

The Risk of Contagion Nation

Challenges to science are emerging across the political spectrum from Christian fundamentalists on the Right to skeptics on the Left who question the inherent good of progress with one result a growing resistance to vaccinations for children, as Bill Moyers and Michael Winship note.

By Bill Moyers and Michael Winship

We haven't even turned the page on the controversy over contraceptives, health care and religious freedom, when another thorny one arises involving personal conscience and public health. A flurry of stories over the past few days coincided with seeing a movie that inspires more than passing interest in their subject.

Steven Soderbergh's film *Contagion* came out a few months ago and was inexplicably and completely frozen out of the Oscar nominations. But it is the most plausible experience of a global pandemic plague you're likely to see until the real thing strikes. With outstanding performances from an ensemble cast that includes Matt Damon, Kate Winslet, Gwyneth Paltrow and Laurence Fishburne, *Contagion* is stark, beautiful in its own terrifying way, and all-too-believable.

The story tracks the swift progress of a deadly airborne virus from Hong Kong to Minneapolis and Tokyo to London – from a handful of peanuts to a credit card to the cough of a stranger on a subway. Rarely does a film issue such an inescapable invitation to think: it could happen; that could be us. What would we do?

With *Contagion* making such a powerful impression, for several days news articles seemed to keep popping up about contagious disease and the conflict between religious beliefs and immunization. There was nothing new about the basics: All 50 states require some specific vaccinations for kids, yet all of them grant exemptions for medical reasons say, for a child with cancer. Almost all of them grant religious exemptions. And 20 states allow exemptions for personal, moral, or other beliefs.

According to the Feb. 15 edition of *The Wall Street Journal*, a number of pediatricians are dropping families from their practices when the parents refuse immunization for their kids. "In a study of Connecticut pediatricians published last year," the paper reported, "some 30% of 133 doctors said they had asked a family to leave their practice for vaccine refusal, and a recent survey of 909 Midwestern pediatricians found that 21% reported discharging families for the same reason.

“By comparison, in 2001 and 2006 about 6% of physicians said they ‘routinely’ stopped working with families due to parents’ continued vaccine refusal and 16% ‘sometimes’ dismissed them, according to surveys conducted then by the American Academy of Pediatrics.”

But some parents still fear a link between vaccinations and autism, a possibility science has largely debunked. Some parents just want to be in charge of what’s put into their children’s bodies, as one West Virginia politician puts it.

And some parents just don’t trust science, period – a few have even been known to fake religion to avoid vaccinating their kids. So there are many loopholes. But now seven states are considering legislation to make it even easier for mothers and fathers to spare their children from vaccinations, especially on religious grounds.

In Oregon, according to a story by Jennifer Anderson in *The Portland Tribune*, the number of kindergartners with religious exemptions is up from 3.7 percent to 5.6 percent in just four years, and continuing to rise. This has public health officials clicking their calculators and keeping their eye on what’s called “herd immunity.”

A certain number of any population group needs to have been vaccinated 80 percent for most diseases, 92 percent for whooping cough to maintain the ability of the whole population “the herd” to resist the spread of a disease.

Ms. Anderson offers the example of what used to be called “the German measles” rubella. All it takes are five unvaccinated kids in a class of 25 for the herd immunity to break down, creating an opportunity for the disease to spread to younger siblings and other medically vulnerable people who can’t be vaccinated. If you were traveling to Europe between 2009 and 2011, you may remember warnings about the huge outbreak of measles there, brought on by a failure “to vaccinate susceptible populations.”

Here in the United States, several recent outbreaks of measles have been traced to pockets of unvaccinated children in states that allow personal belief exemptions. The Reuters news service recently reported 13 confirmed cases of measles in central Indiana. Two of them were people who showed up to party two days before the Super Bowl in Indianapolis. Patriots and Giants fans back east were alerted. So far, no news is good news.

But this is serious business, made more so by complacency. Older generations remember when measles killed up to 500 people a year before we started vaccinating against them in 1963. The great flu pandemic of 1918 killed ten

times more Americans than died in the Great World War that ended that year and took the lives of as many as 40 million globally. Our generation was also stalked by small pox, polio and whooping cough before there were vaccinations.

In a country where few remember those diseases, it's easy to think, "What's to worry?" But as the movie *Contagion* so forcefully and hauntingly reminds us, the earth is now flat. Seven billion people live on it, and our human herd moves on a conveyer belt of perpetual mobility, so that a virus can travel as swiftly as a voice from one cell phone to another.

When and if a contagion strikes, we can't count on divine intervention to spare us. That's when you want a darn good scientist in a research lab. We'll need all the help we can get from knowledge and her offspring.

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US Media Hypes Iran Inspection Flap

Major U.S. news outlets spin any event regarding Iran's nuclear program in the most negative way, now hyping a dispute about conditions for visiting a military site as supposed proof that Iran has something to hide. But Gareth Porter points out that the media is missing key nuances.

By Gareth Porter

News media reported last week that Iran had flatly refused the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) access to its Parchin military test facility, based on a statement to reporters by IAEA Deputy Director General, Herman Nackaerts, that "We could not get access."

Now, however, explicit statements on the issue by the Iranian Ambassador to the IAEA and the language of the new IAEA report indicate that Iran did not reject an IAEA visit to the base per se but was only refusing access as long as no agreement had been reached with the IAEA governing the modalities of cooperation.

That new and clarifying information confirms what I [reported](#) Feb. 23. Based on the history of Iranian negotiations with the IAEA and its agreement to allow two

separate IAEA visits to Parchin in 2005, the Parchin access issue is a bargaining chip that Iran is using to get the IAEA to moderate its demands on Iran in forging an agreement on how to resolve the years-long IAEA investigation into the "Possible Military Dimensions" of the Iranian nuclear program.

In an email to me and in interviews with Russia Today, Reuters, and the Fars News Agency, the Iranian Permanent Representative to the IAEA, Ali Asghar Soltanieh, said Iran told the high-level IAEA mission that it would allow access to Parchin once modalities of Iran-IAEA cooperation had been agreed on.

"We declared that, upon finalization of the modality, we will give access [to Parchin]," Soltanieh wrote in an email to me.

In the Russia Today interview on Feb. 27, reported by Israel's Haaretz and The Hindu in India but not by western news media, Soltanieh referred to two IAEA inspection visits to Parchin in January and November 2005 and said Iran needs to have "assurances" that it would not "repeat the same bitter experience, when they just come and ask for the access."

There should be a "modality" and a "frame of reference, of what exactly they are looking for, they have to provide the documents and exactly where they want [to go]," he said.

But Soltanieh also indicated that such an inspection visit is conditional on agreement about the broader framework for cooperation on clearing up suspicions of a past nuclear weapons program. "[I]n principle we have already accepted that when this text is concluded we will take these steps," Soltanieh said.

The actual text of the IAEA report, dated Feb. 24, provides crucial information about the Iranian position in the talks that is consistent with what Soltanieh is saying. In its account of the first round of talks in late January on what the IAEA is calling a "structured approach to the clarification of all outstanding issues," the report states:

"The Agency requested access to the Parchin site, but Iran did not grant access to the site *at that time* [emphasis added]." That wording obviously implies that Iran was willing to grant access to Parchin if certain conditions were met.

On the Feb. 20-21 meetings, the agency said that Iran "stated that it was still not able to grant access to that site." There was likely a more complex negotiating situation behind the lack of agreement on a Parchin visit than had been suggested by Nackaerts and reported in western news media.

But not a single major news media report has reported the significant difference between initial media coverage on the Parchin access issue and the information

now available from the initial IAEA report and Soltanieh. None have reported the language of the report indicating that Iran's refusal to approve a Parchin visit in January was qualified by "at that time".

Only AFP and Reuters quoted Soltanieh at all. Reuters, which actually interviewed Soltanieh, quoted him saying, "It was assumed that after we agreed on the modality, then access would be given." But that quote only appears in the very last sentence of the article, several paragraphs after the reiteration of the charge that Iran "refused to grant [the IAEA] access" to Parchin.

The day after that story was published, Reuters ran another story focusing on the IAEA report without referring either to its language on Parchin or to Soltanieh's clarification.

The Los Angeles Times ignored the new information and simply repeated the charge that Iran "refused to allow IAEA inspectors to visit Parchin military base." Then it added its own broad interpretation that Iran "has refused to answer key questions about its nuclear development program." Iran's repeated assertions that the documents used to pose questions to it are fabricated were thus dismissed as non-qualified answers.

The Parchin access story entered a new phase today with a Reuters story quoting Deputy Director General Nackaerts in a briefing for diplomats that there "may be some ongoing activities at Parchin which add urgency to why we want to go." Nackaerts attributed that idea to an unnamed "Member State," which is apparently suggesting that the site in question is being "cleaned up."

The identity of that "Member State," which the IAEA continues to go out of its way to conceal, is important, because if it is Israel, it reflects an obvious interest in convincing the world that Iran is working on nuclear weapons.

As former IAEA Director-General Mohamed ElBaradei recounts on p. 291 of his memoirs, "In the late summer of 2009, the Israelis provided the IAEA with documents of their own, purportedly showing that Iran had continued with nuclear weapon studies until at least 2007."

The news media should be including cautionary language any time information from an unnamed "Member State" is cited as the source for allegations about covert Iranian nuclear weapons work. It could very likely be coming from a State with a political agenda. But the unwritten guidelines for news media coverage of the IAEA and Iran, as we have seen in recent days, are obviously very different.

Gareth Porter is an investigative historian and journalist specializing in U.S. national security policy. The paperback edition of his latest book, *Perils of Dominance: Imbalance of Power and the Road to War in Vietnam*, was published in

2006.

Lieberman Edges US to War with Iran

Exclusive: American neocons have moved the United States closer to war with Iran via a subtle change in the “red line” phrasing, inserting the word “capability” after the usual threats to take out an Iranian “nuclear weapon.” Now, Sen. Joe Lieberman is making the shift official, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Sen. Joe Lieberman is leading a group of nearly one-third of the U.S. Senate urging that the red line on war with Iran be shifted from building a nuclear weapon to the vague notion of Iran having the “capability” to build one. The neoconservative senator from Connecticut has introduced a “Sense of the Senate” resolution that would put the body on record as rejecting a situation that arguably already exists, in which Iran has the know-how to build a bomb even if it has no intention to do so.

The resolution tracks with the positions of hardline Israeli leaders, such as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and undercuts the position of President Barack Obama, whose administration has been exploring ways to negotiate an agreement with Iran, which insists that its nuclear program is for peaceful purposes only.

U.S. and Israeli intelligence agencies also agree that Iran has NOT decided to build a bomb. [See Consortiumnews.com’s [“US/Israel: Iran NOT Building Nukes.”](#)] However, in recent weeks, the goal posts have been subtly moved not only by American neocons and Israeli hardliners but by the major U.S. news media, which has inserted [the new weasel word “capability”](#) in mentions about of Iran’s supposed nuclear weapons ambitions.

Of course, many consumers of U.S. news haven’t noticed this slight change in wording from Iran’s alleged “pursuit of a nuclear weapon” to its alleged “pursuit of a nuclear weapons capability.” But the distinction is important because a “capability” can mean almost anything, since peaceful nuclear research also can be applicable to bomb building.

To deny Iran the “capability” would almost surely require a war between the United States and Iran, a course that some neocons have been quietly desiring for at least the past decade when the Iraq invasion was seen as a first step to bringing “regime change” to Iran or as some neocons joked at the time, “real men

go to Tehran.”

Indeed, the massive U.S. Embassy in Baghdad which now sits increasingly idle can be best understood as the intended imperial command center for a new American dominance of the region. But those neocon plans were spoiled by the disastrous turn of the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq and ultimately America’s forced military withdrawal from the country at the end of 2011.

A Neocon Comeback

Since the grim writing was on the wall about the Iraq outcome, American neocons have been looking for new ways to get their imperial agenda back on track, with Iran’s nuclear program just the latest opportunity.

So, Iranian efforts to negotiate confidence-building initiatives regarding its nuclear program, such as agreeing to a Turkish-Brazilian plan in 2010 to trade about half of Iran’s low-enriched uranium for radioactive isotopes needed for medical research, have been blocked by neocons in Congress and their allies in the Obama administration, with the support of key U.S. media outlets, like the Washington Post and New York Times.

The latest shift toward forcing a new war has centered on the insertion of the word “capability” after the words “nuclear weapons.” The Obama administration has indicated that it would consider an Iranian decision to build a nuclear bomb a “red line,” suggesting the possibility of a military strike at that point.

However, that threat isn’t making the neocons happy because the U.S. intelligence community is standing by its 2007 conclusion that Iran halted work on a nuclear bomb in 2003 and hasn’t resumed that effort. Israeli intelligence apparently has reached the same judgment. Both U.S. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta and Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak have referenced this state-of-play in the intelligence assessments in recent public remarks, as ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern has reported.

So, what are the hawks in Israel and the United States to do? Their new sleight-of-hand has been to quietly shift the terms of reference, arguing that it doesn’t matter whether Iran is actually working on a bomb but that it must be denied even the “capability” to work on a bomb. That is the point of Lieberman’s resolution.

Lieberman’s Allies

In a statement at his Web site, the senator announced that 32 senators both Republicans and Democrats have banded together to introduce a resolution urging action to prevent Iran from pushing “forward in its pursuit of a nuclear weapons

capability. By rejecting any policy that would rely on containment of a nuclear-weapons capable Iran, this bi-partisan resolution sends a clear message to Iran's rulers that the United States will stop them from acquiring nuclear weapons capability."

In other words, the next preemptive war could be launched not against Iran for actually building a bomb or even trying to build a bomb but rather for simply having the skills that theoretically could be used sometime in the future to build a bomb. The "red line" has been moved from some possible future development to arguably what already exists.

Lieberman is co-sponsoring the resolution with Sens. Lindsey Graham (R-South Carolina) and Bob Casey (D-Pennsylvania), with support from Orrin Hatch (R-Utah), Barbara Mikulski (D-Maryland), John McCain (R-Arizona), Kay Bailey Hutchison (R-Texas), Jim Inhofe (R-Oklahoma), Ron Wyden (D-Oregon), Susan Collins (R-Maine), Chuck Schumer (D-New York), Bill Nelson (D-Florida), Ben Nelson (D-Nebraska) Saxby Chambliss (R-Georgia), John Cornyn (R-Texas), Mark Pryor (D-Arkansas), Bob Menendez (D-New Jersey), Ben Cardin (D-Maryland), Sherrod Brown (D-Ohio), Claire McCaskill (D-Missouri), Mark Udall (D-Colorado), Jim Risch (R-Idaho), Kirsten Gillibrand (D-New York), Scott Brown (R-Massachusetts), Chris Coons (D-Delaware), Dan Coats (R-Indiana), Rob Portman (R-Ohio), John Boozman (R-Arizona), John Hoeven (R-North Dakota), Richard Blumenthal (D-Connecticut), Kelly Ayotte (R-New Hampshire), Dean Heller (R-Nevada).

That group amounts to nearly one-third of the 100-member U.S. Senate.

[For more on related topics, see Robert Parry's *Lost History, Secrecy & Privilege* and *Neck Deep*, now available in a three-book set for the discount price of only \$29. For details, [click here](#).]

Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories in the 1980s for the Associated Press and Newsweek. His latest book, *Neck Deep: The Disastrous Presidency of George W. Bush*, was written with two of his sons, Sam and Nat, and can be ordered at neckdeepbook.com. His two previous books, *Secrecy & Privilege: The Rise of the Bush Dynasty from Watergate to Iraq* and *Lost History: Contras, Cocaine, the Press & 'Project Truth'* are also available there.

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Ivan Eland Disputes War-for-Oil Dogma

At least since the oil shocks of the 1970s, it has been Official Washington's dogma that the United States must stand ready to fight wars over access to Middle East oil, but the Independent Institute's Ivan Eland questions that certainty in a new book, writes Carl Close.

By Carl Close

Ivan Eland's new book, *No War for Oil: U.S. Dependency and the Middle East*, challenges a long-standing pillar of U.S. foreign policy, the belief that U.S. national and economic security require that American taxpayers fund the military protection of oil-rich foreign lands, especially in the Persian Gulf.

According to Eland, senior fellow at the Independent Institute and director of the Center on Peace & Liberty, the choice is not between preparing to fight wars for oil or risking the loss of energy resources that power the American economy, that's a false alternative.

Rather, the choice is whether or not to continue to spend increasingly costly resources on military and diplomatic policies that are unnecessary and detrimental to the economic and political interests of the American people.

The issue is monumental and merits far greater public discussion and debate than it has received. It's certainly more fundamental than many of the questions asked of the presidential hopefuls.

Here are highlights from the book summary:

–The United States devotes more resources to the defense of oil in the Persian Gulf than most people realize, a total of more than \$334 billion per year (in 2009 dollars).

To ensure the free flow of oil from the Middle East, the United States maintains military facilities in Oman, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, and Iraq, as well as in nearby Egypt, Djibouti, Turkey, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Diego Garcia. Despite the large amount of U.S. expenditures to defend the Persian Gulf, the United States gets only about 18 percent of its imported oil from Saudi Arabia.

–“Cheap” foreign oil comes with huge hidden costs that American leaders and the public need to keep in mind when thinking about U.S. foreign policy.

According to one estimate, gasoline would cost U.S. consumers \$5 more per gallon if federal spending for the defense of Persian Gulf oil were incorporated into gas prices. The U.S. military subsidy for oil means lower prices at the gas pump, but consumers ultimately pay a steep price for that fake discount (and more) in the form of higher taxes and inflationary deficit financing to help fund a large U.S. military presence abroad.

The king's ransom that the United States spends to defend Persian Gulf oil is more than ten times the value of its annual imports from the Gulf.

–U.S. military protection of the Persian Gulf is unnecessary to ensure access to oil from that region.

Without Uncle Sam's generous help, Persian Gulf oil producers, shippers and consumers (that latter residing mostly in Europe and East Asia) would have strong incentives to protect the free flow of oil. If the U.S. government eliminated its military subsidy for oil in the Persian Gulf, it could decommission approximately five army divisions, five active air wings of the Air Force, five Marine Expeditionary Brigades, and 144 ships, including six aircraft carriers, roughly half of the U.S. armed forces.

–Because only 10 percent of the oil consumed by the United States comes from the Persian Gulf, U.S. military protection of that region is even more irrational than Nineteenth Century European imperialism.

American taxpayers would enjoy significant savings if the United States were to rely exclusively on markets to obtain oil, just as Europeans became better off as their governments reduced their use of armed forces and protectionist trade policies and relied more on free markets to obtain goods from other countries. Unfortunately, the U.S. government has taken the opposite approach in recent years and has extended its security umbrella over oil-producing regions in West Africa, Latin America, the Caspian Sea region, and Central Asia.

–Several popular myths about oil undermine clear thinking about America's energy needs and U.S. foreign policy.

One long-standing myth is that oil possesses "special" or "strategic" characteristics. Yet, there are many critical products that the market is allowed to supply in abundance at efficient prices, and oil should be no different. Furthermore, more than enough oil is produced in the United States to meet the needs of the U.S. military in time of war, and this supply can be augmented with oil purchased from Canada and Mexico. Thus, oil is not strategic.

–Becoming "energy independent", a goal promoted by many Democratic and Republican politicians, is not in America's best interest.

In reality, consumers are better off when they are free to buy goods from companies and regions that have a comparative advantage in the production of those goods. Energy independence would serve only special interests such as less-efficient domestic oil suppliers or alternative energy producers that can't yet thrive without government subsidies or protection from foreign competition.

The Big Fat GOP Budget Lie

Exclusive: At every turn of the debt-ceiling battle, Republicans repeat the talking point that Washington doesn't have a "revenue problem," but a "spending problem" as if saying so makes it true. But the reality is that today's debt crisis is driven more by George W. Bush's tax cuts than anything else, as Sam Parry explains.

By Sam Parry

Sometimes you just have to call something what it is. Simply put, congressional Republicans are lying about the federal budget crisis and thus are suffocating America's chance for an open, honest debate about the tough choices that are ahead.

The GOP's bogus argument is built on the oft-repeated sound bite that the federal deficit is a spending problem, not a revenue problem. That isn't true, as the data and U.S. history plainly show. The current budget deficit is MOSTLY a revenue problem.

The most pronounced shift in budget calculations is that federal revenue has dropped from 20.35 percent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2000 when the U.S. government was running a surplus to 14.41 percent of GDP today, with the projected deficit for fiscal 2011 at about \$1.5 trillion.

A fair-minded review of the budget shows, too, that most of the contributions from the spending side of the ledger have almost nothing to do with President Barack Obama or what is typically described as "reckless spending" in Washington on domestic priorities.

The only "discretionary" item in the budget that has seen any significant increase in recent years is Defense. The rest of these "discretionary" categories Education, Transportation, Environment, Agriculture, etc. have actually decreased as a percent of GDP from around 4 percent in the early 1980s to less than 3 percent today.

What Spending Problem?

With few exceptions, national media pundits uncritically accept the "spending problem" GOP spin without even consulting the data available online to anyone with a search engine.

Yes, federal spending has apparently kissed 25 percent of GDP this year, which

is historically high. But, three points must be made:

1. It's not off-the-charts high.
2. Much of the higher spending was reactive to the financial crisis of 2008 or resulted from the deep recession that followed, not from new Washington programs.
3. It is a relatively short-term blip that is projected to come back to a more normal rate of around 22 percent to 23 percent in the next year or two.

First, some history.

Federal spending as a percentage of GDP reached a similar level 82 years ago in 1919, at the end of World War I. That year, the U.S. national budget hit 24.13 percent of GDP.

Of course, that was a far simpler time before the existence of Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid or many of the other government programs so vital to modern America. Spending at the start of the 20th Century reflected this, averaging a trivial 2.5 percent of GDP.

The 1919 surge went almost entirely to support the U.S. military efforts, with 59.6 percent of the total federal budget going to Defense that year. After WWI, federal spending declined, but the days of 2.5 percent were gone forever. In the ten years after WWI, federal spending averaged 4.8 percent of GDP, nearly twice the pre-war average.

And that is roughly where spending stayed until the Great Depression, when spending rates doubled again and averaged 10 percent of GDP from 1933 to 1941.

Then came World War II, which saw a spike in federal spending well beyond anything America had seen before or since. In 1945, spending as a percentage of GDP was nearly double today's levels, reaching 47.9 percent. That year, military spending accounted for 88 percent of the entire federal budget as America fought a two-front global war.

After the war was won, spending settled in at a new normal that reflected the continuing funding of a larger permanent military as U.S. policymakers financed the Cold War to "stop the spread of communism." The federal government also undertook investments and spending projects that helped build the country and sustained the middle class from transportation and infrastructure spending to Social Security and Medicare to developing a modern education system.

Between 1947 and 1980, overall federal spending averaged 18.3 percent and spending levels remained relatively stable during these years, especially after 1951, as you can see:

The Reagan Binge

After Ronald Reagan's inauguration in 1981, federal spending began drifting up, averaging 21.9 percent of GDP during the Reagan-Bush-41 years. Most of that growth went to a mushrooming Defense budget as President Reagan issued warnings about a supposedly expanding Soviet Empire.

In 1979, military spending represented 5.6 percent of U.S. GDP. Seven years later, that had increased to 7 percent, a 25 percent increase relative to GDP. At the same time, federal spending on Education was slashed from 1.2 percent of GDP in 1978 to 0.5 percent of GDP by 1988. Other domestic programs were held flat or were cut during this period.

Starting in the late 1980s, as Defense spending started to come down after the collapse of the Soviet Union declining from 7 percent of GDP in 1986 to 5.35 percent by 1991 Health Care spending picked up much of the slack.

Federal spending on Health Care had steadily increased from relatively trivial amounts in the 1940s to about 2.4 percent of GDP in 1989. However, starting in that year, Health Care spending increased by an average annual rate of more than six percent and today accounts for 5.9 percent of GDP, which is still less than the Defense budget, which accounts for 6.4 percent of GDP.

Clinton, Bush II, and Obama

The Reagan-Bush-I spending binge left the Clinton Administration with difficult choices on how to reduce the then-record budget deficit. Despite pressure from liberals who favored a more aggressive strategy for addressing the nation's needs, the Clinton team reduced federal spending as a percentage of GDP every year, getting it down to 18 percent by 2000, the lowest level of federal spending relative to GDP since 1974.

You can see how significant these cuts were here:

Then came the Bush-II administration, which completely reversed this trend with major spending increases for the military and intelligence services to conduct the post-9/11 "war on terror" and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. George W. Bush also pushed through a new prescription drug bill.

Increases in Health Care and Defense spending accounted for nearly all of the spending increases during the Bush-II administration. Health spending grew from 3.8 percent of GDP in 2001 to 4.7 percent in 2008 and Defense spending increased from 3.6 percent of GDP in 2001 to 5.1 percent of GDP in 2008.

Two unfunded wars and an unfunded prescription drug bill will do that to you, as

you can see here:

Still, George W. Bush left office with the federal government spending less as a percentage of GDP 20.76 percent than the average during the Reagan-Bush-41 years.

Which brings us to today. Over the last couple of years, federal spending as a percentage of GDP has indeed surged topping out at 25.3 percent this year.

But that has little to do with so-called "reckless spending" in Washington and has even less to do with Obama specifically.

First, an obvious point: The recession reduced America's GDP from \$14.44 trillion in 2008 to \$14.12 trillion in 2009. This automatically increased spending as a percent of GDP by lowering the denominator.

More importantly, the recession has led to hundreds of billions of dollars in temporary spending to stabilize the economy, bail out the financial markets, and provide support for the U.S. auto industry.

GOP talking heads like to complain about many of these programs. But several points must be clarified:

1. These emergency measures are short-term stimulus spending and don't have a meaningful impact on spending in the coming years.
2. Most of the money used to bail out the banking and auto industries has already been paid back to the Treasury.
3. The bank bailout occurred on George W. Bush's watch and it took bipartisan support in Congress to pass that bill.
4. Even accounting for all of these factors, which don't even include the multiple wars that the United States continues to fight, federal spending as a percent of GDP is only a little more than half the emergency spending levels of the mid-1940s during WWII, a surge in federal spending that is classically viewed as ending the Great Depression.

In the next couple of years, assuming the economy recovers and stimulus funds and other economic stabilizers can be withdrawn, federal spending as a percent of GDP is forecast to decline to 23.6 percent next year and to 22.3 percent by 2015.

Which leads us to the debate around the stimulus bill.

Yes, Obama and the Democrats with only a handful of GOP votes pushed through a \$787 billion stimulus bill in early 2009. What GOP talking heads never mention, however, is that more than a third of the package wasn't spending at all. To

secure those few Republican votes, a total of \$288 billion or more than one-third of the package was dedicated to short-term tax breaks.

That left \$499 billion in actual spending, but much of that went directly to the states to help rescue depleted state budgets and to avert large-scale layoffs of public employees. Indeed, only about \$85 billion of the stimulus package actually went to things like infrastructure, new energy programs and transportation projects.

Given the economic crisis the country was facing and continues to face an allotment of \$85 billion for capital projects and other infrastructure investments seems like chump change. And, given the weakness of the recovery, it appears that it was woefully insufficient to get the economy back on its feet.

But, even if you ignore these finer points and look at the \$499 billion in actual stimulus spending, this is a tiny fraction (about 1.7 percent) of the \$29 trillion, two-year GDP of the U.S.

And the money has just about run out, which means that long-term it will have a negligible impact on the overall deficit and will have no impact on long-term federal spending levels.

When it comes to spending under President Obama, only two other areas are even worth mentioning:

- Defense has grown from 5.62 percent of GDP in 2009 to 6.4 percent this year, and
- Health Care has risen from 5.4 percent to 5.9 percent.

Otherwise, there have been no other net spending increases of any significance added to the books since Obama was sworn in.

The one debateable caveat to all this is the controversial health care bill signed into law in March of 2010. While there are spending provisions in that law, there are also substantial cost savings. As Obama said repeatedly during the debate, the bill is projected to add nothing to the federal debt.

Altogether, the CBO estimates a net cost savings of \$143 billion over the next 10 years with more savings after that.

Going forward, President Obama has already committed the federal government to significant cuts in discretionary programs. For example, the total cost of the stimulus bill is more than offset by the Obama-ordered freeze in non-defense discretionary spending over the next ten years, which will reduce spending in that budget category from 3.4 percent of GDP to less than 2 percent.

In fact, taking these savings into account, the big GOP spending lie gets even more outlandish. Even if you take into account all spending relative to GDP, including Defense and Social Security/Medicare, total federal spending on these programs as a percent of GDP is projected to actually come down over the next ten years – from 25.3 percent of GDP in 2011 to 19.7 percent in 2021.

Of course, these are projections and they depend, in part, on the economy growing as expected and Congress adopting Obama's spending priorities. But, even if it's half that reduction, the United States would still be well within the recent historical range on federal spending as a percent of GDP.

It's a Revenue Problem, Stupid

There is no question that if you look at this year's federal spending of 25.3 percent of GDP, it looks high, relative to recent American history.

But, given today's struggling economy and the projections for federal spending to stabilize and come down – assuming the economy recovers – it should be clear the United States doesn't face an immediate spending crisis.

The nation does, however, face a revenue crisis. Largely because of George W. Bush's tax cuts, which he justified by noting that the government was running a surplus in 2000, federal revenues have dropped from 20.35 percent of GDP in the last year of the Clinton administration to 14.41 percent today.

So, no matter what spending programs get cut even if spending were rolled back to around 21 percent of GDP, in line with the levels of spending under recent Republican administrations – the United States won't stanch the flood of red ink without getting revenue up to about the same share of GDP.

That revenue target would be a bit higher than the historical average of 17.8 percent of GDP from 1947 to 2008. But, given that the United States has run up huge deficits, which means higher interest payments, and given that our aging population requires more Health Care spending, raising federal revenue back to where it was in 2000 or even a bit higher doesn't seem like such a huge sacrifice.

But don't expect the Republicans to be at all honest about this. Truth-telling is not what wins most elections and political courage is in very short supply. It's much easier to get on the right-wing chat shows and repeat the comfortable "It's a spending crisis" mantra, no matter how inaccurate it is.

Sam Parry is co-author of *Neck Deep: The Disastrous Presidency of George W. Bush.*

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The Torturers' Memoirs

The banality of evil is a common way of explaining why non-descript bureaucrats let their careerism and cowardice lead them into the practice of torture and other human rights crimes endorsed by their superiors. Yet, if these banal operatives are American, they don't expect to get punished, as David Swanson notes in this guest essay.

By David Swanson

June 29, 2011

On Sept. 18, 2009, seven former heads of the CIA publicly told President Barack Obama not to prosecute CIA torturers. Obama had already told Attorney General Eric Holder not to prosecute CIA torturers on April 16, 2009. On Sept. 18, Holder publicly reassured the CIA.

Thus, the coast was clear. The books started flowing. George W. Bush and John Yoo put their books out in 2010, Donald Rumsfeld in 2011, and Dick Cheney's later this summer.

Just as the torture techniques drifted down the chain of command from these dealers in death to the rank-and-file, so too the book contracts. The cogs in the machine are now documenting their bit parts in the past decade's torture epidemic with pride and publishing deals.

Witness *The Interrogator: An Education* by Glenn L. Carle, the story of how a none-too-bright, self-centered, insecure, careerist bureaucrat with weak principles, a fragile ego, a troubled marriage, and no interrogation experience, but the ability to actually speak Arabic, was chosen to lead the interrogating (or "interviewing") of an innocent man the CIA bone-headedly believed to be a "top al Qaeda terrorist" when they kidnapped him off a street and flew him to an undisclosed location outside any rule of law.

As to who got an education in the process of living, writing or reading this book, your guess is as good as mine.

You may have spotted the author in the media last week, since he managed to get James Risen at the New York Times to print his revelation that the Bush White House had asked the CIA to investigate American blogger Juan Cole.

That story is not in the book, but was apparently timed to boost the book's sales. Who knows what other nasty anecdotes Carle is sitting on in hopes of productively producing them when and if he writes a sequel. Even with that prospect, let's hope fervently that he does not.

What an awful book! What an awful example of how to live!

Yes, Carle asserts what all of the experts agree on: torture and abuse are not useful interrogation techniques. The most effective tools for eliciting useful information are the legal ones. But Carle simply asserts this. He provides no new evidence to back it up – not that there was a shortage.

Carle is like a veteran soldier joining in demonstrations against the war he was part of but still talking about how he “served” his country.

“I made it possible for American children to sleep safe at night,” he brags. How exactly did he do this? Why, by participating in criminal operations that enraged billions of people against the United States of America. Good going, Glenn!

Carle discusses, by way of background, the “victims of the Iran-Contra scandal,” by which he means not the men, women and children illegally killed, but the criminals prosecuted or otherwise inconvenienced.

When Carle was yanked out of his cubicle to employ his linguistic skills in interrogating a kidnapping victim, he was not long in coming to view himself as the victim of most concern to the reader. He had concerns about what he was being sent into, but he “was not about to question the apparent basis for my involvement in a very important case.”

“Suppose our partners do something to CAPTUS [the kidnapped man] that I consider unacceptable?” he asked a superior.

“Well, then, you just walk out of the room, if you feel you should. Then you won't have to see anything, will you? You will not have been party to anything.”

Wow, with that defense, get-away drivers aren't guilty of robberies anymore. And that defense was plenty good enough for Carle. He was largely interested in venting his own emotions, he tells us, just as he must have been when composing

the book:

“Every American – and perhaps we in the CIA more than anyone – was outraged and determined to destroy the jihadists who had killed our countrymen [on 9-11] and had been attacking our countrymen for years. I was being sent to the front lines, as it were. I was going to be part of the avenging and protective hidden hand of the CIA, striking al Qaeda for us all. I WANTED to interrogate the S.O.B. and play a key role in our counter-terrorism operations.”

I for one would prefer he had settled for tweeting a photo of his penis.

Carle presented himself with the important moral dilemma of whether to screw up this immoral operation or do it right:

“This conversation – this case – was clearly one of the key moments in my career; I needed to GET IT RIGHT, to exercise refined judgment, to see and act clearly where values and goals conflicted, in the murky areas where there might be no right choice, but one had to choose and act nonetheless.”

Why was resigning and going public at any moment not always an available option?

Carle read one of John Yoo’s torture memos, thought it was illegal, and went along anyway:

“I recall thinking when I read it (a view shared by many colleagues at the time [yet, not a one of whom said a damn word to the American people about it]) that it was tendentious and intellectually shoddy, an obvious bit of hack work, a bit of legal sophistry to justify what the administration wanted done, not a guideline and interpretation of the spirit and intention of the laws and statutes that had guided the Agency for decades. . . .

“Challenging a finding, though, was, as the expression goes, way beyond my pay grade, and in any event, would be viewed as presumptuous and out of place at the moment.”

God forbid!

“We were talking about what some, what I, might consider the torture of a helpless man,” Carle recalls.

“What about the Geneva Convention?” he asked his superior.

“Which flag do you serve?” was the reply.

“I flew out of Dulles two days later,” Carle recounts. He had chosen knowingly and inexcusably to become a cog in a machine of kidnapping, torture and death.

Was it really rage over 9-11 that drove Carle onward? He tells us that when the planes hit the towers, he was too busy being petty and self-centered on the telephone to be bothered to watch. He then tried to go shopping and couldn't get clerks in stores to stop obsessing over 9-11 long enough to help him.

Carle's wife inexplicably became an alcoholic, resulting in this touching scene:

"One evening I was working on the computer in the bedroom, not wanting to think about work, or home; I just wanted to turn off my brain [how would one tell?]. Sally was cooking in the kitchen. I heard a plate crash. I paid no attention and was barely aware of it.

"Ten minutes later I wandered into the kitchen to get a soda from the refrigerator. Sally lay unconscious on the floor. I was angry, disdainful. I decided to leave her there to sleep it off. I stepped over her into a huge and growing pool of blood. It covered half the kitchen floor. 'Oh no! Sally! What have you done?'"

Carle describes his interrogation of "CAPTUS," whom he knew to have been kidnapped and who he knew was being held outside of any legal system. Carle repeatedly threatened him with harsh treatment by others.

The interrogation was helped by Carle's preference for humane tactics, even while threatening others, as well as by his openness to recognizing the man's innocence. But it was hampered by the CIA's incredibly incompetent failure to get Carle access to the documents that had been seized along with his victim, and by the CIA's refusal to consider the possibility that CAPTUS was not who they thought he was.

Carle took a "don't ask/don't tell" approach to the question of whether CAPTUS was being tortured in between periods of interrogation at the first location where Carle interrogated him. Carle did ask, but the CIA blacked out in the book whatever he tried to tell us, about what was done to CAPTUS upon relocating him to a different lawless prison.

When Bush gave a speech pretending to oppose torture, Carle "found this speech infuriating. I knew what we were doing; our actions soiled what it meant to be an American, perverted our oath, and betrayed our flag. Lawyers could argue our actions were legal. But I had lived what we were doing. I knew otherwise."

Did Carle quit and go public? Of course not.

Did any of his colleagues? Of course not.

Carle sat in on meetings discussing blatantly false propaganda aimed at

launching the 2003 invasion of Iraq. He saw through the lies.

Did he then, in that moment when a million lives could be spared, quit and go public? Of course not.

Carle concludes his book by opposing prosecuting anyone involved in the crimes he was involved in. "Punishment metes out no justice," he claims.

Justice, these days, is presumably measured in book sales.

David Swanson is the author of *War Is A Lie* at <http://warisalie.org>

American Exceptionalism's Hypocrisy

U.S. politicians often speak of "American exceptionalism" as some God-given grant of special status that puts the United States above the rules that apply to other nations. In geo-politics, this concept has meant that international law is enforced against countries that offend Washington but not against those in Washington's good graces, as Lawrence Davidson explains.

By Lawrence Davidson

June 5, 2011

One of the defining characteristics of modern Western culture is individuality. Most people in the West take it for granted that they have the right to free expression and personality development. However, in practice, this right is not open-ended.

It is fine if you want to express yourself as a musician, a painter, a filmmaker, a writer, etc. Equally legitimate is your desire to express yourself as an engineer, accountant, bus driver or auto mechanic.

Things become very different if you have a great desire to express yourself as a thief or want to develop your personality as a serial killer. There are rules, in the form of laws, against these latter avenues of expression.

If you choose to ignore these laws, there are police forces and courts systems that will seek to force you to do so. Another way of saying this is that within states or nations, people usually must confine their right of self expression to activities that do not impinge in a harmful or unwanted way on others in the community.

It was at the end of the 18th and throughout the 19th centuries that Western leaders of both established nations and aspiring nationalities began to apply this language of self-expression to the nation state. In other words, they claimed the same right of self-expression for the collective as for the individual.

This represented a melding of romanticism and politics that allowed for the anthropomorphizing of the nation. That is, something that was not a human being (the nation) was being treated as if it was.

The French Revolutionaries spoke of "France" as the growing embodiment of human freedom with a mission to export liberty to others, German nationalists such as Herder and Fichte believed that the "German nation" embodied a *volkgiest*, or "spirit of the people" that had to be free to create a unified and enduring state.

Italian, Russian and other nationalists made the same argument for their nationalities or ethnic groups. In each case, the claim that the collective, with its unique cultural personality, had the right to unfettered development led to a serious and continuing problem.

One half of the problem expresses itself in the form of "exceptionalism." That is the assertion that the nation has rights because its culture and people are, in some way, superior to others and/or because they are "God blessed."

Being superior to others means the nation, striving to realize its uniqueness, has priority claims to a "homeland" and its resources. Those who stand in the way of this goal can be evicted or otherwise persecuted.

Or, perhaps, the nation in question has evolved a special way of life (democracy, capitalism, communism, or some religion) that its leaders feel it must share with others whether they want this gift or not. So it sends out missionaries and diplomats and then usually follows them up with gunboats.

Empire-building based on a claim of superiority often results. It turns out that almost all great powers, Western and non-Western, have expressed some form of exceptionalism.

The second half of the problem lies in the fact that these anthropomorphized nation states, with their insistence on the right of self-expression, are acting in an arena of international relations that lacks sufficient rules to limit their behavior. There is nothing to actually force them to confine their acts of self-expression to activities that do not impinge in a harmful or unwanted way on other states or populations.

Certainly, traditional diplomacy and the use of standard treaties have not been able to do so. There were a few Geneva conventions that, with mediocre success, sought to ameliorate the treatment of civilians and prisoners during wartime. However, during the world wars of the 20th century, even these were ignored.

The horrors of WWII gave new impetus to establishing enforceable international rules or laws, including laws against genocide and crimes against humanity, but over time these too have been eroded. And, here again, exceptionalism has been the motivator. We can see how this has taken place by looking at the case of the International Criminal Court (ICC).

The ICC was created in 2002 by a founding treaty known as the Rome Statute. The court was designed to be an independent body capable of prosecuting major transgressions such as genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity.

However, there were also conflicting amendments built into the founding document. Among others, the Court's jurisdiction is usually limited to crimes committed by a national of a state that is party to the treaty or committed on such a state's territory.

Nonetheless, the Court is also obligated to investigate any case referred to it by the United Nations Security Council, whether the nation or individuals involved are covered by the treaty or not.

Presently, 114 countries are party to the treaty and thus subject to the jurisdiction of the ICC. Some 34 others, including Russia, have signed the treaty but are yet to ratify it. Thus, they are still outside its jurisdiction.

An additional 44 states, including China, have never signed the treaty. And finally, several states such as the United States and Israel, while having initially adhered to the treaty, have subsequently "unsigned" it and thereby withdrawn from its jurisdiction.

Just what is going on here?

It would seem that the leaders of many of the major world powers, China, Russia and the United States, know that they operate in the world on the basis of exceptionalism. They actually are or likely will occupy foreign lands, pursue foreign wars, massacre civilian populations, etc.

In other words, the behavior of their nationals is very likely to transgress the laws against war crimes and crimes against humanity, and perhaps genocide as well. So they seek to stay clear of the ICC's jurisdiction. And, in the case of the United States, the government is tied so closely to the criminal behavior of

the Israelis that it has dedicated itself to protecting Israeli nationals also.

That is why, if you look at the record of ICC prosecutions, all of them have to do with smaller states, mostly African, who have relatively little power and no great power patrons. Yet this skewed record gets worse, for the United States and other great powers, which are not even a party to the Rome Statute, have found a way to turn the Court into a weapon to be directed at their assumed enemies.

They have done so by taking advantage of the treaty clause requiring the ICC to pursue cases referred to it by the UN Security Council. This harmful bit of hypocrisy has recently been examined in an article by Stuart Littlewood, using information and analysis supplied by Dr. David Morrison of Ireland. Here are some of the points they make:

1. "Libya is not a party to the ICC. ... Yet three months ago the UN Security Council voted unanimously, in Resolution 1970, to refer the situation in Libya to the prosecutor of the ICC. Five of the states that voted for this referral [including the United States]...are not parties to the ICC and don't accept its jurisdiction. So here we see the U.S. among those forcing Libya to accept the jurisdiction of the ICC, when it refuses to do so itself."
2. This is a situation that cannot happen to countries like the United States because they can "wield their veto to block any attempt by UN colleagues to extend ICC jurisdiction to their territory."
3. David Morrison concludes that "a court with universal jurisdiction is fair. A court whose jurisdiction you, as a state, can choose to accept or reject has some semblance of fairness. But a court like the ICC, whose jurisdiction can be targeted, at the whim of the Security Council, on certain states that have chosen not to accept it, but not others, is grossly unfair."

It is the sad height of hypocrisy when the United States, whose leaders claim to have the secret to world salvation (both politically and economically), not only corrupts international law to target others, but simultaneously goes to extraordinary lengths to protect its own nationals from that same law.

For instance, if Americans were to commit war crimes in the territories of states party to the Rome Statute, those states could refer the matter to the ICC and the Court could then go after U.S. citizens. But Washington has negotiated bi-lateral agreements with over 100 nations that specifically forbid those states from doing just that. No nation can receive military aid from the U.S. without making this pledge.

This is the behavior of a government that *knows* it acts in a criminal fashion, be it on a small scale or large, and claims the exceptional right to do so with impunity.

The leaders of the U.S. do this because, as so many presidents have told us time and again, the free expression and expansion of the American way of life is best for the world. God has decreed it so. This is extraordinary hubris in action and it is why so much of the rest of the world have, at best, a love-hate relationship with the U.S. and what it claims to stand for.

The notable English thinker and politician, Edmund Burke (1729-97), once observed that “the greater the power, the more dangerous the abuse.”

What can be more powerful, and therefore more abusive, than great powers claiming the right of free expression in an international arena devoid of restraining rules? In a world that is, like ours, mostly lawless.

Spanish Protests Lose Their Way

The popular protests across Spain gave voice to national indignation over the political/economic system, but the result of regional elections was only to shift power from the Socialists to the center-right Partido Popular. Spanish writer Pablo Ouziel says that outcome should prompt some self-reflection among radical groups that seized control of the uprising.

By Pablo Ouziel

May 24, 2011

In Spain, the elections have come and gone, with the squares full of thousands of people continuing with their shouts of indignation, but so far they have not been heard.

The PSOE, the political party of President Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero’s ruling socialist government, has taken a beating, but the formal democracy in which we live has not changed for the better.

The center-right Partido Popular has taken control of much of the country.

What this means, according to most market analysts, is that as the new administrations take over regional and local governments, previously undeclared

debt will surface making Spain's economic reality much more dire than what has been estimated to date.

The post-election week has already begun as a sober reminder of the economic tsunami engulfing the country. The bond market has already punished Spain for the "indignados" movement and for the election defeat of the ruling party.

The stock market has also reflected doubts about the country's austerity measures, and the privatization of national corporations has continued with the announcement of the privatizing of the national lottery and a couple of the country's airports.

In addition, the center-right Partido Popular has made repeated calls for an early general election, which it is poised to win.

Therefore, it is not naive to state that so far the popular uprising has helped consolidate the center-right as the voters' choice for spearheading the country's return to economic growth.

According to the Partido Popular's political program, economic growth will be achieved by cutting corporate taxes, reducing public spending, making the firing of workers easier, bailing out failing banks, making it harder for immigrants to stay in the country, and seeking a stable investment environment.

In essence, the choice made by those who opted to vote reflects the opposite solution to what is being discussed by people in the city squares. This is the unpleasant reality that those in the squares must reflect upon, if their demands are to resonate with the rest of the population.

If the "indignados" want to be heard, now it is time for them to listen to the rest of the country in order to propose a truly constructive program with which the majority of the population can identify.

In other words, we must move from this moment of indignation to a post-indignation space in which "responsibility" becomes the mantra that citizens embrace.

Spain's popular uprising, with citizens camped in city squares across the country, has prompted comments about a much anticipated "European summer" of discontent in which the people of Europe follow the example set by Arab streets and take their turn in demanding democracy, justice and peace.

Some commentary on the Internet has even begun to point to the possibility of a "North American fall" following on the heels of this uprising for change in Europe.

But rather than predicting what might happen in North America, this is a time for reflection and critique of what started in Spain and what such a popular movement will face in coming months.

I have personally camped in the city squares and listened to the proposals made by the committees that have hijacked the movement.

What started as a call for electoral reform and the punishing of political and economic corruption a call that indeed attracted thousands of people to the city squares has quickly metamorphosed into some kind of Bolshevik-like political project led by the country's squatter movement.

Although to those observing from the outside the calls for nonviolence and participatory democracy coming from the microphones of the committees seem to point to a truly revolutionary change, a close look from within the squares reveals that those calls are as empty as the calls for change we are used to hearing from the country's politicians.

It is my opinion that this hijacking of a truly democratic uprising inspired by a general indignation and glued together through solidarity has already caused great damage to this spontaneous call for change.

Of course, it is difficult to put forth clear proposals when thousands of people find themselves on the streets.

It is obvious that in such situations groups with organizing capacity are going to take charge in the steering of the movement, but just because a group has the ability to organize meals, public toilets, and speaking engagements in a public square, it does not mean it has the ability to direct the discontent of a mass of people.

Sadly, those who called for the squares to be filled do not seem to understand this, and their mistake, I think, has already begun to demobilize those whose indignation is not only aimed at the actions of politicians and bankers, but is also aimed at the actions of the committees taking control of the squares.

Hopefully, these committees will realize that the best option for the movement today is for them to turn the microphones away from themselves and hand them down to those filling the squares asking for some form of real democracy.

Unless one thinks that the calls of indignation are going to be met by a center-right government, it seems apparent that indignation itself is not salvaging Spain.

Therefore, if we the people in the squares are to gain true democracy while

avoid having the International Monetary Fund “salvage” our country through a Greek-style bailout and its subsequent debt restructuring, we must act responsibly and acknowledge that we need the majority of the country to rally behind our calls for change.

This only seems possible, once we critique our own actions, correct our mistakes, and stop proposing utopian ideals through undemocratic means, and instead offer real solutions through truly participatory democracy.

Pablo Ouziel’s articles and essays are available at pabloouziel.com
