Farmworkers Protest EPA’s Pesticide Ruling

As part of President Trump’s campaign against President Obama’s environmental regulations, Trump’s EPA has rejected a proposed rule banning a brain-damaging pesticide, reports Dennis J Bernstein.

By Dennis J Bernstein

The decision by President Trump’s Environmental Protection Agency to rebuff the advice of its own scientists to ban the brain-damaging pesticide chlorpyrifos has prompted protests from California’s farm worker communities, now demanding an immediate statewide ban of the dangerous chemical.

A delegation delivered more than 167,000 petition signatures along with a letter signed by 75 organizations representing hundreds of thousands of Californians. The petition was also co-signed by Care2, Center for Biological Diversity, Center for Environmental Health, Center for Food Safety, Courage Campaign, CREDO, Friends of the Earth, and Pesticide Action Network.

EPA scientists have documented that chlorpyrifos can cause serious and profound neurological and respiratory damage, as well as developmental delays, autism and IQ loss for children — even in very small doses, say the activists.

They maintain that the use of chlorpyrifos is particularly problematic in California, “where more than one million pounds of the neurotoxic organophosphate pesticide are used each year, much of it in close proximity to schools and residences. Accounting for roughly 10% of the nationwide total, this chemical is applied on dozens of crops in the state. In the Monterey Bay Area, chlorpyrifos is most heavily used on wine grapes, Brussels sprouts, and apple orchards. In 2016, the air monitor at the Salinas Airport registered average air levels of chlorpyrifos three times higher than the EPA’s target risk level.”

According to Californians for Pesticide Reform (CPR), a statewide coalition of more than 190 organizations, “after years of stalling, EPA was set to implement a ban on chlorpyrifos use on food crops in March. But under intense pressure from Dow Chemical, the largest manufacturer of the neurotoxic pesticide, EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt reversed the agency’s plan and announced he was allowing continued agricultural use of chlorpyrifos.”

The group’s statement went on to say “just last November, the EPA announced that it intended to revoke all food tolerances of chlorpyrifos, calling exposure to any amount unsafe. Underlining the importance of this proposed ban, the agency
cited the serious dangers of chlorpyrifos exposure and added that young children risk exposure from food residues alone that are 14,000 percent higher than the level EPA currently believes is safe.”

I spoke with Lucia Calderon, an organizer with Safe Ag Safe Schools and Californians for Pesticide Reform, about the battle against chlorpyrifos.

Dennis Bernstein: Tell us exactly what it is — what’s the chemistry we’re talking about here? And then we’ll talk about how dangerous it is.

Lucia Calderon: Chlorpyrifos is an organophosphate insecticide, and its main action is to harm the brains of the insects that the agricultural industry is trying to kill. And, incidentally, it has been shown to really, really harm brains, especially children’s developing brains.

DB: Children’s developing brains — say a little bit more about that. Are there cases? Are there studies being conducted now? Are there examples of kids being hurt? What can you say about that?

LC: Yeah, well this is a really historical issue. Chlorpyrifos was actually banned for residential use. It started being phased out in 2000, because of its proven association with developmental harm. And UC Berkeley and Columbia University both had big parts in these studies. In 2000 the science was known that chlorpyrifos was extremely harmful to developing brains and bodies, and it was banned for residential use.

But nowadays it is not banned for agricultural use, and it’s still being used in our fields, especially in California fields. We account for a fifth of the entire nation’s use of this chemical pesticide. And so, what we’re looking at is science that has been established, and is continuing to come out, showing these really detrimental effects of this chemical. And there is complete inaction on the federal level.

DB: So the EPA was set to pass a ban on this, right? Until the new folks came in?

LC: Yes, exactly. The EPA was set on a deadline to revoke the tolerances of this chemical on March 31, 2017, and just a couple of days before that date our new EPA administrator, Scott Pruitt, reversed that ban. So what we’re doing now is going to the State of California. As a big user of chlorpyrifos, we are demanding that the State of California impose a ban on this chemical. And, as I mentioned the science before, a lot of it is coming out of California. We have the UC Berkeley CHAMACOS study, which stands for the Center for Health of Mother and Children of the Salinas Valley, right where Safe Ag Safe Schools is located. That study has been going on for almost 20 years, showing the connections
between prenatal organophosphate chlorpyrifos exposure and lowering IQ, and respiratory issues as well.

DB: Tell us a little bit about who’s involved. Your group is working with the Pesticide Action Network: are there community groups or teachers involved? How are you bringing in the families?

LC: Californians for Pesticide Reform is a statewide coalition, and Safe Ag Safe Schools is only one of the organizations involved. And we represent the communities of the front line. We are from the affected communities, and we all get to come together through this statewide coalition, and then demand improvements and better protections for people living on the front lines of pesticide exposure — those working in the fields and living and attending school very close to the fields.

DB: Are there still problems in terms of schools? Does that come into it?

LC: Yes, definitely. And even regarding chlorpyrifos, we have a city in Monterey County, Greenfield, and two schools there – the middle school and the high school – rank 9th and 4th in the state for chlorpyrifos use within a quarter of a mile. We’re seeing issues with chlorpyrifos being applied around schools and we’re also just seeing issues with pesticide use in general around schools.

The most recent action we’ve had on that was establishing buffer zones around schools where pesticides could not be applied. We have been demanding for years a full mile buffer zone at all times around schools, where pesticides cannot be applied. And what we got were quarter mile buffer zones for parts of the day – from 6am to 6pm Monday through Friday. So we’re still fighting on that front as well. Right now we’re really trying to get chlorpyrifos banned, because it’s one of the nastiest chemicals out there.

DB: This is incredibly important because it affects children and their ability to learn. I understand that some of this, depending upon how you’re doused with this, could cause permanent damage, particularly in pregnant women and young, formative kids.

LC: Yes, one of the reasons that the federal EPA was going to ban the chemical was that the U.S. EPA found that for pregnant women and developing babies and for some children just the amount of chlorpyrifos they were consuming on food as food residue was way too high. The reason that the EPA was banning it was not only for food residues, but for how much is in the air. There’s also no safe amount of chlorpyrifos in drinking water, and it has contaminated a lot of our water supplies as well. So the danger is on all fronts, but especially for women of childbearing age and young children.
DB: And I’m gonna spell that because the name is a little bit unclear: it’s c-h-l-o-r-p-y-r-i-f-o-s — that’s the brain-harming chemistry that we’re talking about?

LC: Exactly, and it is produced by Dow AgroSciences.

DB: Dow?

LC: Yes, Dow Chemical. The CEO of Dow Chemical [Andrew Liveris] is the head of the American Manufacturing Council. Dow Chemical contributed a million dollars to Trump’s inauguration dinner. We’re now hearing reports that Scott Pruitt met with Dow right before he decided to reverse the ban of chlorpyrifos. So they’re a really big actor in this fight right now.

DB: Yeah, and they certainly have the reputation, shall we say, for doing terrible things to people. We thank you for this important information.

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.

Holding onto Nuclear Weapons

Despite longstanding promises to work toward nuclear disarmament, the nuclear states continue their hostility toward abandoning these existentially dangerous weapons, Dr. Ira Helfand tells Dennis J Bernstein.

By Dennis J Bernstein

For months now there has been a frustrating hunt for “collusion” between the Trump administration and Russia, but there is one clear example of collusion — along with the other half dozen or so nuclear weapons states — in opposing the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.

Passed on July 7 by 122 nations at the United Nations, the ban states in part that each cosigner “undertakes never under any circumstances to develop, test, produce, manufacture, or otherwise acquire, possess or stockpile nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices.”

Following the signing of the treaty at the U.N., I spoke to Dr. Ira Helfand, past president of Physicians for Social Responsibility and currently co-president of that group’s global federation, International Physicians for the
Prevention of Nuclear War. The group received the 1985 Nobel Peace Prize for their work in the field of nuclear disarmament.

“Two things were most notable in the overwhelming vote for this treaty,” Dr. Helfand said. “One was the urgency felt by the representatives of 122 countries who voted for it. The other was the rather crude and revealing statement put out by the ‘P3’ – the U.S., Britain and France,” said Dr. Helfand, that “they intend to maintain their policy of mutually assured destruction forever, even though they are legally required to negotiate the elimination of their nuclear arsenals under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.”

Dennis Bernstein: First of all, say something about the treaty – how important it is, what exactly it’s meant to do.

Ira Helfand: Well this treaty is an attempt by the non-nuclear weapon states around the world to tell the nuclear-armed states that they’ve got to stop behaving the way they have been. The nuclear-armed states are, for the most part, committed under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty to undertaking good faith negotiations to eliminate their nuclear arsenals. And they’re not doing it, they haven’t been doing it and they don’t appear to have any intention to do it. And the non-nuclear weapon states have lost patience, essentially, and have said, “Look, your nuclear weapons are posing an existential threat to our citizens as well as your own, and you need to start living up to your obligations to protect the world from the terrible consequences of nuclear weapons.”

The treaty does not in and of itself create a situation where these weapons are going to be dismantled. It does provide a very strong weapon, I think, for people to use to put pressure on the nuclear-armed states to do what they’re supposed to do, and to actually abolish their weapons.

DB: And it’s really important that it be the possession, right?

IH: Absolutely, this is not a treaty about use. That is also included, but this goes far beyond that. This treaty says that the mere possession of nuclear weapons constitutes an existential threat to human survival and cannot be tolerated, that we need to get rid of these things, to dismantle them and make sure that they’re never built again.

DB: All right, give us your assessment: how dangerous is our world today? Are we at Cuban Missile Crisis Two? How would you assess that?

IH: I don’t think we’re quite to the Cuban Missile Crisis, but we’re pretty close. The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists has us at two and a half minutes to midnight, where midnight is the end of the world. Certainly we’re at the most
dangerous moment since the early 1980s. There is increasing tension between the United States and Russia, with potential flashpoints in Syria and Ukraine. There’s increased tension between the United States and China, with a potential flashpoint in the South China Sea. There’s the situation which everyone is following, with North Korea vs. the rest of the world. There’s the ongoing fighting between India and Pakistan, which is almost daily, on their border in Kashmir. These countries now have between them some 260 nuclear warheads. So we’re in a very, very dangerous moment.

And in addition to these geopolitical potential flashpoints, there’s the ongoing danger of an accidental nuclear war, or a terrorist-triggered nuclear war. We know of six or seven instances since the 1960s, where either Moscow or Washington actually began the preparation of launching nuclear weapons, in the mistaken belief that the other side had already done so. And that potential for an accident – an unintended nuclear war – remains with us today, and will, until these weapons are eliminated. So it’s an extremely dangerous time, and we really need to be paying more attention to this danger than we are, frankly.

DB: Who are the nuclear powers?

IH: The United States and Russia have between them about 90-95% of the world’s nuclear weapons. And then after that, France, China, the U.K., India, Pakistan, North Korea and Israel. And it’s not just the P3 – the U.S., France and the U.K. – that have refused to sign it – all of those countries have refused to sign it.

DB: [...] These are very frightening times. It’s really troubling to see that not only do these nuclear powers reject the agreement, they do it with vigor, and some swagger, as if the other solution – mutually assured destruction – is a good one!

IH: Well I think that was particularly striking about the statement that the U.S., the U.K. and France – the so-called P3 – issued on Friday. In the past, the nuclear weapons states at least had the political sense to couch their opposition to this treaty in terms of, “Well, we share your vision of getting rid of nuclear weapons, but the time isn’t right, and so this treaty isn’t the best tactic.”

In the statement that was released on Friday, the United States, Britain and France said, “We will never sign this treaty. We will never eliminate our nuclear weapons.” And it was a very bold statement, which has always been the truth, but was really quite a departure from their normal diplomatic attempts to cover up what they’re doing. And it was quite striking in that way.

DB: You know, people go on about Donald Trump – and there’s a lot to go on about
— but these western progressive nations are still talking insanely in 2017. They’re as crazy as any of the politicians who are on the scene now, and this decision demonstrates it.

IH: I think that’s true. You know, we’ve argued for a long time that nuclear weapons are so destructive, and the chance of their use is so great, that no one should ever have possession of them. I think the “Trump Factor” is a real phenomenon. This is the first time that a large arsenal of a major nuclear power has been in the control of someone who is judged by the security experts in his own party to lack the judgment, the temperament and the knowledge base to command a nuclear arsenal. And there are implications in that — not the least, if it happens once, it can happen again.

DB: But you know what, I have to just say something about all the politicians… I’m no defender of Trump, but before that with Hillary Clinton and her policy — in terms of foreign policy — Syria was a no-fly zone. That’s a road to World War 3 — that’s insane!

All these politicians are willing to talk in the context of everything being on the table — you know that phrase, everything’s always on the table with these folks. […] I’ve never trusted the CIA. And all those folks advising Trump, they’ve got some serious problems. A bunch of them have been liars. They’ve been bugging all of us. I mean there’s a lot to question across the board, and that to me is what makes nuclear weapons extremely troubling in the hands of all these folks.

IH: Oh, there’s some truth to that. Nobody should have their finger on the button. The solution is not to get Donald Trump’s finger off the button, it’s to get rid of the button altogether. Having said that, there is something different about having Donald Trump in charge of the nuclear arsenal, and we cannot turn our backs on that fact.

DB: […] What do you suggest? What do you think people can do about this? What are the realities in terms of what you would recommend if people are interested in standing up and making a difference?

IH: Well, a couple of intermediate steps. First of all, there’s legislation before Congress introduced by Senator Markey and Congressman Lieu, that requires that Congress give prior authorization before nuclear weapons can be used. This is exactly as it should be. The Constitution says only Congress can declare war. Certainly only Congress should be able to declare a nuclear war. And this is a useful, small step in the right direction. That legislation should be passed.

Secondly, we should be demanding that the United States take its nuclear weapons
off its hair-trigger alert. There’s no excuse for maintaining these arsenals in a configuration where they can be launched in 15 minutes. It merely creates an increased danger that there will be an accidental or unauthorized use. It’s not necessary to blow up the world in 15 minutes’ time. If we decide that that’s what we’re going to do, we can do it in 24 hours. So the weapons should be taken off this hair-trigger alert.

But more fundamentally, we need to be demanding that the United States completely change its nuclear policy: stop insisting that we’re going to maintain a nuclear arsenal as a way of protecting our security, and acknowledge that, in fact, nuclear weapons are the greatest threat to our security, and that what we need to do is aggressively pursue, in agreement with the other nuclear weapon states, to eliminate all of these weapons.

Now, we may not be successful in this effort, we may not be able to get other countries to join with us, but we need to try. And the United States has not been trying. In fact it’s been doing just the opposite: it’s been planning to spend a trillion dollars to make heinous nuclear arsenals over decades to come. And that has to change.

It is urgently in the interest of U.S. national security, as well as the security of everybody on the planet, that we actively pursue the vision of a world free of nuclear weapons – not just at the rhetorical level like President Obama did, but really in our actual policy. And that we seek to begin negotiations with the other nuclear weapons states, for a treaty amongst them that provides a specific timetable, and enforcement and verification measures, so that we can, with confidence, eliminate all the nuclear weapons that are being held. And this can be done, the only thing that is lacking is the political will to do it.

DB: Before we say goodbye, can you give us maybe a doctor’s perspective on this? You know, you take an oath to save lives – how do you come at this from that perspective?

IH: Well, I think Physicians for Social Responsibility views nuclear weapons as primarily a public health problem. They are the greatest threat to public health that’s ever existed, and we see this as an extension of our responsibility as physicians to protect our patients. We talk to our patients about why they shouldn’t drink excessively, why they shouldn’t smoke at all, why they should watch their weight and so on. We also need to talk to them about other threats to their health, and this is the greatest threat of all.

And that’s really been the motivation, I think, for the physicians’ movement – to bring this message of grave danger to our patients, in the hopes that we’ll
be able to mobilize them to take the necessary political action to force our government to get rid of these weapons once and for all.

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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**Trump Embraces GOP Tax-Cut Orthodoxy**

**Exclusive:** Not even five months into his presidency, Donald Trump has retreated from key populist promises by moving to slash taxes on the rich and throw millions of Americans off health insurance, writes Jonathan Marshall.

By Jonathan Marshall

President Trump earned headlines — and worldwide condemnation — for his announcement June 1 that he was pulling the United States from the Paris climate accord, an agreement signed by 195 nations to fight runaway global warming.

Just a week later, however, Trump attracted almost no attention when he rejected another important Paris accord — this one to fight international tax avoidance by multinational corporations.

The landmark agreement, signed by more than 70 countries, including members of the European Union, India and China, sets certain minimum standards for tax treaties. In particular, it curbs the abusive practices of companies that manipulate the flow of their income between subsidiaries to take advantage of low tax rates in jurisdictions like Luxembourg, where secret tax rulings have helped hundreds of multinational firms drastically reduce their payments.

One such firm was Amazon, which candidate Donald Trump accused of “getting away with murder tax-wise,” before he abandoned his populist pretenses. This March, a U.S. tax court judge upheld as legal a $1.5 billion tax dodge by the online retailer, which developed an initiative called *Project Goldcrest* to shift billions of dollars of profits into Luxembourg.

After the second Paris no-show, critics denounced the Trump administration for once again abdicating its responsibilities. “By retreating from the agreement at this point, the U.S. is forfeiting leadership in yet another forum,” said Clark Gascoigne, deputy director of the Financial Accountability and Corporate Transparency Coalition.
But Gascoigne had it wrong. Trump is leading—in the opposite direction. In late April, he signed an executive order seeking to delay or suspend any significant tax regulations issued by the Obama administration in 2016 that “impose an undue financial burden on United States taxpayers.”

Experts pointed out that the chief targets of Trump’s order were rules imposed by President Obama to make it tougher for American companies to move headquarters abroad to pay lower U.S. taxes. These rules helped kill a merger last year between U.S. pharmaceutical giant Pfizer and an Irish company, Allergan, which was driven by the prospect of saving tens of billions of dollars in U.S. taxes.

Even without its merger, Pfizer managed last year to keep $194 billion in profits offshore, with the help of 181 subsidiaries in various tax havens, according to U.S. PIRG. Apple beat even that record, reportedly avoiding more than $65 billion in U.S. taxes by parking $215 billion in profits offshore. A 2014 study of 307 large American companies determined that they had collectively stashed two trillion dollars abroad.

Tax avoidance by multinational firms costs the United States Treasury roughly $190 billion a year, according to new estimates published by the World Institute for Development Economics Research.

Rates of corporate tax avoidance are soaring. A 2014 study by Gabriel Zucman, an economist at the London School of Economics, estimated that a fifth of all U.S. corporate profits are now booked in offshore tax havens. That represented “a tenfold increase since the 1980s,” Zucman observed. “Over the last 15 years, the effective corporate tax rate of US companies has declined from 30 to 20 percent, and about two-thirds of this decline can be attributed to increased profit-shifting to low-tax jurisdictions.”

Individuals Evade Taxes, Too

Zucman also estimated—as a lower bound—that wealthy U.S. households had parked about $1.2 trillion in cash, stocks, and bonds in foreign tax havens. Counting art, jewelry, gold, real estate and other real assets, would almost certainly multiply that number, he added.

These estimates are highly uncertain, of course, since owners generally don’t disclose such holdings to the authorities, and “strikingly, more than 20 percent of the world’s cross-border equities have no identifiable owner,” Zucman noted. But the notorious “Panama Papers” leak, as well as leaked documents from Luxembourg and Swiss banks, make Zucman and other researchers confident that tax avoidance and illegal evasion by the ultra-rich are flourishing as never before.
A great deal of tax evasion goes on simply through non-reporting of income, without the use of foreign banks or tax shelters. A reputable 2011 study of America’s “underground economy” estimated that nearly a fifth of reportable income was not, in fact, disclosed to the IRS. The loss to the Treasury from such cheating amounts to a staggering $500 billion annually, equal to all non-military discretionary federal spending combined.

Instead of combating such abuses, President Trump and Congressional Republicans are doing everything in their power to cut tax rates on the rich and undercut enforcement of existing tax laws.

The Republican-sponsored American Health Care Act, for example, is a $700 billion tax cut for the rich dressed up as an alternative to President Obama’s Affordable Care Act. Forty percent of the tax savings would accrue to the top one percent of earners, according to a study by the Tax Policy Center.

Trump’s proposal to scrap the estate tax would benefit only the very wealthiest individuals — about 5,500 per year — whose estates exceed the $5.5 million federal exemption enough to be taxable. Many of the prospective beneficiaries, of course, are the same billionaires who lavish so much money on GOP candidates and political action committees.

“In a major jolt of support for President Trump, the powerful political network overseen by conservative billionaire Charles Koch is launching a multimillion-dollar campaign to drive Trump’s tax plan through Congress,” USA Today reported in May. The Kochs’ network, which pools contributions from 550 super-rich donors, “plan(s) to spend $300 million to $400 million on policy and political campaigns ahead of the 2018 elections,” the paper said.

More Tax Cuts

Trump and House Speaker Paul Ryan also propose to slash tax rates on personal business income, from a top rate of 39.6 percent to as little as 15 percent. The plan, if passed, would cost the Treasury nearly $2 trillion over the next decade, while a major share of the benefits would go to households with incomes of more than $1 million a year (including Donald Trump), according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

The plan would also encourage widespread tax avoidance by individuals who would try to reclassify their salaries as “business income” to pay lower rates.

The IRS, for its part, would be nearly powerless to stop such abuses. Over the past five years, the New York Times reports, “congressional Republicans have taken out their anti-tax wrath on the Internal Revenue Service, cutting its budget by nearly $1 billion, reducing its staff by about 17,000, and even
threatening to impeach its chief.”

Their goal is not to reform the IRS but to cripple it so wealthy tax evaders have nothing to fear. The agency has lost 5,000 revenue agents and investigators since 2012, allowing numerous cases of suspected fraud to go unchecked and tens of billions of dollars in revenue to go uncollected.

“I’m appalled, that’s all I can say,” said Lawrence B. Gibbs, who served as IRS Commissioner under President Reagan from 1986 to 1989. In light of the nation’s challenges, he added, “the one thing people ought to agree on is that we should have a revenue system that works and works well.”

Most Americans do indeed agree, even if Republican legislators and President Trump do not. The latest Pew Research Center survey found that six in 10 Americans were bothered “a lot” by the failure of some corporations and wealthy people to pay their fair share of taxes. Reflecting that sentiment, 56 percent of respondents said the federal tax system is unfair, the highest recorded in two decades.

Perhaps more surprisingly, Americans also feel in general that they are not overtaxed. There’s a good reason for that: Americans have one of the lowest tax burdens of any developed country. Of 36 developed nations, only Korea, Chile, and Mexico tax a smaller share of their total national income.

We’ve come a long way in the two years since economist and columnist Paul Krugman, while harboring no illusions about candidate Trump, praised his professed “willingness to raise taxes on the rich” and his “positive words about universal health care.” Along with most of his other promises, Trump shelved those popular notions when he took office. Today, the billionaire tax dodger pursues only the most orthodox of all Republican agendas: make the rich richer, at the expense of everyone else.

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Playing Games with America’s Health Care

President Trump reneged on promises about health insurance for all to win a House vote on a bill to repeal Obamacare and cut taxes on the rich, but now Republicans have to live with the consequences, writes Michael Winship.

By Michael Winship
This just in: Health care is not a game. It’s a matter life or death for millions and millions of Americans. But you sure wouldn’t know it from watching Donald Trump and House Republicans celebrate their narrow victory on Thursday.

The House managed to pass a bill, the American Health Care Act (AHCA), aimed at altering or eradicating provisions of Obamacare, a somewhat muted version of the “repeal and replace” battle cry screamed throughout the election campaign but one that nevertheless will still devastate all but the richest of society with exorbitant medical costs that many cannot afford. Medicaid would be slashed by hundreds of millions. Twenty-four million fewer would be left without health insurance.

But the Republicans celebrated this impending tragedy with cheers on Capitol Hill and then got on buses to the White House for some further revelry in the Rose Garden.

“Trump basked in adulation as lawmakers heaped praise on him,” Ashley Parker reported in The Washington Post: “… Including Trump and [vice president Mike] Pence, a dozen lawmakers and officials spoke, a snaking queue — nearly all white men — who took turns stepping to the lectern to claim their reward: cable news coverage, orchestrated by a president who values it above almost all else.”

Trump shouted, “How am I doing? I’m president. Hey, I’m president. Can you believe it?” Not if I don’t want to. It all felt like a chintzy version of the victory party after a high school football championship, except no one dared douse Coach Trump or assistant coaches Pence and Paul Ryan with Gatorade. Which was unfortunate.

Democrats got into the act, too, singing, “Hey hey hey, goodbye!” at the Republicans in the House chamber, reminding the GOP that they had just cast a vote that may cost many of them their seats in the 2018 midterms. The whole thing was very classy, as if the Founders high-fived, fist-bumped and burst into “We Are the Champions” after signing the Declaration of Independence.

The fact is, few Republicans have even read the bill. They did not wait for a cost estimate from the Congressional Budget Office before ramming it through. No hearings were held; no group was given the opportunity to raise its objections in such a public forum: no American Cancer Society, AARP, the March of Dimes, the American Hospital Association — all of which, along with many other professional and advocacy organizations, have made their opposition known. No American Medical Association, which announced, “millions of Americans will lose their health insurance as a direct result of this proposal…”

“Not only would the AHCA eliminate health insurance coverage for millions of
Americans, the legislation would, in many cases, eliminate the ban against charging those with underlying medical conditions vastly more for their coverage.”

**Tax Cut for the Rich**

But if you’re looking for the real reasons Republicans were throwing themselves a frat party on Thursday, heed first the words of Sister Carol Keehan, president of the Catholic Health Association of the United States: “It is critically important to look at this bill for what it is. It is not in any way a health care bill. Rather, it is legislation whose aim is to take significant funding allocated by Congress for health care for very low-income people and use that money for tax cuts for some of our wealthiest citizens. This is contrary to the spirit of who we are as a nation, a giant step backward that should be resisted.”

Then remember, as Paul Kane noted in *The Post*, that the GOP “viewed the measure as a necessary step to demonstrate some sense of momentum and some ability to govern in GOP-controlled Washington … inside the White House, President Trump’s advisers became increasingly concerned about how little they had to show in terms of early victories.”

And so they were willing to vote for a lousy, misbegotten piece of legislation just so they could get the first round of tax cuts for the rich and to make it look as if they had accomplished something. Not exactly the Age of Pericles.

I remembered that old poem, *After Blenheim*, in which Robert Southey recounts the 1704 battle in which Britain’s Duke of Marlborough (ancestor of Winston Churchill) defeated the forces of France’s Louis XIV. The poem concludes:

“And everybody praised the Duke
Who this great fight did win.
‘But what good came of it at last?’
Quoth little Peterkin.
‘Why that I cannot tell,’ said he,
‘But ’twas a famous victory.’”

Never confuse motion for action, Republicans. And your “famous” victory may be Pyrrhic. Fortunately, this horrible health care legislation has a long way to go through the Senate before Donald Trump gets the chance to affix his EKG-like signature. As South Carolina Sen. Lindsey Graham tweeted on Friday, “A bill —
finalized yesterday, has not been scored, amendments not allowed, and 3 hours final debate – should be viewed with caution.”

Perhaps the most relevant – if unintentional – comment came from Trump himself Thursday night when he told Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, “You have better health care than we do.” The Land Down Under has universal health care with a private insurance option. They call it Medicare.

If the Democrats don’t immediately start playing Trump’s statement on a constant video loop between now and November 2018, they’ve lost the will to live. The White House said Trump didn’t mean anything by it (although he then doubled down on his words with a tweet) but if you’re in the mood to have a celebration of your own, lift a glass to what he told the Australian PM and make a toast to blowing up this bogus health care reform bill and giving us what Americans truly need – Medicare for all.

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http://billmoyers.com/story/americas-health-hands-gop-frat-boys/

Learning the Health Benefits of Cannabis

State-by-state legalization of marijuana is opening eyes to the possible health benefits from parts of the cannabis plant, but the federal government remains an obstacle, as Martin A. Lee explained to Dennis J Bernstein

Despite breakthroughs in understanding the curative possibilities of CBD – essentially the non-psychoactive part of the cannabis plant – the stigma of marijuana’s criminalization is delaying progress as is the refusal of the federal government to support state-by-state legalization.

I spoke with Martin A. Lee, the director of Project CBD and a leading expert on the breakthroughs and breakdowns when it comes to the use of CBD as a healing tool on April 20, 2017. Lee is also the author of Smoke Signals: A Social History of Marijuana – Medical, Recreational, and Scientific

Dennis Bernstein: Okay. Well, let’s just start with a sweeping overview. Trump is in. We’ve got an extremely right-wing attorney general. On the macro level do you anticipate… is there a sense that the landscape is changing?
Martin Lee: No one really knows what lays ahead. Obviously, the uncertainty coming from the federal government is problematic for the “cannabis industry” – we used to call it a community, now it’s an industry.

But there are also countervailing forces. You know, Trump’s folks have talked about coming down on the recreational market, as opposed to medical. They seem to be conceding medical. But there are countervailing forces particularly with respect to the CBD industry. CBD, cannabinoid, as you are mentioning, is basically a non-psychoactive component of the cannabis plant with a lot of therapeutic applications.

So, whereas there’s concerns about the pharmaceuticalization of CBD, once it is approved as an isolated pharmaceutical, and soon it will be by the federal government, what will happen to the so-called grassroots hemp industry… CBD oils are derived from hemp. This is all over the place, online. And there is significant political support for an indigenous hemp industry in the United States, coming particularly from the Kentucky senator’s. Mitch McConnell, of course, is a very powerful senator, Majority Leader in the Senate, representing Kentucky, a hemp growing state. So, how this is all getting played out, who’s going to control it, how it will be regulated remains to be seen, because of all these different variables. It’s hard to predict.

DB: And, in that context, there is some major confusion. Some people are being busted, some people are having their stuff taken. Talk about… there’s been a number of raids all over the country in the context of hemp and CBD. Talk about what’s been going on in Alaska.

ML: Well, just in general, before Alaska, there’s been an idea promoted by businesses online that CBD, cannabinoid, is legal in all 50 states, which is not true according to the federal government. And there’s been a lot of confusion both… really on the state level, also, how this compound and these products made with this compound, will be regulated. Some states have not legalized medical marijuana, but have legalized the CBD, just one compound in the plant. Sounds a little crazy but there’s now 15 states without medical marijuana laws where, technically speaking, CBD is legal.

And this has given people an idea that they can just access this stuff from the wholesalers, CBD oil, and hang a shingle, so-to-speak, and start selling it. Well, some folks who have done that in various states are in for a rude surprise. In Alaska, a state where marijuana is legal for adults, as well as for medical use, there have been raids of all the medical marijuana facilities that are providing CBD products, on the grounds that they weren’t being produced, these products, within the state of Alaska.
Most medical marijuana states stipulate the product has to be grown and produced and sold and consumed within that state. And since these CBD hemp oil products are coming from all over, from Europe, from Colorado, from Kentucky, not from Alaska that was the reason why there were a series of raids, I think it was seven in total, dispensaries were hit as part of the same drag net, in February, in Alaska.

And there’s been half a dozen other states where there have been some sporadic raids like this. I don’t think this is a result of a unified policy. I think this is a local law enforcement affair. But it underscores the confusion with respect to the legal status of CBD which is ultimately grounded in the contradictions of prohibition, a policy that doesn’t make any sense at all. It’s built on a mountain of lies, basically.

DB: Perhaps the most interesting, outside of Alaska, in terms of those raids is Kentucky. So, even though the majority leader of the Republican Senate is Mitch McConnell, Kentucky is being hit. It’s an interesting sort of back and forth there.

ML: Yes, again, they’ve been hit, in Princeton, Kentucky, actually, the name of the town, there was a law enforcement raid of a storefront that was selling CBD rich products, oil products. But presumably made in Kentucky, but that store did not have a license to do that. And, again, this idea that’s being promoted by vested interests that CBD is legal everywhere, and you can just do whatever you want with it. That has sort of collided with the realities and confusion at the local law enforcement level, and the state level as well. In Missouri, the attorney general actually brought an action against a couple of stores that were selling CBD without a proper license.

DB: Marty, let’s turn the focus to... tell people a little bit more about the possibilities of CBD. There have been some breakthroughs, of course, this is difficult because of the federal government’s unwillingness to relent in considering all of this a very dangerous drug. But there has been more and more research, breakthroughs. Tell us about some of the possibilities that we now know exist in terms of the use of CBD.

ML: Well, there’s a huge amount of scientific research that’s been going on now for several decades, focusing on CBD, it’s cannabinoid and other components of the plant. But what’s interesting is that now we’re seeing some reports from doctors, clinicians, in states where there’s a robust medical marijuana program, such as California, who are actually reporting what they’re finding when they’re treating patients, including pediatric epilepsy patients, which has gotten a lot of attention. Little kids with intractable seizure disorders, terrible, where they’re seizing hundreds of times a week.
It so happens, for certain conditions, CBD as a molecule, even as an isolated product, can be very effective depending on what is the underlying breakdown molecularly, so-to-speak, in the brain that leads to these disease disorders. And there could be hundreds of factors that feed into epilepsy. But, what I find really interesting here, is that what these doctors recently reported in a peer reviewed scientific journal, was that the CBD isolate, the high CBD, low THC oils, which are very effective in some cases, are not effective in all cases. In fact, are not effective in most cases. We need to say most cases, there might be a reduction of seizures but not an elimination, as there are in, let’s say, 10 – 15% of these cases.

And what the doctors clearly found was that they have to have an array of different kinds of cannabinoid medicine, different ratios, of CBD and THC, different components of the plant have to be available for the doctor and the patient to test and to figure out ultimately what works for each individual.

And what that really calls into question, in my mind, is the whole pharmaceutical model, where there’s one compound, one ratio, in this case it’s going to be all CBD, and nothing less that’s going to be approved very soon as a legal medicinal tool. But the science and the clinical experience clearly shows while that’s a very, very valuable medical instrument (the pure CBD), what you really need is some options available from the whole plant. And without that you have a very, very limited possibility of helping people out.

DB: So, what you’re saying is there is an important synergy between the non-psychoactive and the psychoactive and that it’s a formula, it would be, I guess, a prescription from the pharmacy in terms of what are you dealing with, what is the makeup and the breakdown of...adding one or the other to accommodate each case?

ML: Yeah. So it really goes back to old style medicine. And it’s happening today in the sense that...it’s not many physicians who are doing this, but some can take out their pad and write a recommendation, because technically a prescription is not allowed from what is still a schedule 1 substance, an illegal substance. And they can tell you what ratios THC and CBD should be in the oil, what terpenes—the compound that gives a particular smell to the plant—and many different combinations, thereof. Those terpenes also have significant medical effects. They’ve found that in some cases of epilepsy if there are certain terpenes present that the compounds that smell like lemon or lavender, respectively called limonene and linalool. When these are present in the oil that has a great accentuating effect in terms of an anti-seizure property.

So, all these things are being discussed, explored and discovered. And it’s very, very exciting. And it’s tremendous potential I think for medical science,
and practical medicine, and ultimately to reduce the costs of health care. It’s that dimension, I think, that is not being discussed, but I think that’s kind of the elephant in the living room. That given the health care crisis we face in this country we should really be taking very seriously the implications of this plant.

DB: Now that is the breakthrough. The breakdown, once again, is law enforcement, isn’t it? It’s been that way for years, in which the research is still being held up by the arcane laws of yesteryear.

ML: Yes, definitely on the federal level, this is true, and it has a huge influence. But things are happening on a state level now. I think the prohibition is so absurd, particularly with respect to medical research, that some states are going their own way. And I think in California what there’s been a noticeable shift to observe is that Sacramento [the state capital] is now behind the industry, as it were. It’s supportive of the industry. Whereas a year ago you couldn’t say that clearly. But there’s clearly been a shift and hopefully that will manifest itself, in part, in allocation of funds for serious research in this area.

DB: Marty, could you take a moment to talk a little bit about the social history, and how the law enforcement and how the criminalization has been a devastating problem, and which we still face. I mean people are going to be in jail long after the things that put them in jail are legal and sort of helping to float the entire economy of the United States.

ML: Yeah, it is ironic that something that is such a huge economic boon is still penalized, in terms of personal use, although that’s happening less and less. Clearly the history of marijuana prohibition as an instrument of social control by the government is quite significant.

And we’ve seen that clearly in terms of the … arrest statistics, the disproportionate targeting, arrests, persecution, if you will, of young people, particularly people of color, that continues. But, even more than that, and that’s quite enough to be opposed to this prohibition, carte blanche, but it’s not just different segments of society, specific segments of society that have suffered; Everybody has, in terms of the impeding of important medical research. So this is something in many, many different ways that has really hurt society because of the laws have been a convenient instrument to “keep people in their place.”

DB: Are you aware, Marty, that according to the New York Times of April 15th you now live in America’s cannabis bucket?
ML: Yes, I was aware of that. And the triangle, this is the cannabis bud feast in the United States. It’s been such historically since the early 1970’s. And it’s part of that, the region that includes the [S.F.] Bay Area. Yeah, you could say it’s the cannabis capital of the United States. But, really the whole cannabis phenomenon and there’s been a huge pro-cannabis cultural shift socially and culturally. This is now a nation-wide phenomenon. It’s not just California, or Colorado or Washington anymore.

DB: And so, Marty, coming up is 420 [April 20], what does 420 mean in the world of marijuana? And what will you be doing on 420?

ML: Well, April 20th has become kind of a national cannabis holiday, if you will. In my mind, it’s sort of part of a rite of spring that also involves so-called bicycle day, that’s a day in which Dr. Albert Hofmann discovered the effects of LSD in the 1940’s, and Earth Day. And 420 altogether seem to be, like I say, an annual rite of spring to certain elements in our community. And this 420 I’ll be at Animal Farms, that’s a dispensary up at Hopland at the Solar Living Center, with the Real Goods Store, 12 acre permaculture oasis, we described. They’re having an all day party. Everybody is invited. I think a lot of people are going to be there. We’ll have a speaker’s circle, music, food, a whole array of things.

DB: I don’t want to go out, I don’t want to be a bummer. I just want to give folks who are using marijuana in various ways who are going to dispensaries, what is your recommendation to people … in terms of being careful? Should they be frightened now of vape oil, of using these vapes? How does one be cautious in the age, in the 21st century, in the age of marijuana?

ML: Well, I think there are really three challenges, three big problems facing the consumer now. One is just the lack of adequate labeling on the products. Also, the pesticide residues, and there’s a lot of products tainted with pesticides in the cannabis area. And it’s a very significant problem. We’re actually working on this issue now, Project CBD.

But then, as you point out, the issue of vape pens. The problem is with these vape oils, oftentimes they’re cut with thinning agents. And some to watch out for that are apparently legal to include in these things but particularly potentially dangerous, very dangerous: propylene glycol and polyethylene glycol, if you see this on any of the marketing collateral for these vape oils, avoid those. Because when heated and inhaled, those particular compounds, propylene glycol and polyethylene glycol, turn into carcinogens, and can cause cancer. And it’s terrible, but it’s trouble in these vape pen oils. It’s not impossible to find some good ones. But we have seen, when we looked at those, vape oils, made from the hemp derived CBD, we haven’t found one yet that hasn’t been tainted by
these toxic thinning agents. And these are products that are directly used for medical patients. You wouldn’t use a vape oil pen with high concentration of CBD for recreational purposes.

But also, just in general, e-cigarettes, tobacco cigarettes have this propylene glycol in it, and I just fear we’re going to have a terrible day of reckoning, when these aren’t regulated. Unfortunately these things are regulated as being safe for oral consumption.

But they’ve never really been tested for heating and inhalation. And now there’s scientific reports that are coming in, not tested by the government, incidentally, but by individual scientists are quite ominous. So it’s something to avoid.

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Trump Lurches into Chaos and Conflict

President Trump lurched into the attack on Syria in much the same chaotic way that he has lurched from side to side on domestic policy and foreign affairs, notes ex-British diplomat Alastair Crooke.

By Alastair Crooke

It seems clear – as much as anything is “clear” – that the so-called Tomahawk “tweets” were intended as a message (in the sense that they did not constitute a military strategic act, per se), but even now, the address on these Tomahawk tweets remains disputed. Ostensibly, it was directed at Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, but Presidents Vladimir Putin of Russia, Xi Jinping of China, and Kim Jong Un of North Korea are considered probable addressees too (although no one seems certain of this, and U.S. statements are both confused and confusing).

But if we look a little closer at the U.S. National Security dynamics, it is clear that for National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster at least, the target is Russia (see below).

So what might have provoked this sudden lurch toward military action, and towards Trump’s great Syria policy “U-turn”? Ostensibly, nothing had changed on
the ground in Syria: Syria, Russia, and Iran were continuing to prosecute the war against the jihadists with slow, but solid success. Tactical military co-operation with America was growing, and had been effective in halting Turkish disruption.

President Assad had signaled an opened door to Syrian co-operation with U.S. forces in the war against “terrorists,” and President Putin was clear that he would welcome a summit with President Trump. Indeed, US officials were already anticipating the symbolic “defeat” of ISIS, with the fall of Mosul in Iraq and Raqa in Syria as a major Trump achievement. All in all, things might have been thought to be heading in a positive direction (from the U.S. perspective).

Then, in the space of some 120 hours, we move from policy U-turn (from “Assad can stay”), to missiles, following the improbable claim that President Assad was willing to jeopardize this benign change in his environment for the sake of chemical-bombing women and children, in some strategically insignificant village long held by jihadists of various radical ilk. (Claims of use of chemical weapons by both sides are hardly new in Syria, either: this conflict is the site of the most intensely fought propaganda-war in history).

A Complex Puzzle

In trying to find an explanation for this sudden, out-of-the-blue, discontinuity of U.S. policy, we are forced into speculation – trying to put together the parts to a complex puzzle:

The first (but only the first) piece relates to First Daughter Ivanka Trump. On seeing the distressing images of dying children on TV, she had an emotional melt-down, and “nagged her father into doing it.” (We have the reports of her brother Erik, Trump’s son, as well as the British Ambassador in Washington’s telegram to the British Prime Minister, stating that Ivanka was the initial catalyst). “Sure, Ivanka influenced the Syria strike decision,” Erik said.

But Pat Buchanan too (a former Republican Presidential candidate who has supported Trump) points to Trump’s own emotional state having played a pivotal role, when he asks “what was Trump’s rationale” for the action. (And in the same vein, so does the New York Times).

Buchanan writes: “What was Trump thinking? Here was his strategic rationale: ‘When you kill innocent children, innocent babies – babies, little babies – with a chemical gas … that crosses many, many lines, beyond a red line. … And I will tell you, that attack on children yesterday had a big impact on me … my attitude toward Syria and Assad has changed very much.’ Two days later, Trump was still emoting: ‘Beautiful babies were cruelly murdered in this very barbaric attack.
No child of God should ever suffer such horror.’”

In short, the initial reaction was emotive and impetuous – taken, it is clear, without bothering to wait for a considered analysis of facts, because obviously Assad did it, and Ivanka was in grief for the children.

From this initial reaction of emotion, and the desire to act, perhaps came into play Trump’s well-documented obsession to act, in every way, the opposite to that in which Obama acted. Roxanne Roberts, who sat next to Donald Trump at the 2011 White House Correspondents Dinner, wrote in April 2016:

“Regarding the vast mystery ... Why is the billionaire reality star running for president? I don’t know. You don’t know. But a handful of armchair psychoanalysts – reporters for major news organizations, no less – have decided that it all began at the 2011 White House Correspondents’ Association dinner, where Trump was the butt of jokes by President Obama and ‘Saturday Night Live’ comedian Seth Meyers.

“Trump was so humiliated by the experience, they say, that it triggered some deep, previously hidden yearning for revenge. ‘That evening of public abasement, rather than sending Mr. Trump away, accelerated his ferocious efforts to gain stature in the political world,’ wrote the New York Times last month.”

Judge his face for yourself (see here). So, unlike Obama, who prevaricated (in the wake of the 2013 claim of chemical weapons used by Syrian government forces), Trump did the opposite: He did not pause; he acted decisively and swiftly. Both White House spokesman Sean Spicer and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson kept pressing this narrative of Trump’s decisiveness and swiftness.

Of course, post hoc, the further rationalizations may have set in: this attack on Syria, on Putin’s protégé Assad, Trump may have mused, additionally would kill dead the Democrats’ meme that he was somehow “Putin’s man.” This is the now celebrated “Machiavelli rationale” justifying Trump’s Tomahawk decision – a clever ruse to disarm the disparaging claim that he was the “Manchurian Candidate.” Maybe this became an afterthought, but the evidence suggests that the actual decision was grounded in the emotional impact of the moment.

So far so good, but did his National Security Adviser tell him that the intelligence services had their doubts about Assad’s culpability? It seems they did. We do know, from multiple sources, that many in CIA and DIA, including those on the ground, did not accept that President Assad was responsible.

The Missing Intel Officials

Robert Parry, a long time Washington hand writes: “There is a dark mystery
behind the White House-released photo showing President Trump and more than a
dozen advisers meeting at his estate in Mar-a-Lago after his decision to strike
Syria with Tomahawk missiles: Where are CIA Director Mike Pompeo and other top
intelligence officials?

“Before the photo was released on Friday, a source told me that Pompeo had
personally briefed Trump on April 6 about the CIA’s belief that Syrian President
Bashar al-Assad was likely not responsible for the lethal poison-gas incident in
northern Syria two days earlier — and thus Pompeo was excluded from the larger
meeting as Trump reached a contrary decision.

“At the time, I found the information dubious since Trump, Secretary of State
Rex Tillerson and other senior U.S. officials were declaring quite confidently
that Assad was at fault. Given that apparent confidence, I assumed that Pompeo
and the CIA must have signed off on the conclusion of Assad’s guilt even though
I knew that some U.S. intelligence analysts had contrary opinions, that they
viewed the incident as either an accidental release of chemicals or an
intentional ploy by Al Qaeda rebels to sucker the U.S. into attacking Syria. …

“But in the photo of Trump and his advisers, no one from the intelligence
community is in the frame. You see Trump, Secretary of State Tillerson, National
Security Adviser H.R. McMaster, White House chief of staff Reince Priebus,
strategic adviser Steve Bannon, son-in-law Jared Kushner and a variety of other
officials, including some economic advisers who were at Mar-a-Lago in Florida
for the meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping.

“However, you don’t see Pompeo or Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats or
any other intelligence official. Even The New York Times noted the oddity in its
Saturday editions, writing: ‘If there were C.I.A. and other intelligence
briefers around, … they are not in the picture.’”

So, at the crucial NSA meeting that formalized the government decision, the
participants were “rigged” — in the sense that those who may have questioned the
narrative of Syrian government culpability, simply were excluded. McMaster was
the only intelligence professional present, and Trump got official endorsement
for his instinctive conviction that President Assad was responsible.

But, here we come to the fourth piece to this puzzle: Why did the formal
decision to attack the Syrian airbase metamorphose from a symbolic smack over
the knuckles for Assad to an ultimatum? An ultimatum furthermore, which was
clearly directed to Mr. Putin: Either Assad is your ally, or the U.S. — You
choose. Whomsoever drafted this ultimatum will have understood well that such a
binary choice was intended to visit humiliation on President Putin. Well, the
only substantive security/intelligence professional present was General McMaster.
– of whom an erstwhile admirer of the latter’s intellectual powers, has written:

“I have been forced … to come to the conclusion that McMaster is a big part of the problem in the mad rush to war on Syria that erupted, last week, war that could lead to a direct military confrontation with Russia. His appearance on Fox News Sunday was an indication of that but there were indications of this potential well beforehand, while he was still at US Army Training and Doctrine Command. His pre-occupation for the past two years, before he went to the White House, was, after all, how to reshape the Army for future war against Russia.”

Going After Russia

In the Fox interview, McMaster was asked a number of questions about Trump’s missile attack. Here is part of what he said: “The objective (of the strikes) was to send a very strong political message to Assad. And this is very significant because … this is the first time the United States has acted directly against the Assad regime, and that should be a strong message to Assad and to his sponsors.”

He added: “Russia should ask themselves, what are we doing here? Why are we supporting this murderous regime that is committing mass murder of its own population and using the most heinous weapons available … Right now, I think everyone in the world sees Russia as part of the problem.” (Fox News with Chris Wallace) (CF emphasis added)

To place this last answer in context, we need to refer to what McMaster, at a talk to CSIS in Washington D.C. in April 2016, said:

“And what we’re seeing now is we’ve awakened to, obviously, this threat from Russia, who is waging limited war for limited objectives – annexing Crimea, invading Ukraine – at zero cost, consolidating gains over that territory, and portraying the reaction by us and allies and partners, as escalatory: That what is required to deter a strong nation that is waging limited war for limited objectives on battlegrounds involving weaker states – or what Thomas – Mackinder called at the end of the 18th, early 19th century the shatter zones on the Eurasian landmass – what is required is forward deterrence, to be able to ratchet up the cost at the frontier …

“Of course, this is a sophisticated strategy: that Russia is employing – and we’re doing a study of this now with a number of partners – [one which] combines, really, conventional forces as cover for unconventional action, but a much more sophisticated campaign involving the use of criminality and organized crime, and … part of a broader effort to sow doubt and conspiracy theories across our alliance.”
McMaster went on: “And this effort, I believe, is aimed really not at defensive objectives, but at offensive objectives – to collapse the post-World War II, certainly the post-Cold War, security, economic, and political order in Europe, and replace that order with something that is more sympathetic to Russian interests.” (emphasis added)

So where does this McMaster aspect take us? It suggests that President Trump’s core instincts (seemingly) are still primarily focused on the domestic, U.S. scene. It is precisely here, however, in the domestic sphere that he has suffered serious reversals. After nearly 100 days, he has no legislation.

Some Capitol Hill Republicans have envisioned the nightmare scenario for 2017, and it goes like this: “No ObamaCare repeal. No tax reform. No trillion-dollar infrastructure package. No border wall.”

Additionally, “It’s not just drafting laws that Republicans have failed at – it’s drafting passable laws. Right now there are Republican factions who believe that health care should be abandoned so they can score a win on tax reform, and factions that believe tax reform isn’t possible without first dealing with the Affordable Care Act. There’s also an increasing recognition that they can’t get everything they want pushed through without seeking some Democratic support in the Senate, a factor that makes it even more likely that they will shed Freedom Caucus votes in the House. Because Republicans have spent decades declaring that anything which can garner a Democratic vote is intrinsically evil.” (Emphasis added)

Hitting a Wall

In short, Trump has hit a domestic legislative “wall.” And being instinctive, rather than intellectual-strategic by nature, when he hits one wall, he lurches off in another direction until he hits another wall. Now, at the urging of son-in-law Jared Kushner and his Goldmanite allies (Cohn, Phillips), Trump is lurching off in search of some “middle ground” that might help him get some legislation passed and save Republican candidates in the mid-term 2018 elections from a deserting base. Perhaps he thought that “decisive” action in Syria would help claim him the middle ground?

T.A. Frank in Vanity Fair warns succinctly: “He first went for establishment nominees in filling his Cabinet, then hit the wall of resistance from his base, and tacked back toward Bannon, then hit a wall of mainstream outrage over his travel ban, then lurched toward Reince Priebus and more stress on procedures, until he hit a wall with health-care overhaul, then lurched into an attack on Syria, running into a wall of outrage from his base and approval from all the wrong people. So he’ll probably lurch away from Syria, or try to. But acts of
war have a momentum of their own, and for many of Trump’s deplorables, this was not a compromise but a betrayal.”

Mr. Frank has put his finger on the problem exactly: It is three inter-connected problems, in fact. Firstly, in betraying your friends (your political base), to court your enemies: you risk losing both – but the loss of the former can be fatal, and the fleeting approbation of enemies, is, at best, granted on a short lease.

Just to be clear, the activist base that brought Trump to the Presidency is not happy. The divisions within Trump’s team are not just a matter of bad chemistry between Steve Bannon and Jared Kushner that can be corrected by a slap over the wrist – they are deeply ideological. Kushner (and Ivanka) are globalist, liberals from New York, and are both erstwhile Democrats. They represent the polar opposite of that for which stands Bannon and the America Firsters and nationalists.

But secondly, with legislative and GOP paralysis looming, mid-term elections in 2018, and strife within the Trump team already disorientated by Presidential “lurchings,” there is risk of systemic break-down.

And thirdly, in allowing McMaster to “weaponize” the “Tomahawk tweets” as an ultimatum to Putin (together with McMaster’s ambitions to “surge” in Syria and Iraq) Trump risks events spiraling out of control. There are interests in Syria who would happily escalate the situation into a standoff between America and Russia, in which either Putin or Trump will be humiliated by having to “blink first.”

Mr. Frank is likely right that Trump will “probably lurch away from Syria, or try to,” but as one expert on Russia ominously noted: “When I hear of the notion of imposing a no-fly zone over Syria, against the will of Russia, I get a knot in my stomach, because I fully understand where this could lead.”

We are lurching to a situation as potentially serious as was the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis.

Alastair Crooke is a former British diplomat who was a senior figure in British intelligence and in European Union diplomacy. He is the founder and director of the Conflicts Forum.
President Trump wants to show how different his policies are from President Obama’s, but that negative approach is careening his young administration into trouble, observes ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

The abortive attempt to pass House Speaker Paul Ryan’s bill for tax cuts and partial dismantling of the health care system vividly demonstrated the consequences of trying to govern according to what one is against, rather than what one is for.

If this overwhelmingly negative approach had not been the Republicans’ approach (and Donald Trump’s), the story of the Affordable Care Act, and the politics surrounding it, would have been far different. That is certainly true given how the ACA is centered on a system of commercial insurance that was earlier associated at the state level with Mitt Romney.

But with Congressional Republicans deciding from the beginning of Barack Obama’s presidency to oppose him at almost every turn and to deny him significant achievements (and, per Mitch McConnell, to make denying him a second term their top priority), and with the ACA being seen as Obama’s premier domestic legislative accomplishment, total and automatic opposition to the ACA was the course taken. Trashing Obamacare became a mantra divorced from what the law was or was not doing, and divorced from any careful consideration of Americans’ health care needs.

If the Republicans were to develop an alternative, they had seven years to do it. Instead, House Republicans spent that time, as part of the recitation of the mantra, passing dozens of repeal resolutions. When the dog finally caught the car – when the GOP won control of both the legislative and executive branches – the realities that the ACA was designed to deal with were still there.

Realities such as that if people who need extensive medical care now are to be covered, people who do not happen to need a lot of care right now will have to help pay for it, through buying commercial policies, paying penalties or taxes, or whatever. It was impossible both to assure affordable health care coverage for the great majority of Americans and to have a system that, however it might be dressed up, didn’t look a lot like Obamacare (impossible, that is, without going to a single-payer, Medicare-for-all system with which Democrats would be much more comfortable than Republicans). Hence the disarray among House Republicans and their political meltdown last week.
Blame-Shifting

President Trump has since been emphatic in trying to shift responsibility onto Democrats for anything unfavorable that happens henceforth with the health care system. But of course it is his administration, not Obama’s or any other Democratic one, that is now responsible for administering the law.

His assertion of Democratic responsibility, coupled with his forecast that the ACA will “explode”, gives him a motivation to sabotage the workings of the ACA. That sabotage has already begun, as it did earlier at the state level where Republican-controlled state governments refused federal funds to provide help under Medicaid to their citizens needing such assistance.

The years-long drumbeat about getting rid of the ACA has probably been the biggest source of hesitation to insurers about participating in the insurance exchanges created under the act. Since entering office, the Trump administration has been curtailing advertising encouraging people to sign up for insurance and moving away from enforcement of ACA-related requirements such as the individual mandate.

We are seeing here an example of the most perverse possible consequence when a party of No becomes a government of No: the intentional undermining of a public program to make it work poorly rather than well.

The handling of the ACA is perhaps an extreme example because it became an extreme Republican obsession. But some of the same dynamics may be seen elsewhere, including foreign policy. For example, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, otherwise known as the Iran nuclear agreement, occupied a place in Barack Obama’s foreign policy comparable in significance to the ACA in domestic policy. So again, it elicited reflexive Republican opposition.

It does not appear that Trump will pull directly out of the JCPOA; doing so would obviously negate any assertions that the agreement would “explode” on its own. The preferred methods of sabotage include imposition of enough additional sanctions on Iran that the Iranians would proclaim the agreement was voided by the United States reneging on its obligations. And like the ACA, the JCPOA requires ongoing attention and implementation. For the United States to remain in compliance, the administration will have to renew some waivers to existing sanctions legislation.

Thus Trump could in effect sabotage the agreement by doing nothing. The JCPOA example illustrates another attribute of a government of No, which is a failure to consider what the alternatives are to whatever is the policy being opposed, and to consider the relative merits of each alternative. Opposition to the JCPOA
has all along failed to face the fact that the alternative to the agreement, which is no agreement, would mean an end to the special limitations on Iran’s nuclear program and an end to the enhanced international inspections of that program.

In many other areas of foreign policy, in which circumstances and problems are imposed on policymakers at least as much as they tend to be with domestic policies, it is difficult to come up with approaches that look new and different, as well as being prudent and effective. There are only so many things the United States can do with good effect, and chances are that the relevant options have already been thoroughly considered.

**Tackling ISIS**

Thus, key attributes of many policies look very similar from one administration to another. This has been the case so far with some of the major foreign policy challenges facing the Trump administration, such as the fight against ISIS.

Although candidate Trump had berated Obama for not taking more effective action against the group, when Trump’s Secretary of State presented to a gathering last week the administration’s plans for dealing with ISIS, those plans, in the words of the *New York Times* report on the meeting, “closely parroted Mr. Obama’s strategy.” Consistent with that resemblance, so far the Trump administration has followed the general lines of Obama’s policies regarding military activity in Syria.

Similarly with the problem of North Korea and its nuclear weapons: even though Secretary Tillerson spoke earlier this month about a “new approach” toward North Korea, as Jeffrey Lewis observes, the supposedly new approach is “in fact, the old approach,” with even many of the same exact words that the Obama administration had used.

For any administration that thinks more in terms of what it wants rather than what it opposes, such similarities are not necessarily a problem. The continuities are accepted, while asserting responsible stewardship of the nation’s interests and openness to adjustments and improvements in existing policies where appropriate.

But for an administration of No, the similarities are a problem. With its coming to power based overwhelmingly on rejection of what came before, how can it defend continuation of what it rejected?

A resulting hazard is the temptation on the part of such an administration to go out of its way to pursue policies that look new and different even though they are not prudent or effective. Such a hazard may be materializing with moves to
become more deeply immersed in the Yemeni civil war on the side favored by the Saudis and Emiratis, whose intervention in the conflict has multiplied the human suffering without bringing the war any closer to a conclusion.

Other motivations probably are also at play, including an itch to be assertive anywhere there is a possible Iran angle (an itch exhibited by Secretary of Defense James Mattis, whose department has forwarded a proposal for escalation of the U.S. involvement in Yemen). But an escalation that can be portrayed, as this one is, as a removing of “Obama-era restrictions” will be attractive to the Trump White House because it can be described as contrary to something Obama did. Trump’s setback on health care and his sliding poll numbers will tend to make the temptation all the greater.

Damage that results from succumbing to this sort of temptation is likely to continue until and unless this administration can decide, more than it has so far, what it stands for – in the sense of workable policies, not just slogans or promises – and not just what it is against.

Paul R. Pillar, in his 28 years at the Central Intelligence Agency, rose to be one of the agency’s top analysts. He is author most recently of Why America Misunderstands the World. (This article first appeared as a blog post at The National Interest’s Web site. Reprinted with author’s permission.)

Resisting the Trump/Ryan Health Plan

The complex Obamacare system struggled to gain popularity, but now that Republicans are moving to replace it with a less generous program, many medical professionals are irate, reports Dennis J Bernstein.

By Dennis J Bernstein

President Trump and House Speaker Paul Ryan are twisting congressional arms to get enough votes to push through repeal of the Affordable Care Act and replace it with a scheme that relies heavily on tax credits and would, according to the Congressional Budget Office, leave 24 million more uninsured Americans in 10 years. But there is also an army of activists and progressive healthcare workers who are opposing repeal without a real plan for providing broad-based health insurance.

On the front lines of this information battle is Dr. Carol Paris, president of Physicians for a National Health Program and a member of the steering committee
for Health Over Profit for Everyone. She confronted Trump in Nashville, at a recent campaign style rally for “Repeal and Replace.”

“I meant no disrespect to the President or his supporters,” said Dr. Paris, after she was “rather roughly” taken out of the mostly pro-Trump gathering. “I simply did what I felt I had to do as a physician and American. Tens of thousands of people are dying needlessly due to lack of health insurance, and millions are suffering with financial burdens due to unaffordable health insurance and unaffordable health care. I know that a simple solution has already been introduced into the House of Representatives called H.R. 676 – Expanded and Improved Medicare for All.”

I spoke with Dr. Paris about her actions at the Trump rally and her concerns about what is in store for the 24 million additional people who will end up outside the America’s profit-oriented health insurance system.

Dennis Bernstein: You’re from Nashville, tell us why you decided to go there and actually make a scene in public.

Carol Paris: Well, I want to acknowledge first that there were 2,500, approximately, 2,500 protesters outside of the rally. And these are hard working people who stood out in the cold, and took time at the end of their day to protest. I happen to be 64 and retired, so I have the freedom to get in line at 9:30 in the morning, and stand in the cold all day to make sure that I get a seat upfront. And I made that decision partly because I have the freedom to do that, and mostly because I really felt from a strategic standpoint, that this was the time to take a direct action.

DB: And, you were definitely a strong critic of Obamacare. And you were vocal with the groups that you work with, in terms of the failures of Obamacare. And so this is just a continuum, a resistance to, I guess, Obamacare on steroids. But, tell us about the confrontation. What exactly happened, and how did it feel to stand up? Were you afraid? Tell us about that.

CP: Well, of course, I was afraid. I wasn’t raised to be confrontational, and so standing up to the President of the United States, and interrupting him was frankly, terrifying. But, it also was overshadowed, that fear was overshadowed by just an abiding conviction, we have people dying in this country because they can’t get health insurance, and health care. I’m a physician, and I can’t abide that. I really felt compelled to do this.

DB: And what did you do?

CP: Well, I knew that I was not going to be able to say very much, because I was really just waiting for him to take a breather, and find a quiet, relatively
quiet moment in-between people cheering for every other word he said. So, when I thought that that moment had arrived I just stood up, held my sign as high as I could, and what I said was “Put your name on a plan that works, Medicare for all.” And I just kept chanting that. There was so much more I would have liked to have said. But I knew that I wasn’t going to get the opportunity at that point.

DB: I watched the video. ... You repeated it a number of times and then you were approached by security. How did they treat you?

CP: The police officers were polite. One of them kind of pushed me a bit, because I was trying to exit past the press table, and he was not inclined to allow me to do that. So, he did sort of forcibly move me into an exit aisle. But, beyond that it was fine.

DB: And what did the people around you... did they start... they started to boo right? There was a lot of discontent with your expression. And how did the President react?

CP: Well, at that point I was distracted, and didn’t actually... had stopped looking at the President. When I began, I looked right at him. He wasn’t looking at me at that point. And, then I really just focused on saying what I was saying, as loudly as I could, and was more interested in trying to direct some attention to the press table because I wanted the press to see that I was protesting. So, I don’t really know, it’s only in watching the video afterwards that I see that he actually acknowledged that someone was protesting, and made a comment, I guess.

DB: I think he said that that will be the lead on the 6... he was probably right too. And that’s, of course, your point. And we want to speak a lot more with you about your experience, your background, and your response to Trumpcare. Take us... you’re somebody who’s paid a lot of attention to all these plans, and been in the struggle for quite a bit. So, take us through what you see now in terms of where we are right now, this so-called transformation we’re hearing about. What do you see the dangers? Will we go from bad to worse? We saw the report coming out of the Congressional Budget Office investigation. Give us a sense of what you think will happen here if Trump has his way?

CP: I think that if Paul Ryan and Tom Price have their way, because frankly, Donald Trump, I don’t think, based on what he said ... when I reviewed it, he really didn’t elaborate much on what the American Health Care Act would actually entail. He just talked about stage one, stage two, and stage three. So, I think he is just sort of telling thing, what he’s able to understand. This is really Ryan and Price’s...
DB: Right. So what do you think the implications are here, the break down?

CP: I think that they have, from the day that Obamacare was passed, they have had both Obamacare, and Medicaid and Medicare on the chopping block, and to privatize Medicare as much as possible. So, they now have the opportunity to do that. And that’s what they’re doing. But they’re not changing… to call Trumpcare anything other than just Obamacare made leaner and meaner, is to elevate it beyond what it deserves. It really is just Obamacare, only made even more skimpy and lean. And giving even more money, our tax dollars, to the wealthy. It’s another gift to the rich, and... at the expense of poor, working class people, and especially the 50 – 64 year old age group. They’re really going to suffer financially from this piece of legislation.

DB: And, could you talk a little bit about what the possibilities are here. People say this is impossible. We hear about socialized medicine, but we have sort of one of the worst systems in the modern world. How possible is it for us... how affordable is it, for us to move into a system where everybody really is cared for in a way that’s respectful and guarantees the fact that it is a human right?

CP: I won’t argue that point with you. But I don’t have to argue that point with you, if I can argue the point from a strictly cost effective, fiscal responsibility framework. We already spend in this country more per capita for health care than any other country in the world. And we’re not getting the health care we’re paying for.

We still have 28 million people uninsured, in spite of the fact that even just in our public dollars, we’re spending more than any other country in the world, not to mention the private money on top of that. So, we’re spending the money we’re just not getting our money’s worth. And, if we were to eliminate the profit and the bureaucratic waste, in the for-profit insurance industry... the most recent study that came out estimates somewhere around $506 billion a year would be saved and could be used to actually provide health care.

So, it is feasible to do this. This is not an outrageous idea. However, I think expecting that either the Republican Party or the Democratic Party are going to champion this and take it forward is unlikely. I mean, we had a Democratic president with a majority in both houses of Congress in 2009, and he wouldn’t even let single-payer have a seat at the table. It wasn’t even allowed to be discussed.

So, I don’t have big hopes that the Democratic Party is going to champion this, in the future, unless we make it toxic for them not to. And we can do the same thing with the Republicans. Make it toxic for them not to support the national
health program.

DB: Dr. Carol Paris ... is the current president of the national organization, Physicians for a National Health Program. She’s on the steering committee of Health over Profit for Everyone. Interesting name for a group, Health over Profit for Everyone. That really is at the heart of the matter, whether the profit motive or humanity is going to motivate us as we go forward and try and express a real care for our people, for our children, for the future that way, right? This is the big one.

CP: This is the big one. And what the Health over Profit campaign is, is it’s a grassroots based, building movement to... because we know that it’s going... to build a movement takes time. And we’re looking at as much as 3 – 5 years, but that’s what it’s going to take to make this issue such common place knowledge for everyday Americans, and to make it toxic for their legislators not to support it. That’s what it’s going to take. So, that’s what the Health over Profit campaign is all about. It’s a grassroots movement. And right now it is base building and educating.

We know that any active, and the active, sustained support of only 3.5% of the population is always successful, in a campaign. There’s research that shows... we don’t need 51% of the American people to support this. Even though polls show that the vast majority of Americans do support it. What we do need is 3.5% of the population to make an active, sustained effort to influence their members of Congress, and make it toxic for them not to do the right thing. If we don’t do that then our members of Congress will continue to do what their donors tell them to do. And their lobbyists and donors are the very wealthy insurance industry, and pharmaceutical industry.

DB: How would you characterize the situation now? It’s sort of deeply confusing for anybody trying to follow it. People are still signing up on the registries but everything is going towards a closing. Are people signing up in vain? This is serious confusion that’s being created by this process that’s going on in Washington.

CP: It’s serious confusion, and it started when Barack Obama refused to allow a national health program to be considered in 2009. Because it just created more opportunity for the for-profit insurance industry to profit from the suffering of the American people. So I don’t think this is just the fault of the Republicans, they’re just who happen to be in charge right now.

DB: You’ve been protesting on this one for quite a while, haven’t you?

CP: Yes. I have. I joined Physicians for a National Health Program in 2009, when
I really became convinced that it was impossible to try to legislate the insurance industry to behave in an ethical way. And so I gave up on that, and said “We really just need to have a national health program.

DB: So, you know the system. You have an idea of the suffering to come. What’s it going to look like? Are we going to have crowded emergency rooms? Are we going to have people out in the street? What’s medical going to look like if they go... if they’re hell-bent on going forward, without anything as a replacement? You know just to get that squeeze, move the money up again, another shift of what’s left, of the wealth, of the working class, and the middle class. You know, take their houses, take their medical plans now. But this is profound. This is where we see the implications of the mass, unequal distribution of wealth.

CP: And that’s what we’re going to see more of. The estimate from the CBO is that beginning in 2018, 14 million more people will be uninsured. And that’s mostly due to removing the mandate. So, young people, for the most part, will just stop purchasing insurance. And then over 5 years it will go to 21 million, and over 10 years to 24 million. So... and add that to the 28 million that are already uninsured, we’ll have 52 million uninsured people, in this country. And the way that that’s going to translate is that even with the tax credit, that is a much skimpier credit than the subsidies. And while they... the Republican plan may be to in phase 2 or phase 3, create the mechanism for insurance companies to write policies to have lower premiums, the only way you can reduce the cost of a premium, is to reduce what it actually covers. And so, right now Obamacare has certain regulations, that you can’t call this insurance if it doesn’t have an actuarial value of at least 60%. Which means that 60% of the cost is paid by the insurance company, and 40% is paid by the enrollee.

What we’re going to see are plans that have an actuarial value as low as 50%, and that barely even qualifies to be called insurance. So, that may be what they’re selling. And that may be affordable for younger people, but for people who are older, and are only getting until they’re 60, I think what is it... $2,000.00 tax credit? And, we’ve now given the insurance companies the permission to do age rating up to 5 times the cost that a young person would be charged. They can now increase it 5 times for an older person.

That’s going to create a premium that’s unaffordable, even with the tax credits that they’re offering. I saw one estimate that said a person making $26,000 a year at age 64 would have a premium... that would have insurance that would be costing them over $13,000 a year, just about half of their income. That’s if we pass the American Health Care Act as it is written today.

DB: Well, as you say there is a bit of resistance. It’s coming from all sides, I
guess. But it’s certainly not heading in the direction that you believe is correct, and that you’ve been fighting for, doctor, for so many years. But it does, in a strange way it seems inevitable. And it may be this, as people organize, this will burst through the other side of this... what’s really heading towards a massive failure and a great deal of suffering. I guess as a medical doctor, this is in a way very personal, you see this up close.

CP: I did. I’m retired now, but I certainly did see it up close for many, many years. And it’s a tragedy, and people have to decide whether to purchase their medication, or pay their rent, or buy food. No one should have to make that kind of a decision, in a country where we’re... as I said before, we’re already spending more money per capita than any other country, in the world that’s providing universal health care for their citizens. So, no, this is not something that I find acceptable.

DB: And, it’s dramatic in the sense that those most deeply affected are children. Children, and then what goes along with that. The inability to participate in a full way in school, because the health is not there. So, this is... this reverberates, doesn’t it?

CP: It reverberates. Racial disparities certainly play into this. There’s so many aspects of social justice that play into this problem that could be improved if we simply did what we have the ability to do. But there is not the political will to do that, yet. And that’s what we will continue to work on.

DB: Well, it’s shocking. I travel on public transportation, take the underground. There are a lot of people who are out on the street, who are wandering around , who deserve to be cared for. So many veterans, so many people who have done so much in their own lives, seeing more and more families out on the street. So, this is a reflection of the health of the society. And we appreciate all the time that you have taken onto this. If people want to learn more about your work, or want to be a part of this movement, this vision towards a health care system that is humane and treats us all the same, how do people follow your work, or what do you recommend?

CP: I would recommend two websites, pnhp.org which stands for Physicians for a National Health Program. I would also recommend healthoverprofit.org. For people who would like to become active or to learn more about this. And I really especially encourage people who have questions, who aren’t sure that they understand what this is, or would like to know more... Dr. Flowers and I will be doing a webinar on March 27th on the healthoverprofit.org web site. You can sign up for the webinar. And it’s going to be a call in. People who have questions can just call us and we’ll do the best we can to answer their questions.
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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**Embattled Trump Reneges on Health Vow**

President Trump promised health insurance for all, but – now dependent on the political protection of House Speaker Paul Ryan – he is supporting a plan that will push millions outside the system, writes Michael Winship.

By Michael Winship

Yes, ladies and gentlemen, Donald Trump still insists he’s going to Make America Great Again! Mind you, it won’t be a healthy or vigorous America – in fact, it will be coughing and wheezing to the grave, but boy, will it be great!

If you ever needed further evidence that Trump doesn’t give a single good goddamn about the people who elected him, just look at his treacherous turnabout on health care. This Republican “repeal and replace” bill stinks on so many levels I’m tempted to say it should be taken far out to sea and dumped into the deepest depths of the Mariana Trench but I have too much regard for marine life, even the kind with the big googly eyes and the really scary teeth.

Remember that Trump was the carnival barker who declared during the campaign, “I am going to take care of everybody. I don’t care if it costs me votes or not. Everybody’s going to be taken care of much better than they’re taken care of now.” And right before his inauguration he told The Washington Post, “We’re going to have insurance for everybody. There was a philosophy in some circles that if you can’t pay for it, you don’t get it. That’s not going to happen with us.”

Then along comes the proposed Republican bill, which over a decade, according to the now-famous report from the Congressional Budget Office, would see 24 million fewer Americans with coverage, doubling the number of uninsured. Trump’s own supporters would take it on the chin for what he tweeted is “our wonderful new health care bill.”

According to John McCormick at Bloomberg News: “Counties that backed him would get less than a third of the relief that would go to counties where Hillary Clinton won. The two individual tax cuts contained in the Republican plan to replace Obamacare apply only to high-earning workers and investors, roughly
those with incomes of at least $200,000 for individuals and $250,000 for married couples.”

And remember all that nonsense about Obamacare’s “death panels,” a falsehood so rotten to the core it was declared PolitiFact’s 2009 Lie of the Year? Well, this Republican bill actually would kill people. Those older would pay more than the young, it would strip Planned Parenthood of funding and Medicaid programs would be slashed. It would eliminate money for the Prevention and Public Health Fund, which provides epidemiology, immunization and health-screening programs. And there would be no mandate that employers with 50 employees or more provide coverage.

Julia Belluz at Vox reports on: “[V]ery high-quality studies on the impacts of health insurance on mortality, which come to some pretty clear estimates. This research suggests that we would see more than 24,000 extra deaths per year in the US if 20 million people lost their coverage. Again, 20 million is less than the 24 million the CBO thinks will lose insurance by 2026. So the death toll from an Obamacare repeal and replacement could be even higher.”

Ignoring the Needy

Notice that Trump has barely lifted a finger to assist those who need genuine reform that would bring quality care to all, the kind of help he promised as a candidate. Instead, he has directed his energies at helping Speaker Paul Ryan win over right-wing House members by promising to make the bill even crueler to those who need health care the most.

Take a look at this statement issued by tea partier and Alabama Republican Rep. Robert Aderholt after meeting with Trump on Friday, a statement so mind-boggling it’s worth quoting in full:

“President Trump called me to the Oval Office this morning to discuss the American Healthcare Act, because of his understanding that I could not support the current language of the bill. I expressed to the president my concern around the treatment of older, poorer Americans in states like Alabama. I reminded him that he received overwhelming support from Alabama’s voters.

“The president listened to the fact that a 64-year-old person living near the poverty line was going to see their insurance premiums go up from $1,700 to $14,600 per year. The president looked me in the eye and said, ‘These are my people and I will not let them down. We will fix this for them.’

“I also asked the president point blank if this House bill was the one that he supported. He told me he supports it ‘1,000 percent.’ After receiving the president’s word that these concerns will be addressed, I changed my vote to
Can you believe it? Trump’s behind the bill 1,000 percent, the President claims, but don’t worry, we’ll fix it. It’s hard to decide which of the two men is behaving more hypocritically: Trump saying he won’t let the people down or Aderholt claiming to believe the President actually will keep his word. Each is endorsing a cutthroat scheme that will bring nothing but grief to the people but hundreds of billions in tax breaks to the wealthy and vast profits to the insurance industry.

According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities: “The top 400 highest-income taxpayers – whose annual incomes average more than $300 million apiece – each would receive an average annual tax cut of about $7 million, we estimate from Internal Revenue Service (IRS) data.”

Andy Slavitt, who was President Obama’s acting administrator of the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services told The Washington Post, “This is a massive tax cut for unpopular industries and wealthy individuals. It is about cutting care for lower-income people, seniors, people with disabilities and kids to pay for the tax cut.”

This is, in the words of Sen. Chris Murphy, D-Connecticut, “a dumpster fire of a bill that was written on the back of a napkin behind closed doors because Republicans know this is a disaster.” But thanks to ineptitude and an inchoate, ill-planned rush to pass the legislation, it looks as if the current Republican bill may be on its way to failure, if not in the House then in the Senate.

Lucky us – for now. But if the GOP and Trump White House do manage to force on us anything short of what’s really needed – single-payer, universal health care – we’re doomed to live in a nation the motto of which may no longer be “In God We Trust” but instead, “Die young and leave a good-looking corpse.”

Michael Winship is the Emmy Award-winning senior writer of Moyers & Company and BillMoyers.com. Follow him on Twitter at @MichaelWinship. [This article first appeared at http://billmoyers.com/story/trump-gop-prescription-america-dont-get-sick/]

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Greens’ Stein Faults Two-Party System

Some Democrats blame Jill Stein for “siphoning off” crucial votes from Hillary Clinton and thus helping to elect Donald Trump, but Stein insists that the two-party straitjacket is the real enemy of democracy, reports Dennis J Bernstein.
By Dennis J Bernstein

Former Green Party presidential candidate, Dr. Jill Stein, remains undaunted in her belief that the only real and significant change in U.S. politics will come through a third party that can finally break the headlock that the Democrats and Republicans hold on the electoral system.

Stein, who has been running for state and federal office since her unsuccessful run for Governor of Massachusetts in 2002, has yet to win an election and received about 1.4 million votes (or about 1 percent of the total) in the presidential election of 2016.

I spoke with her on March 10 about what comes next for her and the Green Party, as well as her thoughts on the policies of both Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton.

Dennis Bernstein: You are here in San Francisco, doing a bunch of things. But you’re going to be participating a little bit later in an action in support of Standing Rock and indigenous rights. And I want to ask you for your gut reaction to seeing that almost the first thing that Donald Trump did was go after the indigenous communities, and get those pipelines pumping heavy crude.

Jill Stein: It’s a sign of what we’re up against: this incredibly authoritarian, neo-fascist, anti-human rights predator, and who has pretended to be a friend of the working people, and who has really been revealed in all of his glory with his billionaire cabinet composed of people who are attacking the very cabinet departments that they are said to be head of. Who is enlarging the military, expediting the pipelines, expediting all sorts of destructive fossil fuel projects, attacking immigrants. It’s really reigning down on all sides.

The issue of indigenous rights, and pipelines and Standing Rock, brings so many of these issues together. With incredible courage, and vision, and passion, that so engaged the hearts and minds all across America, that we all saw that we are all Standing Rock. That this is where democracy… our rights to protest, indigenous rights, human rights, and our right to air, and water, and the climate that we can live in. They all converge.

And, it’s like the match here that lit the fire is just the passion of our indigenous brothers and sisters who are ready to stand up. Not just for them: they’re standing up for us all. And that passion is not going away. They may be evicted for now, but the fight is going on. It’s continuing in court. It’s continuing in the local struggles against, I guess, what’s called the Klamath River Pipeline [Pacific Connector Pipeline], and LNG [liquid natural gas] Pipeline, that’s going to go under the Klamath River, and put it at great risk.
The important thing here is that we've been successful in stopping fossil fuel projects over the past two years. That has really put the fear of God into this industry. They are in the process of becoming stranded assets. They’re trying to hurry up and get them built before they are no longer financially viable.

DB: The price is so low, they can’t even sell the stuff.

JS: And so, the important thing here is for us to just… to double down. And to be strengthened, to be encouraged, to get past their propaganda of powerlessness, and to know that we still have the numbers, in spite of the election of Donald Trump, which was an obvious distortion of the system.

But even more than that, it’s a system that’s become so toxic, so predominated by big money, corporate money, and corporate media, that it’s become unhinged. We have an unhinged, toxic political system. Donald Trump represents, really, the breakdown of this bi-partisan system that people have lost faith in.

Polls last year, well, early on in the election, showed 90% of Americans have lost confidence in our political institutions, in the bi-partisan system in Congress, the Executive, and the Judiciary. You can’t get more explicit than that, 90%.

At the other end, at the very end of the election, it was 80% of the people who described their feelings towards the election as one of disgust. And the American people are ready to move on. Had we… we were like one open debate from totally throwing out the bums, and moving forward to the future we deserve.

And everything that we’re hearing now, both in what the extraordinarily destructive actions of Donald Trump, but it’s like the neoliberal runway that he launched from, the deportation of three million immigrants, the meltdown of the climate, where the White House was signing an end to the export ban of fossil fuel. They were actually signing the dotted line to end that ban. In other words, to enable the export of fossil fuels again, while the Paris Accords were being signed. So, with one hand they’re claiming this great environmental world, with the other they’re just massively increasing.

So, the point here is we need to move forward. We need to break up with this abusive political relationship. We need to go forward with the future we deserve, because we’re out of time, and it’s on us. We’re the ones we’ve been waiting for. We have the power, people are standing up, joining in. Follow the example of Standing Rock. We can fix these problems.

DB: I love that poem by June Jordan, put to music by Sweet Honey in the Rock […] and I notice that that was sort of the anthem that played in the beginning of the Women’s March, in Washington, D.C. June Jordan is of this community,
contributed to this show. So, we’re happy that she is still being evoked.

Well, let’s talk about what’s happening today. You have some expertise. We all saw the dangerous possibilities of the ObamaCare program. We’re seeing something else go on now. You have some knowledge here, you want to talk about this?

JS: Sure. So, ObamaCare was a very mixed bag. We should have had Medicare For All, a single-payer system. Healthcare is a human right. ObamaCare was basically RomneyCare, writ large. It was essentially a national roll out of what we did in Massachusetts, under Mitt Romney, who launched that RomneyCare movement in order to stop single-payer. That’s really where all of this originated, because single-payer was going like gangbusters in Massachusetts. We very nearly won a referendum that was only beat back by about two percentage points, having been outspent by 30 – 1 or 50 – 1, whatever it was, by the industry.

DB: It got really close.

JS: It was, and that’s why they came up with this diversionary measure. So, it expanded Medicaid, that was great. It did some other things, no pre-existing conditions, etc. It made care affordable for people who were poor.

But for working people it created this mandate. You shouldn’t be funding health care for some people on the backs of other people. We should be funding health care through the incredible abundance of this country. We are not a country of scarcity. We are not a country of austerity.

We are a country that is being bankrupted by a military budget that has just gone hog-wild, which Donald Trump wants to further expand. But it’s pretty toxic to start with. It’s over 50% of our discretionary dollars. It’s almost half of your income taxes going for what? For wars, and regime change that has created failed states, mass refugee migrations, and worse terrorist’s threats.

So, this doesn’t fix the problem. More of a catastrophic policy of militarism – we’re about to go into Syria now, with ground troops – that’s not going to make it better. This, again, is yet another reason why this is a Hail Mary moment [a desperate effort with little chance of success].

And it’s not only that our water is at risk, our climate is melting down, and in fact, that melt down is accelerating. An entire generation of young people are locked in debt, jobs are just not sustainable when average wages for workers are barely at the poverty level. We’re not going to get out of here alive.

DB: […] What do you think is going to happen here? What’s your best assessment of… we know where the Republicans are going with this. They’re hell-bent on passing this stuff. There’s going to be some resistance but essentially they’re
going to be able to get whatever they want. What are the implications?

JS: Well, it’s not clear that they will. And back to the subject on the table about TrumpCare. There’s not agreement about this, at all. It may not pass either House. And Trump is not a uniter, in spite of what he says. It’s very clear he’s not a uniter. He doesn’t bring people together, doesn’t have, kind of, higher order passions and visions.

DB: I haven’t seen him smile once since he’s been elected.

JS: I know.

DB: You notice that? God, they’re disappointed they won.

JS: Not him, and not his wife either, who really looks miserable. The two of them on Election Day... [and] ... on Inauguration Day it looked like they were at a funeral. They did not expect this. Now, he’s being progressively cornered. He’s had to lose some of his key advisors, he’s lost some key cabinet positions, his ratings continue to plummet. They were rock bottom to start with. He is a land mine of liabilities: legal, constitutional and ethical liabilities. There’s just case after case, lawsuits against him. His immigrant policy is about to be stopped again, for the second time. So, this is a guy who should not be in office. He’s being stopped.

I think it’s important for us to remember Richard Nixon, one of the most corrupt and authoritarian presidents in our history. What did we do under the rule of Richard Nixon? We brought the troops home from Vietnam. We established women’s right to choose, from a very conservative Supreme Court. We got the Clean Air Act, Clean Water Act, OSHA, protecting workers’ health and safety. How did we do that? We did it because we were out in the streets with a passion knowing that our lives were on the line, because our brothers were being sent to die, to Vietnam.

Well, guess what? Now, we’ve woken up to find our lives are on the line again, whether it’s from poverty and homelessness; a generation locked into unpayable student debt; from the expanding war which is blowing back at us with a vengeance; from the climate [warming] which is now accelerating, given the news last week that the meltdown of permafrost is well established, and is moving forward at horrific speed. And all the dire predictions from Jim Hansen, that we could see 10 or 20 feet of sea level rise, as soon as 2060. That’s not far away.

Well, guess what? Those predictions are coming far closer now, because those models did not include the impact of methane. We didn’t know when this was going to hit. The meltdown of the permafrost, for those who aren’t familiar, it’s basically frozen, organic debris, like dinosaur flesh, and plant matter, and
stuff like that. It’s just… the organic matter, the living creatures and plant life, of the ages, that’s been frozen. It’s becoming unfrozen. That means it turns into methane, which is one of the most powerful greenhouse gases. This is a major accelerator of climate change.

So, it means that it’s time to stand up. It means that we are out of time. It means it’s time to take action, now. So, people are getting out, knowing that our lives are on the line, for all these issues. On account of immigrant deportations, and the attack on women, and all the rest.

DB: Let me just stop you there, because that’s the other issue I want to hit. I’m referring to it [the bulk-up of US Border and ICE agents] as Trump’s jobs program for ex-military. And I was joking when I said to the audience the other day that, I swear, I know I’m going to open Stars and Stripes, the U.S. Army newspaper, and see major ads.

So I got a call right after the show, from a listener who said, “Are you kidding me? Look at page 9, Stars and Stripes, huge, double page ads, $10,000 and $9,000, special courts and expanded private prisons.” This is really the cutting edge of, if you will, the new civil rights movement.

If we have a responsibility, it is in terms of the incredible attack on brown people in this country. Undocumented workers who do the hardest work, and, of course, the whole Middle East. Anything darker than John Wayne, and you’re in trouble. And we’re seeing Sikh, the other day, a Sikh man was assassinated, because he was like Osama Bin Laden, or something.

JS: Yes, you’re right. And this is where immigrant rights come together with unbridled militarism. Because this refugee crisis… it’s a refugee crisis, it’s not an immigration crisis, it’s a refugee crisis. We create that crisis through our military policies, not only in the Middle East, but also [by] overturning democracies: Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador. Where we, [...] through our U.S. trained death squads, or through the outright overturning of democracies, we’ve created this culture of violence that forces people to flee over the border. So militarism, economic exploitation, and the role of NAFTA, which was awful for workers here, as well as farmers south of the border.

These are fixable problems. They can only be fixed together. To my mind, that’s what a political party is. A political party is a coalition that’s going to work together around an explicit agenda for people, planet and peace, over profit. The time has come. We have to stand up, like our lives depend on it, because they do.

And, now, this is sort of the silver lining behind this awful scary thunder
cloud here that has just descended all over us: That our lives are on the line, so we gotta stand up and do it, in the way that we did under Richard Nixon. And then we impeached him. Trump’s days are numbered.

We just saw the president of South Korea impeached, today, upheld by the courts. Why did this happen? In part it was millions of people getting out into the street. It happened in Guatemala, two years ago. In East Germany, Chris Hedges tells the story, he was there as an investigative reporter. And the democracy advocates were meeting and saying “How are we going to get rid of this awful, authoritarian government?” And they said “Maybe in ten years.” The next week the wall came down, because people came out.

We’ve just... we’re at the breaking point, and we’re also at the wake up point, right now. And so, this is going to accelerate resistance. We’re not only creating sanctuary communities, but we’re actually now building sanctuary institutions, where people will be kept safe, where the ICE agents can’t even go. And, there are other plans that may be in the works with some indigenous tribes, and the role that they can play. Because they are essentially independent nations.

So, there are very exciting things here. In the same way that the Muslim community stood up for the Jewish community and raised money in the face of these anti-Semitic attacks, and all the bomb threats that are going on. We’re seeing these wonderful, just life-affirming, humanity-affirming alliances. And, as we wake up to the fact that our days are numbered right now, and that it is in our hands. It’s only us, we are the ones we’ve been waiting for. The time has come, enough of the lesser evil. It’s time to stand up, and fight for the greater good.

And even this issue of spoiling elections, and splitting the votes. Well, hello, there’s a system called ranked-choice voting which Greens have been promoting forever. The state of Maine just passed it by voter referendum.

[California Governor] Jerry Brown just vetoed it [in California]. There was enabling legislation that was passed by the Legislature and Jerry Brown vetoed it because Democrats are at war with the liberation of our votes. They rely on extortion. They rely on intimidation, and fear, in order to hold people back. Why do they do that? Because they know that they can’t earn your vote.

Ranked-choice voting calls their bluff. It allows you to actually rank your choices. If your first choice loses, your vote is automatically reassigned to your second choice. That’s a win-win on our democracy. There are win-wins for every issue that faces us.
Right now we’re looking at a lose-lose [situation], with this corporate-sponsored duopoly. The Democrats might give us ten more years than the Republicans would, of survival, under Democratic policies. But it’s a sinking ship, with the duopoly. It’s time to get off the ship. Our lives depend on getting off that ship and launching the lifeboat. We’ve got it, let’s make it happen.

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