy and Veneto, are poised to

vote in a non-binding referendum in favor of greater autonomy on Oct. 22. The aim is not to move towards actual independence – a goal embraced by only a small portion of the population – but rather to convince the national government to allow the wealthy regions to keep more of the taxes they pay, instead of sending most of the money to Rome where it is redistributed based on national priorities.

“We want the cash,” a leading member of the Lombardy Regional Government told this writer on Oct. 3. “The referendum will strengthen us in our negotiations with Rome.”

This is the position supported publicly by Lombardy Governor Roberto Maroni, who makes no bones about his desire to shift resources to his own constituents rather than keep subsidizing other areas of Italy that are less efficient and more needy.

In a press conference three weeks ago, Maroni also jumped at the chance to declare his support for a “Europe of the Regions.” Despite aiming to capitalize on populist sentiment, he distanced himself from the nationalist, anti-E.U. sentiment spreading around Europe, expressed by politicians such as Marine Le Pen in France. Thus the push for local autonomy dovetails nicely with the increase of supranational power structures that weaken the nation-state.

A Divided Catalonia

The case of Catalonia is more contentious. The Statute of Autonomy went into effect in 2006, giving the regional institutions heightened power over numerous areas, from education and health to communications and transportation. In 2010, the Constitutional Court of Spain began to roll back the effects of the Statute in various fields, provoking the opposition that ultimately led to the referendum earlier this month.

Not all Catalans are for leaving Spain. Indeed recent polling suggests that there is currently not a pro-independence majority. This conclusion is disputed though, and in the regional elections of 2015 pro-independence parties received 48 percent of the vote, short of an absolute majority, but a plurality sufficient to give them control of the regional government. The result has been a clash between Catalonia and the national government of Spain, with the national police intervening physically to block the referendum on Oct. 1.

The conflict has also raised serious issues for the European Union. Catalan secessionists openly stated that as an independent state they intended to be a member of the E.U. What better way to advance the notion of a “Europe of Regions”?

When push came to shove though, the E.U. institutions found themselves forced to warn Catalonia that it would not receive any preferential treatment even if it were to become independent. After an initial embarrassed silence, the European Commission aligned itself squarely with the position of the Spanish government, showing that in times of crisis the prerogatives of nation-states still prevail.

It's ironic that just as voters throughout the West are supporting populists calling for a return to national sovereignty, in opposition to the end of political and economic borders as preached by globalization, the other flank used to weaken nation-states, that of regional autonomy and self-determination, is now causing problems precisely for those who promoted it.

Andrew Spannaus is a freelance journalist and strategic analyst based in Milan, Italy. He is the founder of Transatlantico.info, that provides news, analysis and consulting to Italian institutions and businesses. His book on the U.S. elections *Perchè vince Trump (Why Trump is Winning)* was published in June 2016.

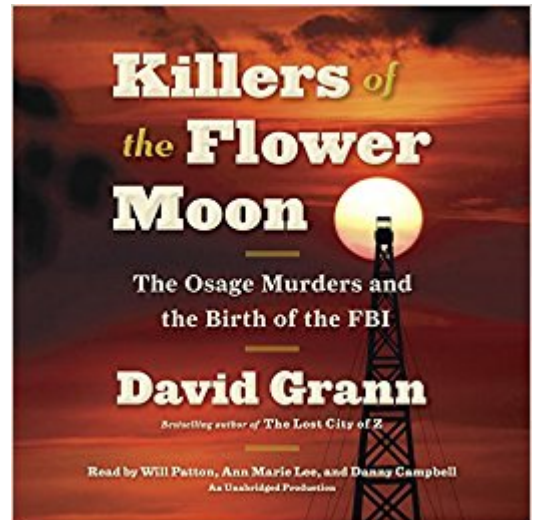
The Osage Indian Murder Mystery

Exclusive: The European arrival in North America led to genocide against Native Americans along with various schemes to steal their land by both government and individual murderers, as James DiEugenio explains.

By James DiEugenio

White America has deployed any number of subterfuges to steal land from the Native Americans, with a favorite tactic being the signing of treaties that were voided whenever it became convenient – and especially when the Native American land was found have something valuable in it. Then, the deal was “renegotiated” or the U.S. Army arrived to slaughter some tribe for going “off the

reservation.”



But there were also more local strategies, hatched by greedy operatives and enforced by targeted killings, such as the murders of Osage Indians at the heart of a new book by David Grann, *Killers of the Flower Moon*.

The Osage Indian nation dated back to well before the formation of the United States, when the Osage roamed through what are now four states (Kansas, Missouri, Arkansas and Oklahoma). After the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 when the new U.S. government “bought” vast tracts of territory west of the Mississippi River from France and after a series of negotiations, the Osage ceded 52 million acres in return for the U.S. government’s protection from other tribes. But the Osage had more to fear from the white men.

In 1870, the Osage were ultimately pushed onto their final destination, the north central portion of Oklahoma, where they lived by subsistence farming and by leasing land to ranchers for grazing. Under the agreement negotiated by Chief James Bigheart, the land was owned by the Osage though administered by the U.S. government. Bigheart also negotiated a deal in which the Osage maintained mineral rights to their land.

That proved important because oil was discovered in Osage County making the tribe relatively wealthy due to a system called headrights. This meant that each tribe member would be allotted royalties from both the sale of the oil leases and also for a percentage of the extracted petroleum. Since some of the bidders on the leases were people like Frank Phillips, George Getty and Frank Sinclair, the auctions on some leases would begin at \$500,000 and end at over \$1 million. In 1923, in just one day, \$14 million in oil leases were sold: over \$200 million in today’s dollars.

This wealth helped transform Osage territory; with the main villages – Fairfax, Hominy, and Pawhuska – becoming the equivalent of Western boomtowns. Horses and wagons were replaced by Model T Fords; one-level wooden frame stores gave way to

five-story brick office buildings; telegraph offices were replaced by blocks and blocks of telephone poles and wires.

Envious Whites

By standards of the time, the Osage Indians became rich; some employing servants, living in large homes, even purchasing grand pianos. In other words, the Osage began behaving like rich white Americans, but – because they were Indians – their displays of wealth provoked a backlash in the U.S. press. For instance, in writing about the auctions, a journalist for *Harper's Monthly* asked, "Where will it all end? Every time a new well is drilled the Indians are that much richer. The Osage Indians are becoming so rich that something will have to be done about it." (Grann, p. 76)

Two things were done. First, the federal government instituted a system of guardianships. This meant that each Osage tribe member could be deemed "incompetent," and that necessitated a guardian be appointed to the case. As Grann notes, this appointment was nearly always based on the quantity "of Indian blood in the property holder; or what a state supreme court justice referred to as 'racial weakness.'" (ibid, p. 78)

Congressmen would study and analyze expenditures made by each individual Osage and criticize the amounts spent on certain items. At times these assessments echoed Rudyard Kipling's famous dictum about England bearing the white man's burden for colonized natives, or as Grann quotes a congressman:

"Every white man in Osage County will tell you the Indians are now running wild. The day has come when we must begin our restriction of these moneys or dismiss from our hearts and conscience any hope we have of building the Osage Indian into a true citizen." (ibid, p. 79)

Therefore, in 1921, not only were the Osage limited by needing approval from their guardians for expenditures, but limits were placed on how much they could annually withdraw from their trust fund. Practical exceptions like having medical bills or wanting to send children to private colleges did not matter. As one can imagine, this guardian system also provided ample opportunities for embezzlement of the Osage "trust" funds.

The second method that the local power structure utilized to control the Osage wealth was exercised through a legal loophole. That loophole specified that the Osage trust funds could be passed on through family inheritance. What this meant was that if an Osage woman married someone outside the tribe, her husband could inherit her wealth.

A Killing Spree

But there was even a more sinister side to these arrangements. Osage women started disappearing and people who dared investigate started turning up dead.

In May 1921, Mollie Burkhart began to worry about Anna Brown, her missing sister. Three years earlier, her sister Minnie had died at age 27 after a brief, mysterious illness. And about a week before Anna's disappearance, a man named Charles Whitehorn, another Osage, had vanished. Whitehorn's body was soon found at the base of an oil derrick. He had been shot execution-style with two bullets between the eyes. (ibid, p. 14)

A few days before her disappearance, Anna had gone to see a play with Mollie's husband, Ernest Burkhart, and his brothers Bryan and Horace. Ernest assured Mollie that Anna would show up soon. But Anna never returned alive. Her body was found by a boy out squirrel hunting at the edge of a creek. She had been killed by a .32 caliber bullet to the rear of the skull. (ibid, p. 19)

Because local authorities seemed reluctant to investigate her sister's murder, Mollie turned to a man named William Hale, who was a pallbearer at Anna's funeral. Hale had been a prosperous rancher in Osage county for two decades, a reserve deputy sheriff and a political ally of the county prosecutor. Hale once said, "I will always be the Osages true friend."

The inquest found that Bryan Burkhart was the last known person to have seen Anna alive. He said he brought her back to her home and never saw her again. His brother, Ernest Burkhart, said, "I don't know of enemies she had or anyone that disliked her." (ibid, p. 31)

After eliminating local outlaws and her former husband as suspects, the local Justice of the Peace closed the case in July 1921. He concluded that both Anna Brown and Charles Whitehorn had died at "the hands of parties unknown." (ibid, p. 35) That same month, Mollie's mother Lizzie also passed away. Bill Smith, Mollie's brother-in-law, became convinced Lizzie had been poisoned.

The mysterious deaths didn't stop there. In February 1922, a 29-year-old Osage named William Stepson died, also believed to have been poisoned. Five months later, Joe Bates, another Osage tribe member in his 30s also died of suspected poisoning. (ibid, pgs. 67-68)

With the death toll climbing, but the public and private inquiries yielding meager results, the Osage turned to Barney McBride, a wealthy white oil man whom they trusted and who was genuinely sympathetic to Indian affairs. He knew several people in Washington who might help.

The night McBride arrived in Washington, he stopped at the Elks Club to play billiards. As he departed, someone wrapped a burlap bag tightly over his head to

silence him. The next morning, McBride's body was found near a culvert in Maryland. He had been stabbed 20 times, his head was bashed in, and, except for his shoes and socks, his body was stripped naked. The authorities suspected McBride had been followed from Oklahoma. The Washington newspapers called McBride's killing "the most brutal in crime annals in the District." (ibid, p. 69)

A few weeks later, the dead body of Henry Roan was found in his car. He had been a friend of William Hale, the rancher who had vowed to help solve the murder of Anna Brown. (ibid, pgs. 81-82)

But the killing spree only got worse. A spectacular explosion tore through the house of Mollie Burkhart's sister and brother-in-law, Rita and Bill Smith, the man who had voiced his certainty that Mollie's mother Lizzie had been poisoned. Rita Smith and a maid Nettie Berkshire died in the blast and Bill Smith died four days later.

That incident attracted the attention of a former prosecutor, W.W. Vaughn, who learned that a potential witness was in a hospital in Oklahoma City suffering from suspected poisoning, George Burkhart, a nephew of tribal chief James Bigheart. When Vaughn reached the hospital room, he met alone with the ailing man shortly before he died. Vaughn then called the Osage County sheriff and told him he now had all the information he needed and would take the first train to pass on the evidence to the sheriff. The sheriff asked him if he knew who killed Bigheart. Vaughn replied that he knew a lot more than that. (ibid, p. 94)

But Vaughn never arrived in Pawhuska to meet with the sheriff. He was dragged from his Pullman car and his body was found 36 hours later with his neck broken. Whatever notes he took concerning his interview with Bigheart had disappeared. With Vaughn's death, the official number of murders in the Osage case rose to 24. The local and state authorities seemed powerless to stop it. Whoever was running the plot seemed beyond the reach of the law.

Federal Attention

In the summer of 1925, the head of Washington's Bureau of Investigation decided it was time to intervene in a serious way. One of the functions of the Bureau, which had not yet been named the FBI, was to investigate crimes on Indian reservations. The director was 29-year-old J. Edgar Hoover, who knew his position was tenuous. Hoover decided the only way to prevent more bad publicity was to call in a law enforcement acquaintance from the area and give him the power he needed to crack the case.

The man Hoover called upon was Tom White, a Texas Ranger for 12 years before

joining the Bureau in 1917. Hoover offered White the stewardship of the Oklahoma City office and the freedom to select his own task force. Hoover made a good choice and was wise to give White the independence he needed.

White decided to pursue the conspiracy on two levels. He would stay in Oklahoma City as the public face of the inquiry. From there, he and his chief assistants – most notably John Burger – would review the files that had accumulated from all law enforcement agencies over the last four years. Secretly, White would employ a team of undercover agents who would slowly flow into the Osage area seeking to make friends and to find leads. One of these agents was John Wren, a Ute Indian.

White was interested in finding out if Bill Smith, the bombing victim, had revealed anything before he died. Through all his suffering and slipping in and out of comas at the hospital, Smith had managed to say that he had only two enemies in the world. They were William Hale, the rancher who had professed his devotion to the Osage people, and his brother-in-law Ernest Burkhart, Mollie's husband and Hale's nephew. (ibid, p. 152)

But there was something else White discovered during his inquiry into Smith's final hours. Before Smith died, David Shoun, a popular doctor in Osage County, got him to sign a document making Shoun's brother James, who was also a doctor, the administrator of Smith's dead wife's estate. (ibid, p. 153)

That document led White to uncover a massive system of graft and embezzlement, involving as much as \$8 million stolen from the Osage through the guardian system (or about \$112 million in today's dollars).

In reviewing the evidence, White thought it was odd that Hale was never considered a suspect in the murder of Henry Roan because Hale was the recipient of a \$25,000 insurance policy upon Roan's death. And employees of the insurance company said Hale had approached them to sell Roan the policy. When an agent suggested \$10,000 as the sum, Hale upped it to \$25,000. Since Hale was not a relative, he had to prove that Roan owed him money in order to collect on the policy of a man who was not yet 30. Hale produced a document that said Roan owed him the precise amount of the policy. White later found that the document had been doctored. (ibid, p. 159)

White also discovered another curious aspect of the Hale/Roan relationship. Hale had unsuccessfully tried to purchase Roan's mineral headrights. But the attempt led White to another lead. While studying the record of the murders, and the scam that Dr. Shoun had pulled on Smith before his death, White concluded that, with Mollie Burkhart's relatives dying off one by one, more and more headrights were ending up with Mollie, who was married to Ernest Burkhart, Hale's nephew.

Was this the objective of the conspirators? White reasoned that if he was right about Hale, it was time to turn to the criminal underworld for more information. In talking to local criminals who specialized in cracking safes, White came across a source who said he knew the man who had created the "box" – the nitroglycerine fuse and package – for the Smith bombing. It turned out that, while in the process of a jewel heist, this man had been killed by a local merchant. But, as White later learned, the robber was killed because Hale had tipped off the merchant. (ibid, p. 176)

Financial Motive

The case was broken when White went back into the files and discovered an informant named Blackie Thompson, who was half Cherokee. He told White that Ernest Burkhart and William Hale had tried to enlist him in the Smith bombing, but he was arrested for theft before the bombing was carried out. White confronted Burkhart with Thompson's sworn affidavit. When Burkhart still denied it, he had Thompson enter the room to endorse the document. Burkhart then admitted his role, saying that when he expressed reservations about the bombing, Hale said to him, "What do you care. Your wife will get the money." (ibid, p. 190) Burkhart also revealed the names of the killers who Hale had recruited to murder Henry Roan and Anna Brown.

Hale did everything to escape justice. He attempted to influence the grand jury, he tried to have his case moved out of federal court and into state court. He even hired an assassin to murder a key witness. But White heard about it before it could occur and confronted the accused assassin. Hale and three accomplices were eventually convicted.

In his book about the mystery, author Grann argues that if the victims had been white, Hale would have received the death penalty. But since they were Indians, the conspirators were sentenced to life in prison. Ernest Burkhart and Hale were eventually paroled. Hale later said, "If that damn Ernest had kept his mouth shut, we'd be rich today." (ibid, p. 248)

Shortly after Hale went to jail, White retired from the Bureau and became a prison warden. Hoover closed the case. But that meant the public never discovered who stabbed Barney McBride in Washington and who threw W. W. Vaughn from that Oklahoma City train.

Grann looked up Vaughn's surviving descendants and was told that Vaughn's family was threatened not to pursue the matter any further. (ibid, p. 259) But they did, and information was passed on from one generation to another. Their major suspect was a local banker named H. G. Burt, who tried to embezzle money from Vaughn's estate and was later sued by his widow.

White had discovered that Burt and Hale were close associates. In fact, White had one informant who labeled Burt a murderer. And Burt had a motive for his involvement in the conspiracy. After George Bigheart died, his valuable headrights were passed on to Bigheart's daughter whose guardian was Burt. Burt also was on the train with Vaughn when it departed Oklahoma City and he reported Vaughn's disappearance. And, when Hoover sent Tom White to Oklahoma City to take over the case, Burt moved to Kansas. (ibid, p. 264)

At the end of the book, Grann looked up the records of Indian guardianships that the Bureau of Indian Affairs maintained. Two things struck him as revealing about these records. The first is the recurrence of guardianship rights to powerful people in Osage County like Burt and the owner of the local Trading Company. Some of these local luminaries had as many as 13 wards. The second curious matter was the number of wards who died mysteriously under guardianship. (ibid, p. 281)

After doing an inquiry into other cases in which the Bureau had information that did not lead to the Hale plot, the author concludes that the official number of Osage dead greatly exceeds the 24 named by the FBI. Grann believes that one of the most common forms of murder was through hypodermic needle overloaded with morphine. Then, cooperative doctors, like the Shoun brothers, would conceal the actual cause of death. (p. 290)

The book leaves the reader with the clear implication that the conspiracy to kill and rob the Osage was much wider than the one that Hale organized. As one authority on the case told Grann, "If Hale had told what he knew, a high percentage of the county's leading citizens would have been in prison." (ibid, p. 291)

James DiEugenio is a researcher and writer on the assassination of President John F. Kennedy and other mysteries of that era. His most recent book is *Reclaiming Parkland*.

The Evil That Guns Do

On the defensive over the Las Vegas massacre, the NRA is trotting out some new arguments, such as the inevitability of evil, to deter any meaningful gun control, explains Michael Winship.

By Michael Winship

In the United States, you will hear madmen insist that: 58 dead and 500 injured in Las Vegas are the price of freedom; 49 dead and 58 wounded in Orlando, Florida, are the price of freedom; 27 dead and 2 injured in Newtown, Connecticut, are the price of freedom.

And so it goes. This truly is insanity. We can try to deal with that small percentage of the population who collect or own guns for hunting, target shooting or security, but to claim as a constitutional right the possession of firearms intended for nothing less than brutal, gruesome warfare strains credulity. These are killing machines with no purpose other than to maim and destroy.

Of course, we've said this time and again and will doubtless say it again because the foolish cycle remains unchanging. Every time someone unleashes gun violence and takes multiple victims, we begin with adamant, genuine grief and a collective wringing of hands. Then we are told that the immediate aftermath is not the time to bring politics into a time of sorrow, and then that, yes, maybe we will look into the license to kill we permit with our lax gun laws. Then the flowers will fade, the candles will gutter, the memorials will be over and nothing will be done.

But beyond the horrific scale of the Las Vegas killings, there were a couple of things that struck us as different about this latest tragedy. Usually, the National Rifle Association goes into its bunker and assumes radio silence for a week or so after these mass murders take place, and as if on cue Sunday morning, NRA CEO Wayne LaPierre suddenly popped up on CBS' *Face the Nation*, blaming the violence not on the millions and millions his organization spends holding gun control at bay but, you guessed it, "the elites." He said:

"They all protect themselves with armed security. I mean, they criticize the NRA. You want to talk about irresponsible use of firearms? The No. 1 person teaching irresponsible use of firearms is all these elites' employer, the Hollywood television gaming industry. We spend millions teaching responsible use of firearms. They make billions every single day, teaching irresponsible use of firearms. They're so hypocritical it's unbelievable."

Limiting the Response

What was different this time was that just a couple of days after the Las Vegas deaths, for once the NRA seemed in favor of new gun laws, in this case forbidding the sale of the bump stocks that killer Stephen Paddock used to turn his semiautomatic rifles into automatic weapons that could spray the concert area below him with hundreds of bullets.

But hold on. What the NRA's carefully parsed statement actually said was that the group was urging the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives "to immediately review whether these devices comply with federal law. The NRA believes that devices designed to allow semi-automatic rifles to function like fully automatic rifles should be subject to additional regulations."

In other words, as John Cassidy reported at *The New Yorker*, "the NRA was looking to convert a legislative threat into a regulatory issue. Since fully automatic weapons are already illegal, it wasn't giving up any substantive ground, and it was trying to prevent an open political debate in areas where it knows it is vulnerable."

So don't be fooled by their rhetorical camouflage. In truth, the NRA still wants to steer clear of any open debate in Congress that conceivably could change minds and even lead to other new gun control rules already widely favored by the public – like a renewal of the ban on assault rifles, universal background checks and a federal data base tracking gun sales.

Which leads to the second thing we noticed – the repeated use of the word "evil" to describe the deadly Vegas attack. It was "an act of pure evil," President Trump said the morning after. And Don Turner, president of the Nevada Firearms Coalition, state branch of the NRA, told Mary Louise Kelley of NPR's *All Things Considered*:

"Putting more new laws on the books is not going to stop it. This has been a conundrum humans have fought with since Cain and Abel. You cannot legislate compliance with evil. People are going to be evil. They're going to do evil acts for one reason or another, and there's not any laws in the world would stop them. If we had a total ban on guns, they would've used a semitruck or a bomb."

That the acts of mass murderers are evil is undeniable. The problem is that if you insist that civilization cannot avoid the generation of evil acts – that the force of evil is out of the control of mere mortals – you are throwing up your hands and shirking responsibility for taking action. It's a stinking cop out.

Bruce Clark, who writes the Erasmus blog on religion and public policy for *The Economist* magazine, notes that the emphasis on evil makes this assumption: "If evil is an inexorable feature of a fallen plane of existence, one that has been tainted from the very start of things by human sin, then no policy measures will ever remove it. The only response to evil is to identify it clearly, to avoid secular soft-headedness, and perhaps to mitigate its effects as and when they arise, without presuming to abolish it. In other words, gun control will not work."

You can't change fundamental human nature, the NRA and its allies shout. Wayne LaPierre proclaims, "[I]f we could legislate morality, we would have done it long ago." But as Clark concludes, "whatever you may think about the causes of badness in the world, it seems manifestly absurd to suggest that the legislator should not try, at least, to reduce the scope for evil to prevail."

We must continue to try. Yet given the nature of evil, why bother, LaPierre suggests. He knows the answer. More guns. But only for "the good guys," of course. Madness.

Michael Winship is the Emmy Award-winning senior writer of *Moyers & Company* and *BillMoyers.com*. Follow him on Twitter: [@MichaelWinship](https://twitter.com/MichaelWinship). [This article first appeared at <http://billmoyers.com/story/evil-guns-in-america/>]

A Deaf Ear to Dire Russian Warnings

Official Washington is so obsessed with the hyped Russia-gate allegations that it isn't picking up on dire warnings from Russia that continued U.S. military interference in Syria won't be tolerated, as Gilbert Doctorow notes.

By Gilbert Doctorow

From time to time, the Kremlin uses the Sunday evening weekly news wrap-up program of Dmitry Kiselyov on state television, channel Rossiya-1, to send blunt and public warnings to Washington without diplomatic niceties. Last night was one such case and we must hope that the intended audience within the Beltway can put aside all its distractions about Russia-gate long enough to read a real message from Moscow.

The last such message came in the week following President Trump's April 6 decision to launch 59 Tomahawk missiles at a Syrian air base to punish the Syrian government for an alleged but disputed chemical attack on a village in Idlib province. TV host Kiselyov used his airtime to spell out Russia's disdainful response, which he characterized as unprecedented in scope and seriousness.

It was essential to put all the elements of the warning together in one place, as he did, because the Pentagon sought to downplay the elements in isolation, such as Russia's installation of the Iskander nuclear potential missiles in Kaliningrad, a Russian city on the Baltic Sea surrounded by Poland and Lithuania; or the abrogation of the deconfliction agreement relating to air

space over Syria; or the dispatch of still more Russian vessels to the Eastern Mediterranean equipped to sink U.S. Navy ships.

While U.S. generals were saying that the Russians didn't really mean it, Kiselyov put the whole picture on the screen: an ultimatum to Washington to back off or be prepared for war.

A still earlier message of this kind to Washington aired on the Kiselyov news show in the week following the supposedly accidental Sept. 17, 2016 bombing by U.S. and allied warplanes against Syrian army positions inside the encircled eastern town of Deir Ezzor, which killed more than 80 Syrian soldiers and prepared the way for a renewed offensive by the Islamic State. That bombing scuttled the agreement on a Syrian cease-fire concluded with the approval of President Obama less than a week earlier by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry after a 14-hour negotiating session.

Lavrov was shown on the Kiselyov program openly accusing U.S. Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter of directing "friendly fire" against Kerry and of dangerous insubordination to his boss, the U.S. President, which put in question any possibility of reaching agreements with the Americans on anything.

Who's in Charge Here?

That last question about who's in charge in Washington has now re-emerged in the program that Kiselyov presented on Sunday evening. The Americans were identified as the "main obstacle" to the mopping up operation in Syria, at a time when Kiselyov indicated that people could finally see "the light at the end of the tunnel" for the horrific six-year conflict with more than 90 percent Syrian territory now back under government control.

The core of the accusation is that the United States is secretly aiding the Islamist terror groups at the center of the remaining resistance to President Bashar al-Assad's regime: supplying the terror groups with weapons, helping them to move around, removing them from hostile fire, and giving them the findings of aerial reconnaissance, maps of where Syrian government forces are operating and even the locations of Russian military detachments.

Things have gotten to the point where the Russians feel that it is not the military capability of the Islamic State that stands in the way of routing the remaining terrorists from Syrian territory but this American assistance to the terrorists. This analysis, said Kiselyov, is not his own idea: it is the official position of the Russian Ministry of Defense as issued through its spokesman this week, Igor Konashenkov.

Kiselyov added: "The Americans deny everything. But the RF Ministry of Defense does not believe their words, relying instead on facts. We recall in the past week how part of the main road connecting Palmyra and Deir Ezzor was taken over by the fanatics. This is the main artery supplying the Syrian forces leading the offensive from Deir Ezzor against the remaining forces of the terrorists in Syria. De facto this was an attack in the rear. This was planned and facilitated by the Americans. In parallel, on 28 September a large group of terrorists numbering about 300 men left the area of the American base in al-Tanf at the Jordanian border. In this area there is a refugee camp numbering tens of thousands."

According to Kiselyov, the Americans have cut off the refugee camp, not allowing in United Nations or other humanitarian relief convoys, so as to use the camp as cover, a human shield, for the Islamic State fighters whom the U.S. military is supporting.

Striking at 'Random Events'

According to the warning from Russian defense spokesman Konashenkov, if the U.S. forces see these attacks by mobile units of terrorists whom the Americans are assisting as "unforeseen random events," then Russian armed forces in Syria are prepared to totally destroy all such "random events" directed against the zone under their control.

Kiselyov asked why is this American behavior happening and whether President Trump made this decision. But the question is rhetorical. Though it may seem "amazing," Kiselyov suggested that it appears Trump was not a party to this behavior, that it more likely resulted from what the TV host called sloppy management when the military gets out from under political control.

On the territory of Syria, Kiselyov said, "they start wandering around quite on their own" and "flirting" with the terrorist groups.

Throughout the six-year war, the United States and its allies – including Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States, Jordan and Israel – have provided support for Islamist militants and other rebels who have fought in close coordination with and often shared sophisticated U.S. weapons with Al Qaeda's Syrian affiliate, Nusra Front, and at times Al Qaeda's spinoff, the Islamic State.

However, whatever the U.S. intentions may be, said Kiselyov, the result is extremely unpleasant both for Russia and for the American leadership as its generals are being pushed toward adventurism.

Konashenkov characterized the area in Syria under American control near the Jordanian border as a "black hole" that is 100 kilometers long. From this "black

hole," the terrorists come out to stage their attacks on Syrian troops and against the peaceful civilian population.

The Sunday program's feature segment then shifted to a calmer note with the insistence that Russian President Vladimir Putin remains confident in the victory over the terrorists regardless of who is aiding them. To demonstrate this confidence, the show presented footage of Putin's response to questions put to him at the Energy Forum in Moscow at mid-week. Putin said, "in the end, we all [presumably including the Americans] have common interests in securing Syria and the region against terrorists and that will bring us together for cooperative action."

In the meantime, however, videos showed the results of Russian air activity in Syria this past week, including more than 400 sorties of Russian planes based in Syria, plus SU-134 and SU-135 bombers arriving from Russian territory that killed a dozen or more terrorist leaders together with 50 security personnel and seriously injured a top official who lost an arm and sank into a coma.

Russian air attacks destroyed the terrorists' main underground weapons caches amounting to 1,000 tons, according to the report, and an attack by Kalibr cruise missiles launched from submarines in the Mediterranean destroyed Islamic State command installations and vehicles as well as weapons supplies. This attack cleared the way for Syrian troops to begin the liberation of the town of Meyadin.

The program left the dots unconnected, but the Russian threat is clear: Moscow will use its air power to eliminate all forces standing in the way of complete victory including U.S. forces on the ground near the Jordanian border.

The Saudi Visit

The same news round-up had another segment that relates in less direct fashion to the Russian success in Syria: a state visit to Russia by the king of Saudi Arabia, the first in the two countries' 90-plus years of diplomatic relations. And it was not a simple affair.

Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud brought with him a contingent of 1,000 people, including business leaders, ministry officials and senior military officers. They came with a reported 100 tons of baggage, including favorite carpets and other accouterments of the royal lifestyle.

All aspects of this visit were impressive, including the signing of contracts and letters of intent for multi-billion-dollar joint investments in industrial projects in both countries, possible Saudi purchases of Russian Liquefied Natural Gas from yet another mega-project seeking financing and multi-billion

dollar military procurement, said to include the latest S-400 air defense system that Russia agreed to supply to Turkey a few weeks ago in exchange for a \$2.5 billion down-payment and which Turkey accepted gratefully over NATO objections.

Putin quipped to the moderator of the Moscow Energy Forum, also held during the past week, that nothing is forever, not even the U.S. hold on the Saudis.

Kiselyov placed the visit in the context of Russian foreign policy in the region generally. Putin, he said, is pursuing a policy of seeking peaceful harmony in the Near East that takes into account the balance of interests of all countries in the region, a policy which is paying off: Russia is now the only country in the world to have good relations with Saudi Arabia, Iran, Israel, Turkey, Iraq and, of course, Syria.

From both segments it would appear that U.S. longstanding domination of the region is unraveling.

Gilbert Doctorow is an independent political analyst based in Brussels. His next book, *Does the United States have a Future?* will be published during October 2017.

Ignoring Today's 'Great Hungers'

The U.S. government presents itself as the beneficent superpower, but the reality of Washington's endless wars and lavish spending on bombs – while millions face starvation and disease – suggest a different reality, as Kathy Kelly notes.

By Kathy Kelly

Earlier this year, the Sisters of St. Brigid invited me to speak at their Feile Bride celebration in Kildare, Ireland. The theme of the gathering was: "Allow the Voice of the Suffering to Speak."

The Sisters have embraced numerous projects to protect the environment, welcome refugees, and nonviolently resist wars. I felt grateful to reconnect with people who so vigorously opposed any Irish support for U.S. military wars in Iraq. They had also campaigned to end the economic sanctions against Iraq, knowing that hundreds of thousands of Iraqi children suffered and died for lack of food, medicine and clean water.

This year, the Sisters asked me to first meet with local teenagers who would

commemorate another time of starvation imposed by an imperial power. Joe Murray, who heads Action from Ireland (Afri), arranged for a class from Dublin's Beneavin De La Salle College to join an Irish historian in a field adjacent to the Dunshaughlin work house on the outskirts of Dublin.

Such workhouses dot the landscape of Ireland and England. In the mid-Nineteenth Century, during the famine years, they were dreaded places. People who went there knew they were near the brink of death due to hunger, disease, and dire poverty. Ominously, behind the workhouse lay the graveyard.

The young men couldn't help poking a bit of fun, at first; what in the world were they doing out in a field next to an imposing building, their feet already soaked in the wet grass as a light rain fell? They soon became quite attentive.

We learned that the Dunshaughlin workhouse had opened in May of 1841. It could accommodate 400 inmates. During the famine years, many hundreds of people were crowded in the stone building in dreadful conditions.

An estimated one million people died during a famine that began because of blighted potato crops but became an "artificial famine" because Ireland's British occupiers lacked the political will to justly distribute resources and food. Approximately one million Irish people who could no longer feed themselves and subsist on the land emigrated to places like the U.S. But seeking refuge wasn't an option for those who couldn't afford the passage.

Evicted by landowners, desperate people arrived at workhouses like the one we were visiting. Our guide read us the names of people from the surrounding area who had been buried in a mass grave behind the workhouse, their bodies unidentified. They were victims of what the Irish call "Greta Mor"—"The Great Hunger." It was recently, as I tried to better understand the migration of desperate and starving people now crossing from East Africa into Yemen, that I began to realize how great the hunger was.

A Global Holocaust

During that same period as the Irish famine – in the latter half of the Nineteenth Century – there were 30 million people, possibly 50 million, dying of famine in northern China, India, Brazil and the Maghreb. The terrible suffering of these unknown people, whose plight never made it into the history books, was a sharp reminder to me of Western exceptionalism.

As researched and described in Mike Davis's book, *The Late Victorian Holocaust*, El Nino and La Nina climate changes caused massive crop failures. What food could be harvested was often sent abroad. Railroad infrastructure could have been used to send food to people dying of hunger, but wealthier people chose to

ignore the plight of the starving. The Great Hunger, fueled by bigotry and greed, had been greater than any of its victims knew.

And now, few in the prosperous West are aware of the terror faced by people in South Sudan, Somalia, northeast Nigeria, northern Kenya and Yemen. Millions of people cannot feed themselves or find potable water.

Countries in Africa, which the U.S. has helped destabilize such as Somalia, are convulsed in fighting which exacerbates effects of drought and drives helpless civilians toward points of hoped-for refuge. Many have chosen a path of escape through the famine-torn country of Yemen.

But the U.S. has been helping a Saudi-led coalition to blockade and bomb Yemen since March of 2015. Sudanese fighters aligned with Saudi Arabia have been taking over cities along the Yemeni coast, heading northward. People trying to escape famine find themselves trapped amid vicious air and ground attacks.

In March 2017, Stephen O'Brien, head of the United Nation's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, traveled to Yemen, Somalia, South Sudan and Northern Kenya. Since that trip, he has repeatedly begged the U.N. Security Council to help end the fighting and prevent conflict-driven famine conditions.

Regarding Yemen, he wrote, in a July 12, 2017 statement to the U.N. Security Council that: "Seven million people, including 2.3 million malnourished (500,000 severely malnourished) children under the age of five, are on the cusp of famine, vulnerable to disease and ultimately at risk of a slow and painful death. Nearly 16 million people do not have access to adequate water, sanitation and hygiene, and more than 320,000 suspected cholera cases have been reported in all of the country's governorates bar one." This number has since risen to 850,000.

Spreading Famine

Ben Ehrenreich describes famine conditions along what the Israeli theorist Eyal Weizman calls the "conflict shoreline," an expanding band of climate change-induced desertification that stretches through the Sahel and across the African continent before leaping the Gulf of Aden to Yemen. He notes that this vast territory, once the site of fierce resistance to colonial incursions, is now paying the heaviest price, in disastrous climate conditions, for the wealth of the industrialized north. As the deserts spread south, ever more dire conflicts can be expected to erupt, causing more people to flee.

Of a drought-stricken area of Somaliland, Ehrenreich writes: "People were calling this drought *sima*, 'the leveller,' because it affected all of the clans stretching across Somaliland and into Ethiopia to the west and Kenya to the

south.”

“The women’s stories were almost all the same,” writes Ehrenreich, “differing only in the age and number of children sick, the number of animals they had lost and the number that survived. Hodan Ismail had lost everything. She left her husband’s village to bring her children here, where her mother lived, ‘to save them,’ she said. ‘When I got there, I saw that she had nothing either.’ The river and streams, their usual source of drinking water, had gone dry and they had no option but to drink from a shallow well at the edge of town. The water was making all the children sick.”

In 1993, at the Rio de Janeiro “Earth Summit,” delegates conveying the views of then-President George H.W. Bush, voiced a refrain of the statement, “the American lifestyle is not up for negotiation.” U.S. demands of the summit incalculably restricted the changes to which it might have led.

Representing President Bill Clinton six years later, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright defended planned bombardment of Iraq, saying “If we have to use force, it is because we are America; we are the indispensable nation. We stand tall and we see further than other countries into the future, and we see the danger here to all of us.”

A Downward Spiral

There is danger that must be recognized. The danger is real and the danger is spreading. Violence spreads the famine, and the famine will spread violence.

I find myself repulsed by assertions voicing U.S. exceptionalism, yet my own study and focus often omits histories and present realities which simply must be understood if we are to recognize the traumas our world faces.

In relation to conflict-driven famines, it becomes even more imperative to resist the U.S. government’s allocation of \$700 billion to the Department of Defense. In the U.S., our violence, and our delusions of being indispensable stem from accepting a belief that our “way of life” is non-negotiable.

Growing inequality, protected by menacing arsenals, paves a path to the graveyard: It is not a “way of life.” We still could acquire a great hunger: a transforming hunger to share justice with our planetary neighbors. We could shed familiar privileges and search for communal tools to preserve us from indifferent wealth and voracious imperial power.

We could embrace the theme of the Irish sisters at their Feile Bride gathering: “Allow the Voice of the Suffering to Speak” and then choose action-based initiatives to share our abundance and lay aside, forever, the futility of war.

Kathy Kelly (kathy@vcnv.org) co-coordinates Voices for Creative Nonviolence
(www.vcnv.org)

Galveston's BioLab Amid Global Warming

Special Report: During Hurricane Harvey, a story questioning the wisdom of putting a biocontainment lab on vulnerable Galveston island revealed not only that public hazard but the failure of today's corporate media, reports Joe Lauria.

By Joe Lauria

Ken Kramer grew up in the 1950s and 1960s in Houston. As a child he spent a lot of time on Galveston, an island about 50 miles away in the Gulf of Mexico. Kramer experienced [Hurricane Carla](#) in 1961 with gusts of 175 mph and a storm surge of 22 feet. It destroyed 120 buildings on Galveston, though the eye was 120 miles away. He also studied the 1900 storm that devastated the island. The Great Hurricane of Galveston is still the worst humanitarian, natural disaster in U.S. history. Somewhere between 8,000 and 12,000 people were [killed](#).

That's why Kramer, who was statewide executive director of the Texas chapter of the Sierra Club for 23 years, was first alarmed in 2003 when he learned that the U.S. federal government chose Galveston as the site for a national biocontainment laboratory.

On the site would be a Bio-safety Level 4 lab, the highest grade of precaution taken to work with agents, such as anthrax, ebola and SARs, which can be transmitted through the air and cause fatal diseases in humans for which there are no known cures. The national laboratory's primary mission would be to develop vaccines against a perceived threat of terrorists deploying biological weapons in the wake of 9/11. Galveston was one of two such post-9/11 labs built. The other is in Boston.

Two months before the Galveston National Laboratory (GNL) was to open on the campus of the University of Texas Medical Branch (UTMB), the island took a direct hit from Hurricane Ike on Sept. 13, 2008.

The GNL's website says the lab can withstand a Category 5 storm and 140 mph winds, though Category 5 storms on the Saffir-Simpson wind scale [begin](#) at 157

mph. Though Ike flooded most of Galveston and damaged university back-up generators, the Category 2 storm packed only 100 mph winds, which the lab buildings withstood.

“Hurricane Ike was devastating,” David Walker, director of UTMB’s Center for Biodefense and Emerging Infectious Diseases, told the Texas Medical Center magazine. “But there was one really good outcome, an unmitigated, beneficial effect: it proved that the GNL had been designed appropriately. It was the only building that was completely undamaged. Everyone was criticizing us for building a BSL4 lab on a barrier island that’s constantly hit by hurricanes, but this proved that we had designed our facility soundly and it could function safely.”

That did not soothe Kramer, however. “The University of Texas should consider locating its biohazards lab away from Galveston Island and out of harm’s way,” he told *The New York Times* six weeks later, on Oct. 28, 2008. “As destructive as it was, Hurricane Ike was only a Category 2 storm. A more powerful storm would pose an even greater threat of a biohazards release.”

Hurricane Harvey

That more powerful storm hit Texas nine years later, on Aug. 25. It was the first big test for the lab. Though Hurricane Harvey’s eye struck 200 miles away from Galveston in Rockport, Texas, it was a massive storm that stretched nearly the entire coastline from Mexico to Louisiana. It packed 130 mph winds as it hit the Texas coast, just 10 mph below GNL’s threshold. Amid apocalyptic scenes of flooding in Houston, reporters from both Fox and CNN said they could not reach Galveston. Little news was coming from the island, and not a word about the lab.

After placing a phone call to the lab that was not returned, I wrote an article on Aug. 30 raising concern. I cited Kramer’s remarks to *The New York Times* and those by Jim Blackburn, an environmental lawyer in Houston, who had told the paper that placing the lab on Galveston is “crazy, in my mind. I just find an amazing willingness among the people on the Texas coast to accept risks that a lot of people in the country would not accept.”

I interviewed Prof. Francis Boyle, who wrote the U.S. implementing legislation for the Biological Warfare Convention. He expressed concern for a power failure that could disrupt the containment system.

My piece prompted the university’s public relations office to issue its first statement, five days after the storm had hit. It said there had been no damage and admitted the statement had only been issued in reaction to my article (although the statement mischaracterized what my article had said.)

“There are inaccurate reports that the Galveston National Laboratory (GNL) at

The University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston may have been compromised because of Hurricane Harvey," the statement said. "These false reports do a disservice to all of the people in our community and the dedicated scientists and workers on staff at the GNL."

Two weeks after the storm, Kramer, the former Sierra Club official, spoke out again about the lab. He told me he had lost none of his concerns before and after Harvey hit. "My reaction when I first heard that the bio hazards lab had been located in Galveston was, 'Say what? That's crazy.' That's still my feeling," he said in an email. "I think that was a questionable decision."

Kramer said this time luck was on the lab's side. "Since Galveston did not get the direct hit & full force hurricane winds that Rockport got, the lab building did not face that issue, which would have been a major concern," he said. "Some buildings on the TX coast that were in the direct hit zone apparently did not meet their ratings for withstanding hurricane winds." Harvey packed 130 mph winds as it hit the Texas coast. This is just 10 mph below GNL's threshold, had it struck Galveston instead.

Kramer added: "It's hard to know what effect Hurricane Harvey had on the lab w/o more details coming from the lab."

The Director Speaks

Some of those details were offered by James LeDuc, the lab's director, in written responses to me eight days after I submitted questions on Aug. 31. LeDuc is a 23-year career Army officer in the medical research and development command. He's been based at the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research and the U.S. Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases, as well as in Central and South America. He was the Influenza Coordinator at Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta, and in the 1990s worked for the World Health Organization.

Whether the lab continues or shuts down its work as a hurricane approaches was a matter of confusion as LeDuc and the university P.R. officials made contradictory statements. The P.R. office said on Aug. 31 that work had continued "uninterrupted" throughout the storm, while LeDuc told the *Galveston Daily News* the same day that lab work had been halted as the storm drew near.

"Our statement that the facility continued operations without interruptions refers to the fact that the laboratory never lost power, there was never a breach in biocontainment, there were armed guards at their duty stations within the GNL throughout the storm, and there was a dedicated stay team of building engineers and operations staff on site within the GNL throughout the storm.

Thus, all safety and security operations continued without interruption," he said.

He said the lab "routinely uses the hurricane season for preventive maintenance and equipment upgrades. We dramatically reduce the amount of research in our highest level containment laboratories during the height of storm season in August and September."

The director said the "last of our major vaccine trials were completed, as designed, on August 14, 2017. BSL4 labs involved in these major trials had gone through the procedural decontamination, and no new major experiments are scheduled to begin in those labs until October when peak hurricane season is over. The decision to resume major experiments will be made at that time based on our assessment of the risk of future serious storms." (A new storm called Nate may form in the Gulf of Mexico later this week.)

LeDuc admitted that some work had indeed continued during Hurricane Harvey – "*in vitro* and small animal experiments that can be easily stopped as needed." He added, "During Hurricane Harvey conditions never necessitated stopping these studies and the laboratories were never completely shut down. This decision to not cease all work was made based on our risk assessment of the storm location, its strength and the likelihood of severe damage to the facility."

Though some work is scaled down or ended in hurricane season, the microbes are still "stored in freezers on site," according to the university's communications director. That storage depends on a continual flow of electricity and the structural integrity of the building, which could be at risk in winds exceeding 140 mph.

LeDuc told me the labs never lost electric power and that the back-up generators are not located on the roof, as the 2008 *New York Times* story indicated. "They are located above the flood plane, 26 feet up, and equivalent to the second floor of our building," he said, Two diesel fueled generators there are tested weekly and reserve fuel tanks are "full at all times" and can last for "several days," he said. After Hurricane Ike the tanks could be refueled within 24 to 48 hours after the storm passed.

Intensified Storms

"I fully realize that those responsible for the lab have no doubt taken precautions for hurricanes & other potential disasters, and let's hope they are adequate," Kramer said. "But obviously [Hurricane Harvey] was way beyond expectations and historical experience in so many ways. So that's why I am not totally comforted by efforts to prepare for hurricanes."

Indeed, as reassuring as are the measures LeDuc outlined, there is irrefutable evidence that climate change is intensifying hurricanes. *Michael Mann, a professor of atmospheric science at Pennsylvania State University, wrote in the Guardian in Britain that climate change had made Harvey more dangerous. He cited a combination of sea level rise, increased ocean temperatures and moisture in the air, as well as deeper levels of warm water in the Gulf of Mexico.*

On Sept. 6, the *Miami Herald* reported: “Hurricanes Harvey and now Irma became monster storms while swirling over two separate stretches of unusually warm ocean water, a feature that has reignited debate on climate change and the degree it is adding to the intensity of hurricanes. ... There is scientific consensus that a warming planet will produce bigger and more destructive hurricanes, with many scientists arguing that those impacts are already occurring.”

Hurricane Irma at one point packed 185 mph winds, making it the strongest storm ever recorded in the Atlantic. Had it not turned north after squeezing through the straits between Florida and Cuba it could have headed into the Gulf on a straight line towards the Texas coast, around about Galveston. Irma’s wind speeds reduced as it approached land, but Hurricane Marie hit Puerto Rico at 150 mph. The Galveston lab is built to withstand 140 mph winds.

LeDuc could not deny the impact of climate change. “It does concern me. I think anybody in their right mind has got to be concerned about the more intensity that we are seeing with storms,” LeDuc admitted to me. “Certainly in our location on the Gulf Coast we are always concerned about that.”

Galveston is Also Sinking

Another worry is that Galveston island is literally sinking. As a barrier island, it is made of sand and seashells built up by centuries of ocean waves 6,000 years ago. Its highest point is only 20 feet.

“These islands, common along the Gulf Coast and East Coast of the United States, are some of the most fragile and changing landforms on Earth. And they are particularly vulnerable to storms,” according to the website *Live Science* in an article headlined, “Ike Underscores Foolishness of Building on Barrier Islands.”

“Barrier islands like Galveston are particularly vulnerable to storm damage because they are made of sand, as opposed to the hard bedrock that underlies larger islands and the mainland,” the site said. The Galveston lab is secured with 120-foot pilings dug deep into – sand.

“They also tend to have very low elevations, making it easy for water to wash over and submerge the island,” *Live Science* said. “Many have questioned the

wisdom of choosing to build on and develop barrier islands, given their risks.”

Bob Morton, a geologist at the U.S. Geological Survey’s Center for Coastal and Watershed Studies in St. Petersburg, Florida, told the website: “Barrier islands are exposed to the open ocean, and the waves and storm surges generated by hurricanes. As a storm makes landfall they’re the ones that are going to receive the strongest winds and the highest wave actions.”

Clark Alexander, a marine geologist at Georgia’s Skidaway Institute of Oceanography, added: “From a safety standpoint, it’s silly. Because the lifespan of a typical house is something like 60 years. But if you live on a barrier island, you can’t guarantee you’ll have land under your house in 60 years. It’s trying to put something permanent in a place that’s very dynamic.”

A 2013 *Houston Chronicle* [article](#) pointed out that climate-change induced sea-level rise “may pose an even graver problem for Galveston than other coastal areas because the island is sinking at a faster rate than most other areas in the country, a condition known as subsidence.”

Val Marmillion, managing director of America’s Wetland Foundation, told the paper erosion and loss of protective wetlands could shrink Galveston by a third within 30 years.

“The barrier islands are in a very serious situation in all the Gulf Coast states,” Marmillion said. “Galveston, because it is so heavily populated, may be one of the more vulnerable islands we have.”

The Trouble with the Labs

Questions about the safety of biocontainment labs are not only about Galveston. They are nationwide, as a major [investigation](#) by *USA Today* showed in 2015:

“Vials of bio-terror bacteria have gone missing. Lab mice infected with deadly viruses have escaped, and wild rodents have been found making nests with research waste. Cattle infected in a university’s vaccine experiments were repeatedly sent to slaughter and their meat sold for human consumption. Gear meant to protect lab workers from lethal viruses such as Ebola and bird flu has failed, repeatedly.

“A USA TODAY Network investigation reveals that hundreds of lab mistakes, safety violations and near-miss incidents have occurred in biological laboratories coast to coast in recent years, putting scientists, their colleagues and sometimes even the public at risk.

“Oversight of biological research labs is fragmented, often secretive and

largely self-policing, the investigation found. And even when research facilities commit the most egregious safety or security breaches – as more than 100 labs have – federal regulators keep their names secret.

“Of particular concern are mishaps occurring at institutions working with the world’s most dangerous pathogens in biosafety level 3 and 4 labs – the two highest levels of containment that have proliferated since the 9/11 terror attacks in 2001. Yet there is no publicly available list of these labs, and the scope of their research and safety records are largely unknown to most state health departments charged with responding to disease outbreaks. Even the federal government doesn’t know where they all are, the Government Accountability Office has warned for years.

“High-profile lab accidents last year with anthrax, Ebola and bird flu at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the discovery of forgotten vials of deadly smallpox virus at the National Institutes of Health raised widespread concerns about lab safety and security nationwide and whether current oversight is adequate to protect workers and the public. ...”

The investigation showed that there are biocontainment labs in all 50 states, including in Manhattan and the District of Columbia.

A year earlier, the *Houston Chronicle* reported that there are no federal guidelines for such labs and no regulatory agency.

“The U.S. Government Accountability Office ... released a study that repeated its findings last year that there is still no government agency responsible for overseeing the safety of some 400 laboratories nationwide authorized to handle hazardous biological material,” the *Chronicle* reported. “The study also found that such laboratories are built without regard for need or assessment of risk and that no national standards exist for their construction and operations.”

In 2013, the Galveston lab lost a vial of a potential bioterror agent and believes it was destroyed. The incident had to be reported to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta.

LeDuc told me in the phone interview that the Galveston lab follows National Institute of Health guidelines. He said federal inspectors last visited the lab in July and stayed eight days.

The *USA Today* investigation also raised the troubling issue of “gain of function” manipulation of microbes, that is, the purposeful fortifying of the viruses by some biocontainment labs.

“At a few labs, experiments have been done with strains of flu and other viruses

purposely made to be more dangerous in studies that seek to understand how they might mutate naturally. White House science advisers called for a temporary halt of that kind of 'gain of function' research last fall while expert scientific panels spend the next year studying its risks and benefits," the paper reported.

Le Duc told me in the phone interview that there is no gain of function work done in Galveston although it has been restarted at other labs. He also said no classified research is conducted at the GNL and none of the scientists working there need security clearances.

How the Media Misplayed It

The excellent reporting by *USAToday* and the *Chronicle* are exceptions when it comes to media scrutiny of biocontainment labs. This became clear in the case of Galveston. The lab made no statement at all about its condition after Harvey hit for five days and only after my first story was published. LeDuc's first answers came eight days after that and only after my follow-up story. Given the legitimate concerns about the lab's location, perhaps a proactive, rather than a reactive response to the public, is warranted.

Sam Husseini, a journalist and communications director for the Institute for Public Accuracy, tweeted: ""Seems to me the lab's strategy is to lay low and not get media in such a situation bc if it did people would question the wisdom of it."

In contrast to Galveston, two nuclear power plants in South Florida took a proactive approach, declaring themselves ready in advance of Hurricane Irma in mid-September.

Kramer believes the lab's lack of transparency may be part of a culture of secrecy that's emerged from 9/11. "The focus on concern about 'terrorism' and 'homeland security' is eroding our ability to know what is going on that might affect our well-being," he told me. "It is also unfortunately sometimes a convenient excuse for not being forthcoming with the public about operations and risks." The lab's primary work is bio-defense.

LeDuc, however, defended the lab's reactive public relations strategy. "I am satisfied with the way we handled communications with the public," he said.

When I pressed him on whether the lab should have been more proactive, he said he communicated with government agencies, rather than with the public. He'd spoken with the Department of Homeland Security, the White House's Office of Science and Technology Policy and with the Health and Human Services' assistant secretary for preparedness.

“They all asked how we were doing and we assured everybody that we were fine,” he said. He assured everybody but the public, that is.

“We are part of the UTMB campus and the campus was fully operational through the storm and our communications guys were answering the phones,” he said. “I think our strategies, our activities were appropriate,” he said, as reactive as they were.

When I pressed LeDuc about the website not having posted a statement, he responded, “The laboratory is built to withstand hurricanes and it proved its worth during Hurricane Ike. We never even lost power.” He did admit the lab’s website needed improvement and would be upgraded.

When authorities are not forthcoming, it has traditionally been the role of the press to hold them to account. But in this instance we have had a textbook case of how corporate control of the media can neuter journalism.

Since the lab tried not to draw attention to itself as Hurricane Harvey approached, and issued no statements until days after it struck, it was the press’ job to report the story. This was a significant moment for the lab: the first major hurricane since it opened its doors in November 2008 amid legitimate public concerns.

The response to my report was a Twitter attack on me – mainly by other journalists. John Wayne Ferguson, a reporter from the local *Galveston Daily News*, demanded I print a correction. But he didn’t respond when I asked him what facts needed to be corrected. When I protested that a story raising concern for the lab was responsible, he answered, “Bullshit.”

A reporter from the *Columbus Dispatch* chastised me for calling for local coverage: “What are they supposed to write? All’s well at the lab?”

When Hurricane Matthew threatened NASA’s Kennedy Space Station on Cape Canaveral in 2016, there were a slew of stories raising concern before the storm. Afterward, there were stories that the Cape had dodged a bullet with only minimal damage. In other words, “all’s well” at the space station. Before Hurricane Irma hit Florida in mid-September there were again stories about potential danger to Cape Canaveral.

Though the Cape escaped danger both times, the coverage was warranted. Had there been significant damage to an evacuated space station it would have cost the U.S. taxpayer, and perhaps the U.S. some prestige. But it would not have threatened lives, as significant damage could at the Galveston lab.

Flacking for the Lab

The existence of a controversial lab in the backyard of a small paper like the *Galveston Daily News* in another era would have been a hot story that its editors would have zoomed in on. But that was an era of journalism when defending the community against powerful and often unaccountable institutions was an editorial priority.

Today, too many journalists, driven by careerism, identify with the powerful people they cover, rather than with the interests of their readers. The bigger the stake the journalist has or aspires to have in the corporate system the more she or he will defend it. Self-interest, not public interest, becomes the motivating factor. A careerist does not rock the boat. A journalist who doesn't rock the boat has no business being a journalist.

The *Galveston Daily News* wrote nothing about the lab until six days later when it ran a hit piece against me titled, "Rumor Central." But it went further. Both the local and national media worked with the university's communications office to silence the story. It is an illustration of who is winning the long-running battle between public relations and the press.

My first article raising concern was published on *Consortiumnews*, the *Huffington Post* and in the pages of the *Johannesburg Star*, the *Cape Argus* and the *Pretoria News* in South Africa. The university's communications office and Ferguson of the *Daily News* teamed up to try to get the article retracted. As Hussein tweeted: "Reporters like [@johnwferguson](#) should not be flacking for the lab. It was legit to raise concerns; the lab should give public facts."

Christopher Gonzalez Smith of the communications office posted a readers' comment under the *Consortiumnews* [article](#) that said: "This story is not correct. There was no breach of any sort during the storm. The GNL had no damage or loss of either physical or biological security. "

He apparently sent the same message to my editor in South Africa, who called it out for the lie that it is. He wrote me, "We never said there was a breach, but only fears of a breach." My editor refused to retract the article and asked for a follow-up story.

Of the three places the article was published, only *The Huffington Post* caved to the pressure. An editor there broke a newsroom rule by pulling the story without first contacting the writer. She simply informed me after the fact, with the reasons that LeDuc made a statement (only in reaction to my piece), that the lab was safe, and that no other news organization had the story. I told her the reason no one else had the story was because it was exclusive. I've had colleagues over the years tell me the same thing: their editors rejected stories because the rest of the media herd didn't have it.

My appeals to *The Huffington Post* to restore the article because it contained no factual errors, no libel and no plagiarism were met with no response. It had a knock-on effect. *Esquire* magazine had linked to my *Huffington Post* article in a story about environmental hazards in Texas during the storm. Ferguson, ostensibly a reporter, did the lab's work by complaining to *Esquire* about my piece. The magazine gave in when they saw *The Huffington Post* retraction and published a clarification, thanking Ferguson by name and promising to do a better job in the future.

I contacted the *Esquire* writer, Charles Pierce, explaining that neither *Consortiumnews*, nor the *Johannesburg Star* and the other South African papers had retracted. *The Huffington Post* was the odd one out. I told him he'd been right the first time to link to my piece and asked that the clarification be removed. Pierce totally ignored me, uninterested in the damage his mistaken clarification had done.

The Oregonian also published a piece about the retracted article, quoting the *Huffington Post* editor who nixed my story. "Galveston lab that houses deadly airborne viruses not in danger from flood; HuffPost pulls fear-raising story," was the headline.

In naming me in the article, the reporter, Douglas Perry, broke two of the most basic rules of journalism: one, there are two sides to a story, and two, if you name someone in an article, especially negatively, you need to try to contact that person for comment. The reporter did neither. He also falsely reported that my quotes from Boyle had come from 2008, when they came from a current interview, giving the false impression that the concerns were old.

I asked Perry why he deemed the *Huffington Post*'s voice in his story the only valid one? In journalism that favors the powerful, the institution's voice is heard and rarely the individual contesting it. His article had a serious factual error and gave only one side of the story but it smeared me by name for an article I wrote with no errors, and which was balanced with the lab's stated hurricane precautions spelled out. Eventually Perry corrected the Boyle quote and updated his story with a quote from me, not inserted into the body of the article but tagged to the end:

Joe Lauria responds: "I wrote the same story for the *Johannesburg Star* and two other South African papers, as well as for *Consortiumnews.com*, and only the *Huffington Post* wrongly retracted it, apparently based on a false statement from a lab spokesman who said my article had reported a breach had occurred. My story never reported that. The concerns for a lab in a hurricane zone are real and ongoing."

Indeed, as Kramer said, despite the belated reassurances of LeDuc about the precautions taken, the placement of the lab with uncertain federal oversight on an endangered barrier island remains questionable, especially as storms of greater than 140 mph winds are more possible than ever in this dire age of climate change.

Joe Lauria is a veteran foreign-affairs journalist. He has written for the Boston Globe, the Sunday Times of London and the Wall Street Journal among other newspapers. He is the author of “How I Lost By Hillary Clinton” published by OR Books. He can be reached at joelauria@gmail.com and followed on Twitter at [@unjoe](https://twitter.com/unjoe).
