

# 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.**

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# As Trump Fumes, Puerto Rico Struggles

Angered by criticism from desperate U.S. citizens in Puerto Rico, President Trump lashed out with threats to remove federal rescue and recovery personnel – even as the crisis grows worse, as Dennis J Bernstein reports.

By Dennis J Bernstein

Some three weeks after Hurricane Maria shredded Puerto Rico, the situation on the U.S. island territory remains grave with only about 10 percent of Puerto Rico's residents having electricity, according to the Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority. Meanwhile, thousands of people remain in packed shelters in San Juan.

Health and public officials now worry about a developing public health crisis with outbreaks of several deadly water and airborne diseases that have not plagued the island for years, including four confirmed cases of Leptospirosis, a rat urine-borne disease that can be deadly. The death toll has risen to about 50 although a precise count is difficult given the lack of telephone service in remote areas.

On Oct. 11, I spoke with Attorney and Human Rights Activist Judith Berkan about the ongoing rescue and recovery, and the major failures on the part of the Trump Administration to deal with a very serious ongoing life and death situation.

Dennis Bernstein: Tell us about your day today. You were delivering generators?

Judith Berkan: People are organizing here like crazy, given the absence of effective official relief. We went out into the countryside today to deliver a generator, flashlights and batteries.

Dennis Bernstein: Before we get into the government failure, tell us about the situation on the ground and the other kinds of actions taken by people who obviously realize that there is racism at play and the federal government is out of town.

Judith Berkan: In some ways it has gotten a little worse than when we spoke last week. The electrical power, which was beginning to come on at a very slow rate, has now basically collapsed again. Virtually no one has power.

The other thing that has changed is that we are beginning to see in concrete ways a public health crisis developing. We have four confirmed cases of Leptospirosis, a rat urine-borne disease you get from being exposed to water or mud and which must be treated very early or it is fatal. About seven other cases have been identified in four island towns. We also have mosquito-borne diseases

and stagnant waters are breeding grounds for mosquitoes.

We are experiencing major problems with our hospitals. A lot of them no longer have electrical power. Everything we anticipated happening is beginning to happen. People cannot get fresh food. Asthma and other respiratory diseases are rampant. People are dying in nursery homes with limited access to power. They are rationing dialysis at most hospitals.

Apparently there is some kind of official narrative being heard in the United States that things are vastly improved, that the federal and state response has been good. This is not at all the case. The long-term effects of this storm are going to be worse than the storm itself. It is a lot worse in the countryside than it is here in San Juan, and it has been from the beginning. About half the island now has water, but the water is unsafe for drinking. Health officials are telling people to boil the water before drinking it, but no one has electricity!

There is no strategic planning and there is a sense of total chaos in coordination of services, whether it is the Red Cross or FEMA or the Coast Guard. Nobody seems to know who is supposed to do what. It is a devastating situation and I believe it is going to get worse before it gets better.

Dennis Bernstein: On the island of Vieques, people are concerned that toxins there are being scattered around by the storms.

Judith Berkan: Yes, on the offshore islands the situation is even worse. In 1942 and 1943 the US expropriated the islands and continued to bomb Vieques until 2003. There is so much toxic material still in the ground water and one of the problems with the lack of sanitation is that the toxins tend to propagate.

Another issue is that we have had extraordinarily heavy rains in the last three days, which has caused flooding because the waterways are full of debris. There hasn't been a cleanup since Irma.

Dennis Bernstein: For a brief moment there seemed to be some hope with the suspension of the Jones Act.

Judith Berkan: The Jones Act was a 1920's statute that was passed largely to benefit the US shipping industry. What it says is that, if you are going to ship anything from US ports to Puerto Rico, you have to do it on US flag ships staffed by US crews. This makes everything much more expensive in Puerto Rico. There are some relief groups in the States who made contact with foreign flag ships to send supplies down here but cannot anymore.

Today it was reported that Trump has proposed to Congress a \$4.9 billion loan to Puerto Rico. This is quite remarkable because Puerto Rico is in a desperate

situation with our debt and all we need now is to get more into debt! Right now there is talk that the Puerto Rican government will not be able to meet any payments after October.

Dennis Bernstein: Tell us something about the people's reaction to this devastating crisis.

Judith Berkan: People are taking collective actions which are real models for what Puerto Rico may look like in the future, as a self-sustaining country rather than a dependant colony. You see it in casual ways, with neighbors coming with machetes to help other neighbors, people checking up on each other, on the elderly.

But you also see a lot of new organizational activity. It is collective activity to make sure that people's needs are met: delivering generators, delivering water, doing censuses of people's needs, taking people out of dangerous situations, making sure they get medical care. It is a very egalitarian and democratic way of doing things.

There are some agricultural collectives who are trying to figure out how to get fresh food out to people. There are medical collectives offering free medical services. There is a marvelous sense of community. You walk around the streets and talk to strangers, you figure out what people's needs are, you share experiences.

Before this there had been a gradual process of more alienation, more dependence on electronic devices, on fossil fuels. All that served to break with what was remarkable about Puerto Rican society, which was its sense of collective well-being.

We know we cannot rely on the government anymore. We used to demand things of the government but at this point we don't expect anything. In Washington, we currently have a particularly racist government in power. But there is a long history of colonial relationship in which all economic structure was developed to meet the needs of imperial power. It has been exacerbated with the current administration and there is clearly no interest in making sure the most basic needs are met.

Dennis Bernstein: We now have FEMA picking up where the president left off, in terms of insulting the mayor of San Juan and other local politicians, blaming you and making believe that the oppressed are responsible.

Judith Berkan: And you have to understand that our market system is based on the US market system and we pay for services like FEMA. Our current statehood government is trying to paint a rosy picture in order to curry favor with the

administration, which is boasting about how great conditions are in Puerto Rico.

In some ways we are making progress, but the entire island is basically without power. Right now the official death count is 44 and there are 113 people still missing. There has been a spike in suicides. The situation is dire, people are suffering.

**Dennis J Bernstein is a host of “Flashpoints” on the Pacifica radio network and the author of Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom. You can access the audio archives at www.flashpoints.net.**

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## Puerto Rico’s Continuing Health Crisis

President Trump and his team stress the positive about their response to Hurricane Maria’s devastation of Puerto Rico, but people are dying because the island’s health care system remains crippled, reports Dennis J Bernstein.

By Dennis J Bernstein

More than two-and-a-half weeks after Hurricane Maria devastated Puerto Rico, the U.S. territory continues to face a humanitarian crisis with people lacking basic needs, such as food, clean water, electricity and medical supplies. Doctors say they don’t have what they need to save lives, with unnecessary deaths occurring especially among the elderly, the infirm and those on respirators and other kinds of electronic life support systems.

The island’s healthcare system remains hobbled with about 80 percent of the island without electricity and cell phone service. Many residents also lack potable water.

Meanwhile, residents of the island of Vieques, which was used as a bombing range by the U.S. military for decades, face the added fear of the toxic military waste that has been churned up and may have been spread around and released into the local environment by the high winds and heavy rains from the hurricane.

I spoke on Oct. 6 with Attorney and Human Rights Activist Judith Berkan, who has lived in San Juan for decades, about the tragic and deadly situation that remains for tens of thousands of Puerto Ricans.

Dennis Bernstein: First of all, what can you tell us about the aid situation?

Judith Berkan: The situation continues to be extraordinarily bad. The first week

or week and a half after the storm there was basically no distribution of aid. Communities, however, were coming together, displaying typical Puerto Rican solidarity.

But we need additional aid. We need things like the FEMA tents, which have arrived on the island but have not been distributed. Many people have lost their homes, but even those who still have their homes cannot stay there because the aid is not there. It is really a problem of distribution. There are communities that have never seen a federal person yet.

Although the water has receded in most parts of San Juan, there is an extraordinary amount of debris around and a large number of mosquitoes, which has created a public health problem. Only about ten percent of the population have electricity. In mountain communities there is absolutely no distribution. It is clear that there has not been a commitment to really deal with this crisis.

There have been stories about there being 9,000 containers at the port a couple days ago. Some of that has gotten out, not a lot. It is going to FEMA distribution centers and then from there to get to the community it really depends on community initiative.

Dennis Bernstein: Could you describe for us everyday life there on the island?

Judith Berkan: When you try to communicate with someone, you never know if you are getting through. The first few days, if you wanted to get gas you had to wait in line for eight or ten hours. The ATM machines are still pretty hard to get to. Everything takes ten times longer. People in isolated areas have to walk for hours to get to a grocery store and when you get there, there is not a lot available. The gas problem has been considerably resolved.

Health issues are dramatic. The hospitals don't have diesel for their generators, you can't get prescriptions filled. There is still fecal matter in the water in people's homes. It is a pretty dire existence and the long-term health effects are going to be dramatic.

Dennis Bernstein: Could you talk a little about President Trump's latest insult to the Puerto Rican people?

Judith Berkan: It was racist and arrogant. It is very hard to describe how that was received in Puerto Rico. It started with his tweet that the Puerto Rican people were just waiting for things to be done for them. Then he comes here and says this is not a real catastrophe. When you compare the federal response to that in Florida and Texas, it is hard not to see racism on the part of the government.



Dennis Bernstein: Do the people there have any say in how the island will be reconstructed?

Judith Berkan: For a long time now, we have been resisting the gentrification of the entire island and an economic model designed for the pleasure of outsiders. We need people in the United States on a more macro level to support our community efforts to resist gentrification.

We are very afraid that relief money will go toward policies of privatization and displacement of people from their ancestral homes. We are demanding from the federal government more relief effort and more control of this relief by the people of Puerto Rico.

For the last year we have been under the yoke of the Fiscal Control Board, which has the power to reverse fiscal decisions made by the government. For example, the decision as to whether we should pay off a bondholder or make sure a school stays open. Another power of the board is infrastructure projects. They locate public assets, whether they be forests or buildings, and put them up for sale.

Our great fear now is that the money that is coming in will not be used for the benefit of the Puerto Rican people but to contribute to this privatization model.

Dennis Bernstein: I would like to get your response to the confrontation between the mayor of San Juan and President Trump.

Judith Berkan: The mayor did the right thing in focusing attention on what was really going on here. What she was saying was what we were all feeling. And the response from Trump was both racist and misogynist. Here was a small but strong Latina woman basically speaking truth to power and the response was outrageous and hurtful. While you may hear of Puerto Rican politicians who are Democrats or Republicans, the distinction is irrelevant to local politics. This is not a partisan maneuver against Trump.

Dennis Bernstein: As someone who would like to see the island be for the people, what would you like to see happen in the short run and then long-term?

Judith Berkan: I have lived in Puerto Rico for forty years. This is an incredible people. If we organize on a community level, this could be a new beginning for us. We can reconstruct but the funds have to be here and we have to be in control. We have an opportunity to redirect our usage of land, to work toward community land ownership. We must redirect our use of power sources, moving from coal to solar power.

Beyond that, we have to take the yoke of colonialism off our backs, whether that

means independence or federation with other Caribbean states. As the economic models have been imposed through the Caribbean, they have devastated the region. Decisions have to be based on the needs of the Puerto Rican people rather than the needs of colonial power.

We are very thankful here for the outpouring of support. We really appreciate that people are paying attention to Puerto Rico. This is a long, ongoing struggle and it will continue for many years to come. It is important to have your support.

**Dennis J Bernstein is a host of “Flashpoints” on the Pacifica radio network and the author of Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom. You can access the audio archives at www.flashpoints.net.**

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## The Spiraling Crisis of Puerto Rico

Puerto Rico's infrastructure, which already faced severe pressures because of the U.S. territory's huge debt and demands from its creditor, has now been devastated by Hurricane Maria, as Dennis J Bernstein reports.

By Dennis J Bernstein

Though President Trump bragged about the relatively low death toll from Hurricane Maria – 16 at the time of his visit on Tuesday – the number soon jumped to 34 and was expected to rise much more when isolated hospitals could finally report in.

Many of the island's 59 hospitals were cut off from power and half the island's 3.4 million inhabitants lacked safe drinking water. The continuing crisis reflected a slow response from the federal government.

Puerto Rican Jewish feminist writer, poet, and activist Aurora Levins Morales is a nationally known Puerto activist. In the following interview, Morales expressed her outrage at Trump's racist response to the Puerto Rican hurricane disaster.

Morales is the author of *Medicine Stories*, *Remedios: Stories of Earth and Iron from the History of Puertorriqueñas*, and *Kindling: Writings On the Body*, and co-authored two books with her mother, Rosario Morales.

She created the Vehicle for Change project to research, design, fund and build her chemically accessible mobile home, and is currently traveling around the

United States writing about the confluence of ecology, health and social justice struggles for her radio blog Letters from Earth, broadcast on Flashpoints on Pacifica Radio. She writes and performs with Sins Invalid, a Bay Area disability justice performance project. I spoke to Morales on October 2.

Dennis Bernstein: Aurora Levins Morales has been watching the situation very closely. This is your homeland and you must be heartbroken.

Aurora Levins Morales: I am devastated. All of us are desperate for information and there is very little to be had. Most of the island is still out of communication. My home is in a remote mountainous area in the west of the island that has received no help yet at all. Today I wrote a poem, which for me is the clearest way to express what is going on right now. It is called *Rumors*:

### Rumors

Someone posted a message about the bees, how they search, frantically, everywhere, for the flowers that are gone. They said to put out bowls of sugar water for them, so the bees don't all die, but no one has sugar, and no one has water.

Someone posted a message from Carrizales, which is just ten buried curves from my home. It said, "The roads into town are broken. We can't get to the stores. We have no food." That was days ago.

There are seven springs on my family's land. I am hoping a few people with machetes can open a path so everyone can drink. I hope there are still springs.

Someone posted an article that said that the morgues are so full, that there isn't room for one more body, that people are burying their dead themselves, and the governor is still saying that there are only seventeen dead.

Someone posted about the father of a former mayor who died because not all his connections could get him the oxygen he needed.

Someone said people were eating the spoiled food from their dead refrigerators because there was nothing else, and I thought about the smell, of having to hold their noses to swallow it, and about having food poisoning, having diarrhea and vomiting, without water to drink or wash in.

I remember what don Luis heard from his father after San Ciriaco, 1899, how the people dug up the roots of banana plants because there was nothing else to eat, that they must taste of nothing but water and dirt. I remember fifty years ago, how the poorest people crept onto other people's land to dig up malanga. I whisper: Dig. Don't give up. Keep digging.

Someone posted pictures, ten buried curves in the other direction from my home, and it looked like November in New England, bare branches, wind burnt brown leaves. It looked like a war zone, with huge bomb sized holes in concrete buildings, and the walls missing. The people who took the pictures could only get so far along that road. They didn't make it to where my people are.

Someone said the warehouses are full and our hands are empty. Someone posted that they're dividing each minimal packet of FEMA food into four. A packet of apple sauce. A cracker. A sip of water. Soon they'll just hand out pictures of food. Let them eat labels.

Whenever they can, the people post picture after picture of themselves hauling broken trees, clearing rubble, carrying each other on their backs, floating each other through contaminated flood waters to dry land, sharing the last of the food.

Here in the far away, we are all tilted, off balance, leaning with our whole selves toward what we love. We post picture after picture of all the boxes we have packed for them, all the money we sent, all the clothes, diapers, medicine, food that went to sit in the warehouses. We keep posting the names of our silences, all the places we have left our unanswered messages.

Without electricity, maybe they don't know that the man who calls himself president thinks Puerto Ricans sit around waiting, want everything done for us, that he thinks we're lazy. If they did, maybe their anger would light up the night and start the generators.

It was announced that satellite phones would be airdropped to all the mayors, but they weren't. Nobody knows what's going on. Journalists arrive in mud soaked towns and they are the first to get there. The people gather around them asking, Are you FEMA? Eleven days and nobody else has come. No helicopters. No trucks. Only wind.

There was a rumor that the National Guard had just left for Maricao that afternoon, to open the roads, and carry in supplies, but it kept being posted on different days, and there is not a single picture of a national guard giving a bottle of water or a sandwich to anyone in Maricao, so I don't believe it.

There are people peering over the horizon into next week or the week after and saying the words famine and epidemic. An expert said that the water through which people wade, where children without houses play, is full of sewage. I think cholera and try not to inhale.

The mayor of San Juan, who has waded chest deep through her flooded streets, waded through the official sewage pouring from the presidential mouth says this

amounts to genocide.

Someone said, we are no longer dying of hurricane. We are dying of colony.

There was a rumor that no one can sleep anymore, that we are all awake, finally awake. There was a rumor that it was about to be over. There was a rumor that all that raging brown water filled the bank vaults and turned their contracts into pulp, that resignation was disintegrating everywhere. I heard that floods of chemically contaminated runoff erased their hard drives and made the ink run on the articles of subjugation. There was a rumor that people are refusing to put one single cinder block onto another to rebuild our misery. There was a rumor, I just heard it, that enough is finally enough. I heard that people are peering over the horizon into next week, or the week after, and saying the words libre, libre, libre y soberana.

Dennis Bernstein: Puerto Rico is the quintessential case of environmental racism. For half a century it was used as a bombing target of the US military. Now we have the military saying this is a difficult task and we don't know what to do on this island that we have been occupying forever. Talk about the military response and also about the mayor versus Trump.

Aurora Levins Morales: How can the US military, the largest and most powerful in the world, have the gall to say that they face a challenge in airlifting diesel fuel for hospital generators, where people are dying because they cannot refrigerate insulin, they cannot run dialysis machines, they cannot run respirators?

Carmen Yulin is absolutely right that this is genocidal. A few days after the hurricane she was saying that we may not be able to get to everyone, and now she is saying we don't even know how to begin counting the dead. The inability of aid to reach people is so cynical.

And then to have the so-called creditors of this entirely fraudulent debt saying, "Well, they have some bills to pay before we can help them." Put aside all of the colonial pillage of our country over 119 years by the United States and just look at the Jones Act, which restricts Puerto Rico to receiving goods only on ships flying a US flag, and at double the cost. That is millions and millions of dollars that we have been overcharged since 1920, which would easily pay off the so-called debt in a minute.

It is so cynical to describe this situation as Puerto Rico being in debt to Wall Street. They have been extracting and extracting with no pretense of putting anything back in. Everywhere you go there are signs of coffee farms up for sale. People cannot make a living from the agriculture. They are pressured

economically and politically to grow cash crops. We import 80% of what we eat and there is only about two weeks of reserves ever on the island. So the island is always hovering on the brink of famine.

Dennis Bernstein: This is what Trump said about the mayor of Puerto Rico: "Such poor leadership ability by the mayor of San Juan and others in Puerto Rico who are not able to get their workers to help and want everything to be done for them, where it should be a community effort. 10,000 federal workers are now on the island doing a fantastic job. The mayor of San Juan, who was very complimentary only a few days ago, has been told by the Democrats that you must be nasty to Trump."

Aurora Levins Morales: This is the story that gets told about colonized and oppressed people across time. This is what slaveholders said about the enslaved: lazy, ungrateful, can't get it together, that's why they're slaves. People are doing an amazing job in Puerto Rico of organizing at the community level.

Activists all over the island are out there making sure people are okay. Yes, we have a flaming racist in the White House, but remember that the PROMESA Act came into being under Obama. That was a great big present to Wall Street. This was the so-called "rescue" of Puerto Rico which took over our economy entirely and put it in the hands of an appointed board of fiscal control that can override any decision of our elected government.

They are basically selling off all of our public assets and gutting all of our government services in order to pay a fraudulent debt to predatory lenders on Wall Street. It is a massive armed robbery of our people. Now the indignation of the Puerto Rican people has reached a fever pitch. People are demanding that the PROMESA Act as well as the Jones Act be revoked right now, that the debt be cancelled and that we be given a whole lot of money to rebuild, or our country is dead. There is no way to recover without that.

The way in which the story is told determines how people respond. This is being portrayed as a natural disaster when it is really a result of climate violence. Our country is being portrayed as incompetent when in reality we are actively being denied help.

It reminds me of the differences in how the Haitian earthquake was covered in the US media and in the Latin American leftist media. The American media made it sound like those Haitians died because they just don't know how to build good houses. Not that Haiti has been under economic attack in revenge for the slave uprising two hundred years ago. The left Latin American countries are saying, we have a debt to Haiti because of what they did for all of us.

It is the same narrative with Puerto Rico, that people are just sitting around waiting to be rescued. Nobody is sitting and waiting for anything.

Dennis J Bernstein is a host of “Flashpoints” on the Pacifica radio network and the author of Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom. You can access the audio archives at www.flashpoints.net.

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## 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.

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## **America Not Immune from Chaos**

“Exceptional” America views itself as largely immune from devastating storms and the violence that infect much of the world, but recent weeks show that there is no protection against natural and human catastrophes, writes Ann Wright.

By Ann Wright

Over the past two months – between natural disasters and the actions of a heavily armed gunman firing from a high-rise hotel – citizens of the United States have faced the kind of havoc and violence that people in other parts of the world have been enduring routinely.

Sunday night's mass shooting in Las Vegas killed 59 and left more than 500 wounded. In previous weeks, American citizens have faced loss of life and massive property damage in Puerto Rico, Florida, Texas, and the U.S. Virgin Islands from Hurricanes Maria, Irma and Harvey.

Of course, other places in the Caribbean suffered their own devastating blows from these major hurricanes: Cuba, Barbuda, Dominica, Antigua, British Virgin Islands, Turks and Caicos, British Virgin Island, St. Martin, Monserrat, Guadeloupe, St. Kitts and Nevis.

In other parts of the world, one-third of Bangladesh has been under water from monsoon rains; parts of Nigeria have been flooded; Mexico has endured killer earthquakes.

And then there is the politically driven violence, such as is occurring in Burma/Myanmar with Rahingya villages burned, thousands murdered, and over 400,000 people fleeing into Bangladesh to escape Buddhist Burmese/Myanmar military attacks.

There is also the seemingly endless devastation from wars waged or encouraged by U.S. policymakers. People in Afghanistan have been enduring war and destruction for 16 years; in Iraq for 13 years; and in Syria for five years.

Afghan, Pakistani, Somali, Iraqi, Syrian and Yemeni civilians have been murdered by U.S. killer drones whose pilots, ironically, are trained 60 miles from Las Vegas, raining hellfire missiles from above in the same sort of sudden violence as people in Las Vegas suffered Sunday night.

Americans are now face-to-face with the human and environmental violence that many parts of the world have experienced albeit with those stories confined to briefs packages on the back pages of U.S. newspapers.

So, in just the past month or so, Americans have been shocked by the ravages of gun violence inflicted by a committed sniper and the violence of nature's environmental reaction to global warming made worse by careless human behavior releasing carbon dioxide and other pollutants into the atmosphere.

U.S. wars killing people around the world and the glorification of this

organized violence as an answer to geopolitical problems can't help but influence the thinking of some troubled individuals who may see random violence as the answer to their own personal problems. Easy access to guns in the United States is simply out of control.

Yet, corporate lobbying and political pressures have encouraged Congress and the Trump administration to deny both the connection between the accessibility of powerful weapons and mass shootings and between the burning of fossil fuels and global warming.

But it turns out that this refusal to face difficult realities will not shield Americans from horrific consequences. America will not be "exceptional" in the sense of having special exemption from the destructive forces unleashed upon the world whether by war and violence or by environmental degradation.

**Ann Wright was in the US Army/Army Reserves for 29 years and retired as a Colonel. She was a U.S. diplomat for 16 years and served in U.S. Embassies in Nicaragua, Grenada, Somalia, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Micronesia, Afghanistan and Mongolia. She resigned from the US government in March 2003 in opposition to the US war on Iraq.**

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## 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 Hussein, 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.**

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## Trump's Hurt Feelings over Puerto Rico

President Trump bristled at criticism of his administration's slow response to the disaster that Hurricane Maria inflicted on Puerto Rico, lashing out on Twitter against San Juan's frontline mayor, report Dennis J Bernstein and Randy Credico.

By Dennis J Bernstein and Randy Credico

The federal response to Hurricane Maria's devastation of Puerto Rico has come under harsh criticism, including President Trump's delay in even recognizing the extent of the catastrophe and then his foisting blame on San Juan Mayor Carmen Yulin Cruz Soto, who literally has been waist-deep in working against the flood.

"We are dying, and you are killing us with the inefficiency and the bureaucracy," Mayor Cruz said Friday at a news conference, directed at Trump. As a contrast to the undelivered promise of federal aid, she lauded the donations from major corporations, including 200,000 pounds of food donated by Goya.

In response, Trump angrily blamed the Mayor for the failure to organize and activate a clean-up on the local level. "Such poor leadership ability by the Mayor of San Juan, and others in Puerto Rico, who are not able to get their workers to help. They ... want everything to be done for them when it should be a community effort. 10,000 Federal workers now on Island doing a fantastic job. ... The Mayor of San Juan, who was very complimentary only a few days ago, has now been told by the Democrats that you must be nasty to Trump."

The Trump administration's slow response to the Puerto Rico clean-up is being compared to the breakdown in President George W. Bush's response after Hurricane Katrina inundated New Orleans in 2005.

Meanwhile, the island is still struggling to meet even basic needs, with the electric grid for the entire island hobbled and cell phone service barely operating, leaving many residents unable to reach emergency workers.

"This is what we got last night," Mayor Cruz said on Friday at the press conference: "four pallets of water, three pallets of meals and 12 pallets of infant food – which I gave to the people. ... I cannot fathom the thought that the greatest nation in the world cannot figure out logistics for a small island of 100 miles by 35 miles," she said.

"If we don't get the food and the water into people's hands, we are going to see something close to a genocide. ... I am asking the president of the United States to make sure somebody is in charge that is up to the task of saving lives," Cruz said. Trump announced that he plans to visit Puerto Rico this week.

I spoke late Friday with Puerto Rican-born New York State Assemblyman Jose Rivera. Rivera, 80, is deeply engaged in seeing that the rescue and clean up in the wake of Maria picks up speed. Rivera is outraged at Trump's lack of action and his attack on those at ground zero trying to save lives. I also reached frontline independent rescue worker, Ronald Rosario, in San Juan. Rosario said the situation is "absolutely dire."

Dennis Bernstein: Welcome Assemblyman Jose Rivera, joining us from the State Capitol in Albany New York, and Ronald Rosario, who joins us live from a very flooded San Juan, Puerto Rico. Let me begin with you Ronald Rosario. Tell us about the situation there on the ground in Puerto Rico.

Ronald Rosario: The situation here is absolutely dire. People are dying in the



streets. The response by the federal government to our situation here has been completely negligent, to the point of being almost criminal. More than 9,000 freight containers are being held in port by FEMA. There are towns that are completely unable to communicate with the outside world. People are dying due to lack of fuel to power their generators.

The average person has to wake up at 3:00 in the morning to stand in a line to get \$20 worth of gas so they can drive and wait in another line for food. Just to withdraw some money from an ATM can take five or six hours. This is in the capital of San Juan. But in the center of the island you don't even have that benefit.

People have no water and no food. The whole country is paralyzed. There is no power. Only 40% of water sources are available, mostly in the big cities. A sense of desperation has spread throughout the island.

It took nine days for the military to finally step in. So on top of everything we now have a militarized situation as well. A curfew is in place from 9:00 pm to 5:00 am. It makes no sense because, as I said, you have to get in line earlier than that in the morning to get gas and eventually food.

Dennis Bernstein: Assemblyman Jose Rivera represents the Bronx in the New York state legislature. I know this isn't the first report like this you have heard. What have you been able to find out in terms of what is going on and how that might change?

Jose Rivera: Back on September 22 of 1989, when Hugo hit the island of Puerto Rico, we were able to get two airplanes to land there. It doesn't surprise me that FEMA has not acted yet because they didn't act in 1989. It took weeks before they acted. But the state of New York under Governor Cuomo took charge on our request and sent a National Guard aircraft there. But only two planes landed in Puerto Rico. FEMA did not react until a couple weeks later.

Their behavior now is criminal. It is an attempt to force people to leave the island in order to eliminate us as a people on our own island. They are trying to do what they did to Hawaii, when they reduced the native population to one percent so that they could do what they wanted with the islands.

We met with Governor Andrew Cuomo and within a couple days he mobilized the National Guard and we sent two aircraft to Puerto Rico. We were the first responders. But the aid we took there has not been distributed. The mayor of San Juan has taken issue with the governor, who is a puppet and goes along with everything Trump is saying.

Three days ago I received a very desperate call from the island of Culebra,

which, like Vieques, was used by the navy for target practice. Former SEIU president Dennis Rivera called me to say that they have no drinking water because a purification plant there has been destroyed. Puerto Rico desperately needs the help of the American federal government.

Dennis Bernstein: Ronald Rosario, say a little more about your concerns if you don't get the kind of help you need soon.

Ronald Rosario: The number of deaths reported so far is only sixteen but we all know that in fact the number is much larger. We know that people are dying in hospitals because they don't have the diesel needed to fuel their generators. Some hospitals and elderly homes don't have water or power. This instability has already created a social tension which has given rise to an increase in crime. People are stealing diesel from hospitals.

Dennis Bernstein: Do you agree with the assemblyman that part of this is an attempt to cleanse the island and turn it into a vacation paradise?

Ronald Rosario: Absolutely. Puerto Rico is a very important colony within the American empire. The United States waits eight days to respond to an emergency on one of its colonies. Three days before Trump is scheduled to come here, the Marines show up and say they are going to make sure the supply lines are restored.

Dennis Bernstein: Vieques was extensively used as a bombing range. Is there a chance that some of the pollutants that haven't been cleaned up are going to present another kind of problem?

Ronald Rosario: The people of Puerto have had a long struggle with a company that is producing electricity with coal in the south of the island. They are depositing huge piles of toxic ash there. In the case of a large hurricane, those ashes are spread all over the place. Actually, there are many forms of toxic waste that we have not accounted for. At this point we are just working on getting water and food to people in dire need. The next step will be to take account of what is left.

Randy Credico: What is preventing these containers from being distributed?

Ronald Rosario: Of course, they are blaming the truck drivers. However, we know that a number of freight companies have presented themselves to the main government command center, telling them that they are willing to deliver this freight free of charge, and they have been turned away. Puerto Rico is without communication. You can only receive a phone call in San Juan. There is no internet because the power is down.

This crisis is manufactured. True, the island suffered an immense blow, but the response has made the crisis worse.

Randy Credico: Have any other Caribbean nations offered help?

Robert Rosario: Yes, they have, as they always do. Cuba offered to send four brigades of electricians and one brigade of medics with a mobile hospital. Unfortunately, the Jones Act of 1917 forbids Puerto Rico from receiving freight from any ship that does not fly a US flag. This means that all freight must come from the US, at a cost of three times the international market cost. We are demanding that the US free us from this restriction.

Dennis Bernstein: I guess they have lifted it now for ten days.

Ronald Rosario: But do you know how long it takes for any vessel to come from any part of the Caribbean at this point? At least six days. It is just cynicism.

Randy Credico: Have the Cuban medics been deployed at this point?

Ronald Rosario: No, they have been refused.

Randy Credico: It seems that the mayor of San Juan, Carmen Yulin Cruz, is not as tied to the US establishment.

Ronald Rosario: No, we have a progressive mayor who believes in Puerto Rican sovereignty and the right of self-determination. She is the only one at this point who is advocating for the truth, for uncovering the lies of the colonial and federal governments.

Randy Credico: How has Congresswoman Nydia Velazquez (D-NY) been received by the average Puerto Rican?

Ronald Rosario: Half of Puerto Ricans reside in the United States. This is the only real political power we have. We see them as our allies, we are all Puerto Ricans. We count on them to advocate for us. They are the only ones who can.

We want all our friends in the United States to understand that we are experiencing a huge humanitarian crisis. This is not a crisis to come, it is already happening. We need people to mobilize and to demand that the United States take responsibility for its colony.

We did not ask the US to invade us in 1898, we did not ask the US to force citizenship on us in 1917. This was US imperial policy. Today we demand that the United States government take responsibility, not because we are US citizens but because we are human beings.

Dennis J Bernstein is a host of “Flashpoints” on the Pacifica radio network and the author of [Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom](#). You can access the audio archives at [www.flashpoints.net](http://www.flashpoints.net).

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# New Earthquake Leaves Mexico on Edge

Mexico continues to struggle with recovery after another earthquake over the weekend left some people still trapped inside collapsed buildings and many Mexicans on edge, as Molly Kate Goss described to Dennis J Bernstein.

By Dennis J Bernstein

The earth under Mexico continues to shake and Mexicans continue to sleep with one eye open, ready to take to the streets when the next quake hits. Indeed, a strong tremor in southern Mexico temporarily suspended the search for survivors of last week's damaging earthquake in Mexico City.

On Saturday, Mexicans rushed into the streets as alarms sounded all over Oaxaca, some 300-plus miles south of Mexico City. Tremors from the 6.1 quake on Saturday were felt in various parts of Mexico City, where people also took to the streets as earthquake warning alarms sounded.

Last week's 7.1 quake in Mexico City has claimed the lives of over 300 people and counting, as rescue crews continue to dig through the rubble for possible survivors. As of this writing, there were reports of people still trapped in different locations around the sprawling city, and the Mexican government's response, according to many reports, has been inadequate.

I spoke late Monday to Pacifica's Flashpoints Special Correspondent Molly Kate Goss for an update on the situation on the ground. Goss said the recovery is going slowly and that civil society continues to play a major role in offering assistance to those who were most affected by the quake.

Dennis Bernstein: Why don't you give us a sense of what happened over the weekend and what these latest quakes and tremors are doing to people's nerves?

Molly Goss: At about 7:50 on Saturday morning I woke up to the earthquake alert and couldn't believe I was hearing it again. This is the third major earthquake in two weeks. I definitely think that people's anxiety level has gone up a lot.

I am from Northern California where we have a lot of quakes and I have never been very afraid of them until now. Many people will tell you it is difficult for them to get to sleep, it is difficult every time they hear an ambulance go by. This quake was a little over six on the Richter scale.

People are trying to return to their lives to a certain extent. A lot of restaurants and shops are open, though most of the schools in Mexico City are still closed. When you go out to the sites where they are looking for people,

there are still hundreds of people waiting to help out in whatever ways they can.

DB: People don't even really know at this point how dangerous each building is.

MG: There are so many things we don't know. We don't know which buildings are unsafe to inhabit. There is a lot of uncertainty about many of these buildings. In the 1990's there was a huge push toward building very tall buildings here. Now there are questions about whether those buildings have the correct permits and who issued those permits. In the weeks and months and years to come, there is going to be a lot of questioning about the urbanization that has been going on in Mexico City for the last couple decades.

DB: Did you say that people are still looking for survivors under the rubble?

MG: At one site about 20 minutes from here, they are still looking for upwards of 40 people on the fourth floor of a six-floor building. In the last couple of days they haven't reached anyone but they are still there.

Family members staged a protest today complaining that the government, with the navy and the army, are not giving them the correct information. In situations like this in Mexico, many people don't believe the government. There are many reports of the government not letting in civilians, who are turning up at these sites in the thousands.

Right now the major issue for many Mexicans is that they don't want the heavy equipment brought in yet. In 1985 people were found at least a week after the earthquake occurred. People don't want the tractors and other heavy equipment to go in yet because that could lead to the deaths of their loved ones.

DB: With these two latest quakes over the weekend, I can imagine that people are both looking back to the damage and listening to the radio to make a break for it if the earth starts shaking again. I can't imagine that people are able to relax.

MG: The first time I heard the earthquake alarm it was a test and I kind of meandered out of the building, but this Saturday I was awake in a second, grabbed my dog, and flew out of the building. What I am hearing from a lot of people is that this is something for the long haul, there are effects that will continue long into the future. I think people are going to be on edge for some time.

But even though people are nervous and having trouble sleeping and talking to their children about the impossibility of predicting when this might happen again, the solidarity continues. People are still out there with their hardhats,

taking water and medicine to the rescuers.

DB: Is the government stepping up now? Are people getting more of the support that they need? Or is this a lingering problem?

MG: I would say it is an ongoing problem. In the state of Morelos, which was hard hit by the September 19 quake, it has been questionable whether a lot of the help that has been sent is actually getting through to the people. People in certain communities in Oaxaca have complained about not getting any help at all from the government after the first earthquake. People have been banding together and trying to get help from private sources.

Just down the street from where I live, for example, a bar has been turned into a center for sending help out to the different states that have been affected. Civil society is really stepping up, but I can't say the same for the government response.

**Dennis J Bernstein is a host of "Flashpoints" on the Pacifica radio network and the author of Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom. You can access the audio archives at www.flashpoints.net.**

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