

Small Farmers Vs. Big Mining in Central America

Heavy-metals pollution threatens indigenous agriculture throughout the region, reports Edgardo Ayala.

By **Edgardo Ayala**

in **San Salvador**

Inter Press Service

Like an octopus, metals mining has been spreading its tentacles throughout Central America and dealing a blow to the region's agriculture and natural ecosystems, according to affected villagers, activists and a new report on the problem.

"Where the mining company is operating was land that peasants leased to plant corn and beans, our staple crops. But since the company came in, there is no land left to farm," said Lesbia Villagrán, who lives in the municipality of San Rafael Las Flores in eastern Guatemala.

Minera San Rafael, a subsidiary of the Canadian company Tahoe Resources, set up shop in this rural municipality of just over 9,000 people in 2007, and since then local residents in different villages scattered throughout this municipality and nearby areas have been organized to bring its operations to a halt. Villagers have been fighting the El Escobal silver mine arguing that it will affect their livelihood in agriculture, as well as local water sources and biodiversity.

"When I was little, my father leased four or six manzanas (a little more than four hectares) of land and for us it was a

joy to work in the abundant harvest. But when the owners of the land sold it to the company, my father was no longer able to plant our staple crops,” added Villagrán, 28, in an interview with IPS from San Rafael.

The mine changed ownership in January, and now the company is called Minera San Rafael El Escobal, a subsidiary of Canada’s [Pan American Silver](#), which according to its website, is the world’s second-largest producer of silver. It owns and operates six mines in Argentina, Bolivia, Mexico, Peru, and now Guatemala.

“The situation in agriculture is complicated by the company’s operations,” said Alex Reynoso, a coffee grower from a municipality near San Rafael.

Fears of Heavy Metal Contamination

According to Reynoso, the country’s markets do not want produce harvested near the mine because of fears that they are contaminated with heavy metals used in the extraction process.

“The country’s most important markets flat-out avoid buying our products,” he told IPS from his hometown.

IPS attempted to get comments from both Tahoe Resources and Pan American Silver with respect to the criticism by San Rafael Las Flores residents against the mine, but had received no reply by the time this article was published.

Mining operations have been suspended since July 2017 while the Guatemalan Constitutional Court studied a complaint by organizations of local Amerindian Xinca residents that they were not consulted about the project as required by law.

The Court issued a ruling upholding the suspension of mining activity in September 2018.

This case in Guatemala is an example of the tensions caused in Central America by metals mining, an activity that has been ongoing in the area, albeit in a rudimentary fashion, since the time of Spanish colonialism in the sixteenth century.

Recent Expansion

In the last few decades it has expanded with the arrival of transnational mining corporations to the area.

The arrival of foreign corporations generated social conflict, as local residents in the villages and towns where the mines are active began to organize, especially in Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador and Nicaragua.

The consortia that win the mining concessions have been grabbing up traditional farming and forest land, while monopolizing water resources that local communities, especially indigenous ones, depend on, putting their food security at risk.

A study released Feb. 11 in San Salvador, gives an account of this expansion and its impacts. Published in Spanish by the [Central American Mining Alliance](#), a conglomerate of environmental organizations in the region, its title in English is, ["Strategies for the Defense of the Environment and Human Rights in the Face of the Impacts of Mining Extractivism in Central America,"](#)

In Honduras, up to January 2017, 172 mining concessions had been granted, covering a total area of 7,275 square

kilometers, equivalent to 6.47 of the country's territory.

In Guatemala, up to the same date, 55 concessions had been granted, covering an area of 4,143 square kilometers, or 3.81 percent of the national territory.

And by May 2017 Nicaragua had granted 146 mining concessions, and is still processing 20 more applications. Altogether, including the pending applications, they cover 11,143 square kilometers, or 8.55 percent of the country.

El Salvador made international history by being the first country in the world to ban all forms of mining in March 2017. But as of 2006 there were 31 mining concessions, covering an area of 1,088 square kilometers, 5.17 percent of the national territory.

Central America is a region of great social deprivation, with a population of 48 million inhabitants and an area of 524,000 square kilometers, also made up of Belize, Costa Rica and Panama.

Vulnerable to Climate Impacts

It is also one of the regions most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, with high annual crop losses, either due to excess water, during the rainy season, or due to droughts in the dry season.

Following the Salvadoran example, "there are cases of movements that are demanding mining-free territories" in neighboring countries, Nicaraguan researcher Angélica Alfaro, one of the chief authors of the new study, told IPS.

"But the reality is that countries like Honduras, Guatemala

and Nicaragua have passed laws aimed directly at promoting the mining sector,” said Alfaro, who worked on the document as a consultant for the [Association for the Development of El Salvador](#).

The mining industry jeopardizes food security in Central America because it directly impacts agriculture, as it affects several watersheds, Julio González, of the Guatemalan group Madre Selva, told IPS.

For example, the Cerro Blanco mine, located in the Guatemalan municipality of Asunción Mita, bordering on western El Salvador, is part of the Ostua-Guija-Lempa basin.

The pollution generated by the mine runs into Lake Guija, in El Salvador, and from there to the Lempa River, which winds through this country, supplying water that is processed for use in irrigation and for human consumption.

“Water, apart from daily use, is vital for agriculture, and is affected by the presence of metallic minerals, like cyanide, all of which will alter food production,” said González, who participated in the presentation of the study in San Salvador.

He added that the land used by the mining industry is not the enormous extensions of land owned by large landowners, but rather the areas used for subsistence agriculture, especially in the territories of indigenous people, historically expelled from their land and pushed into forested areas. “But that’s the agriculture that sustains food security,” he said.

The report "[Impacts of metal mining in Central America](#)," published in 2011, warned that "access to the geographical space available to mining is twice that dedicated to the production of basic grains, that is, for every square kilometer that is planted with basic grains in Central America there are two square kilometers controlled by the mining industry."

Edgardo Ayala covers El Salvador for the Inter-Press Agency.

Agribusiness Is the Problem, Not the Solution

Current policies often favor large farms at the expense of small growers who produce most of the world's food, writes Jomo Kwame Sundaram.

By [Jomo Kwame Sundaram](#)

in Kuala Lumpur

[Inter Press Service](#)



For two centuries, all too many discussions about hunger and resource scarcity has been haunted by the ghost of Parson Thomas Malthus.

Malthus warned that rising populations would exhaust resources, especially those needed for food production. Exponential population growth would outstrip food output.

Humanity now faces a major challenge as global warming is expected to frustrate the production of enough food as the world population rises to 9.7 billion by 2050. Timothy

Wise's new book "[Eating Tomorrow: Agribusiness, Family Farmers, and the Battle for the Future of Food](#)," argues that most solutions currently put forward by government, philanthropic and private sector luminaries are misleading.

Malthus' Ghost Returns

The early 2008 food price crisis has often been wrongly associated with the 2008-2009 global financial crisis. The number of hungry in the world was said to have risen to over a billion, feeding a resurgence of neo-Malthusianism.

Agribusiness advocates fed such fears, insisting that food production must double by 2050, and high-yielding industrial agriculture, under the auspices of agribusiness, is the only solution. In fact, the world is mainly fed by hundreds of millions of small-scale, often called family farmers who produce over two-thirds of developing countries' food.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, neither food scarcity nor poor physical access are the main causes of food insecurity and hunger. Instead, Reuters has observed a "[global grain glut](#)," with surplus cereal stocks piling up.

Meanwhile, poor production, processing and storage facilities cause food losses of an average of about a third of developing countries' output. A similar share is believed lost in rich countries due to wasteful food storage, marketing and consumption behavior.

Nevertheless, despite grain abundance, the 2018 "[State of Food Security and Nutrition](#)" report – by the Rome-based United Nations food agencies led by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) – reported rising chronic and severe

hunger or undernourishment involving more than 800 million.

Political, philanthropic and corporate leaders have promised to help struggling African and other countries grow more food, by offering to improve farming practices. New seed and other technologies would modernize those left behind.

But producing more food, by itself, does not enable the hungry to eat. Thus, agribusiness and its philanthropic promoters are often the problem, not the solution, in feeding the world.

“Eating Tomorrow” addresses related questions such as: Why doesn’t rising global food production feed the hungry? How can we “feed the world” amid rising populations and unsustainable pressure on land, water and other natural resources that farmers need to grow food?

Family Farmers Lack Power

Drawing on five years of extensive fieldwork in Southern Africa, Mexico, India and the U.S. Midwest, Wise concludes that the problem is essentially one of power. He shows how powerful business interests influence government food and agricultural policies to favor large farms.

This is typically at the expense of “family” farmers, who grow most of the world’s food, but also puts consumers and others at risk, e.g., due to agrochemical use. His many examples not only detail and explain the many problems small-scale farmers, but also their typically constructive responses despite lack of support, if not worse, from most governments:

- In Mexico, trade liberalization following the 1993 North

American Free Trade Area (NAFTA) agreement swamped the country with cheap, subsidized U.S. maize and pork, accelerating migration from the countryside. Apparently, this was actively encouraged by transnational pork producers employing “undocumented” and non-unionized Mexican workers willing to accept low wages and poor working conditions.

- In Malawi, large government subsidies encouraged farmers to buy commercial fertilizers and seeds from U.S. agribusinesses such as now Bayer-owned Monsanto, but to little effect, as their productivity and food security stagnated or even deteriorated. Meanwhile, Monsanto took over the government seed company, favoring its own patented seeds at the expense of productive local varieties. A former senior Monsanto official co-authored the national seed policy that threatens to criminalize farmers who save, exchange and sell seeds instead.
- In Zambia, greater use of seeds and fertilizers from agribusiness tripled maize production without reducing the country’s very high rates of poverty and malnutrition. Meanwhile, as the government provides 250,000-acre “farm blocks” to foreign investors, family farmers struggle for title to farm land.
- In Mozambique too, the government gives away vast tracts of farm land to foreign investors. Meanwhile, women-led cooperatives successfully run their own native maize seed banks.
- Iowa promotes vast monocultures of maize and soybean to feed hogs and produce bioethanol rather than “feed the world.”
- A large Mexican farmer cooperative launched an “agro-

ecological revolution,” while the old government kept trying to legalize Monsanto’s controversial genetically modified maize. Farmers have thus far halted the Monsanto plan, arguing that GM corn threatens the rich diversity of native Mexican varieties.

Much of the research for the book was done in 2014-15, when Barack Obama was U.S. president, although the narrative begins with developments and policies following the 2008 food price crisis, during the last year of former President George W. Bush. The book tells a story of U.S. big business’ influence on policies enabling more aggressive transnational expansion.

Yet, Wise remains optimistic, emphasizing that the world can feed the hungry, many of whom are family farmers. Despite the challenges they face, many family farmers are finding innovative and effective ways to grow more and better food. He advocates support for farmers’ efforts to improve their soil, output and wellbeing.

Eating Better

Hungry farmers are nourishing their life-giving soils using more ecologically sound practices to plant a diversity of native crops, instead of using costly chemicals for export-oriented monocultures. According to Wise, they are growing more and better food, and are capable of feeding the hungry.

Unfortunately, most national governments and international institutions still favor large-scale, high-input, industrial agriculture. This neglects more sustainable solutions offered by family farmers, and the need to improve the wellbeing of poor farmers.

Undoubtedly, many new agricultural techniques offer the prospect of improving the welfare of farmers, not only by increasing productivity and output, but also by limiting costs, using scarce resources more effectively, and reducing the drudgery of farm work.

But the world must recognize that farming may no longer be viable for many who face land, water and other resource constraints, unless they get better access to such resources. Meanwhile, malnutrition of various types affects well over 2 billion people in the world, and industrial agriculture contributes about 30 percent of greenhouse gas emissions.

Going forward, it will be important to ensure affordable, healthy and nutritious food supplies for all, mindful not only of food and water safety, but also of various pollution threats. A related challenge will be to enhance dietary diversity affordably to overcome micronutrient deficiencies and diet-related non-communicable diseases for all.

Jomo Kwame Sundaram, a former economics professor, was United Nations assistant secretary-general for economic development, and received the Wassily Leontief Prize for Advancing the Frontiers of Economic Thought.

Trump Resists Progress on Global Warming

Exclusive: Market trends now favor renewable energy as a cost-effective alternative to fossil fuels, but President Trump's resistance to this good news is doing real damage in the fight against global warming, reports Jonathan Marshall.

By Jonathan Marshall

With petrochemical billionaires Charles and David Koch paying many of the GOP's bills these days, it's no wonder conservative policymakers are pushing hard to protect dirty fossil fuels against competition from clean, renewable energy. But entrepreneurial capitalists whom conservatives claim to worship are fighting back, slashing costs for wind and solar power to the point where few customers can refuse them.

A remarkable new study by Lazard, the venerable New York investment house, concludes that the *unsubsidized* cost of energy from new wind and solar plants now falls decisively below that of nuclear and coal plants, and even below that of efficient natural-gas-fired generation. The gap is widening each year as scale economies and improvements in turbine and photovoltaic technology drive cost reductions. Significantly, even cautious modelers at the U.S. Department of Energy concede these trends.

Even more disruptive is Lazard's finding that "in some scenarios the full-lifecycle costs of building and operating renewables-based projects have dropped below the operating costs alone of conventional generation technologies such as coal or nuclear." In other words, it's often cheaper to shut down those older plants and replace them with new wind and solar projects.

Where local conditions especially favor renewable energy, the cost advantages of wind and solar have become enormous. Last spring, for example, Tucson Electric Power inked a 20-year deal to purchase enough solar energy to power more than 20,000 homes at a price of less than 3 cents per kilowatt-hour. (One kilowatt-hour is the amount of energy needed to light ten 100-watt bulbs for an hour.)

That's just half the cost of new gas and coal generation and about a quarter of the cost of new nuclear power. Only the cheapest wind power can compare.

Trump Fights the Market

Members of the Trump administration, and many Republicans in Congress, are trying to derail the renewable express train.

Secretary of Energy Rick Perry has called for "rebalancing the market" by issuing federal rules to tilt the playing field in favor of coal and nuclear power. Perry was reportedly influenced by the CEO of Murray Energy, a major coal company that sells much of its product to U.S. utilities whose traditional generating plants are becoming uneconomic.

In an effort to boost profits for coal companies, the Trump administration is also working with Peabody Energy to subsidize continued operation of the Navajo

Generating Station in Arizona, whose owners voted in February to close the 43-year-old plant. The coal-fired facility has been a major source of air pollution and haze in the Grand Canyon and is the third largest source of greenhouse gas emissions in the nation.

Speaking at a Kentucky Farm Bureau event in October, Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Scott Pruitt said "I would do away with the incentives that we give to wind and solar," even though current law already schedules most credits to expire by 2020 for wind and 2022 for solar.

Echoing his sentiment, the latest House tax bill guts clean energy tax credits, though the draft version under consideration by the Senate keeps them intact. The Senate's reluctance reflects the fact that many of the nation's more than 300,000 jobs in renewable energy production are in heavily Republican states.

As renewable energy costs continue to fall, however, the Trump administration is finding it hard to repeal the laws of supply and demand.

In August, Duke Energy Florida said it was scrapping plans to build a new nuclear plant and would instead double the Sunshine State's solar capacity as part of a \$6 billion program to modernize the state's power grid and build 500 new electric vehicle charging stations.

Meanwhile, American Electric Power, one of the country's leading owners of coal-fired plants, announced in July that it is investing \$4.5 billion to build the nation's largest single-site wind project, in western Oklahoma. Beyond that 2,000 megawatt project, AEP has plans to acquire 5,300 megawatts of additional renewable power by 2030 to diversify its power production portfolio and slash carbon emissions.

In a survey this spring of 32 power utilities operating in 26 conservative states, Reuters found only one that said it might prolong the life of its coal-fired units to please the Trump White House.

"The number of utilities betting their futures on renewable energy seems to be growing by the day," observes the investment website *The Motley Fool*. "Utilities aren't investing billions of dollars into renewable energy to save the climate or appease environmentalists, they're doing so because it's in their best interest financially. Renewable energy is now the lowest cost option when building new power plants and that's what's driving adoption. If these utilities are any indication, there will be tens of billions more poured into the industry over the next decade."

The same trend is happening globally, as major greenhouse polluters like China and India invest tens of billions of dollars in new solar and wind plants. Even

the world's fossil-fuel capital, Saudi Arabia, is joining the revolution: In October, its power authorities received an astonishingly low bid of only 1.8 cents per kilowatt-hour for a 300-megawatt project in the north of the kingdom. Unlimited sun and cheap land make solar power the cheapest resource even in the land of oil.

Policy Imperatives

With renewable energy costs in sharp decline, and utilities shifting their investments accordingly, why should we care if President Trump's team denies the existence of climate change and lauds the future of coal? Because with global carbon emissions still rising, the world must dramatically step up its response if we hope to keep the impact and cost of global warming in check.

"Humanity has failed to make sufficient progress in generally solving these foreseen environmental challenges, and alarmingly, most of them are getting far worse," declared a communique by more than 15,000 scientists from 184 countries published this month in the journal *BioScience*. "Soon it will be too late to shift course away from our failing trajectory."

To keep overall warming of the planet under 2 degrees Celsius relative to pre-industrial levels – about twice the increase to date – global annual investment in clean energy must *triple*, according to a major new analysis issued this October by Stanford University's Precourt Institute for Energy.

As climate activist Bill McKibben told a recent international climate conference in Germany, "If we have any hope of preventing absolute civilization challenge and catastrophe, then we need to be bringing down carbon emissions with incredible rapidity, far faster than it can happen just via normal economic transition."

In other words, we can't afford to depend on slow market adjustments. We need continued renewable energy subsidies and new carbon taxes to accelerate the transition to cleaner energy. We need increased investment in customer energy efficiency programs. We need to tackle carbon emissions not just from power plants, but from transportation, industry and agriculture – all potentially greater challenges.

Daunting as that agenda is, we can at least find some comfort in signs – like the new report from Lazard – that market forces are finally lining up to help humanity save itself.

Jonathan Marshall, former editor of the Next100 blog on clean energy and the environment, is author of the recent stories "Trump's War for Coal Raises Risks," "Trump Takes Aim at Energy R&D Funds," and "The World's Shift to

Escaping the Colonized Mind

In our late-stage capitalism, every inch of humanity has been exploited and maximized for profit, creating “colonized” minds and emotions, a challenge for humans to free themselves and save the planet, says poet Phil Rockstroh.

By Phil Rockstroh

Human sexuality mirrors human culture. Mating dances of seduction and refusal, and acts of non-consensual aggression cannot be separated from traits witnessed, practiced and internalized by the people of a particular society. It is impossible to close the bedroom door to the culture at large. Eros not only inhabits the genitals and the heart but Anima mundi as well.

Sexuality is not going to go away because its nature, which is sublime in the sense of the beautiful and the monstrous, makes people uncomfortable. The phenomenon brings all things human to the fore of consciousness. Therefore, it is imperative we talk about it all, and without mind-negating shame and heart-freezing hysteria.

The late, archetypal psychologist James Hillman, in his final book, the brilliant but under recognized, *A Terrible Love Of War*, noted the consort, the backdoor man, of the Goddess of Love and Beauty is Ares, the God of War. Moments after her practical-minded husband Hephaestus would leave for work, Ares and Aphrodite would be ensconced in the lover’s bed, locked in intimate embrace, under the very roof constructed by her craftsman spouse. Withal, libido translates, often, into impractical, irrational and dangerous phenomenon.

Hillman asks, “where else in human experience, except in the throes of ardor – that strange coupling of love with war – do we find ourselves transported to a mythical condition and the gods most real?” – *A Terrible Love of War* (p. 9).

When human beings evince the erotic, we are gripped and grappled by primal forces. The ancient Greeks traced the phenomenon to the heights of Olympus while the lurid, Calvinist/Puritan imagination places it in lakes of torment-inflicting hellfire.

Under capitalism, the activity will be commodified. Sexuality is deemed a “human resource.” And, as is the case with the finite resources of all things on planet

earth, designated as fodder for exploitation by ruthless profiteers. The genitals of an individual are but another precinct to be colonized. One is advised to be ready with a local insurgency of the heart, mind and body to retain self-rule.

If only it was that easy. Where are the mountains of the heart from which to stage a guerrilla war? The option is possible. But expect a long struggle, and for your heart to receive all manner of wounds. Yet the pain of struggle provides us with a common tongue that limns the radiance of everyday catastrophe, including catastrophes attendant to the realm of Eros, son of errant and erratic Aphrodite. Thus we blunder into self-knowledge, are privy to our own biography, read by pressing fingertips to the braille of one's scars.

Taking It All

When sexuality has been degraded by inequitable power, and the powers at large have decreed all the things of the world theirs for exploitation then the system from which the predatory class gains their power over the individual must be challenged and dismantled. But the setup cannot be changed from within its own self-sustaining, self-defining order. The notion is as risible as a yellow fin tuna joining the crew of a massive, sea life-decimating fishing trawler, the tuna claiming it plans to reform the system from within.

Men who callously disregard the autonomy of others are only as powerful as the societal structures in place that not only protect but lavishly reward their hyper-aggressive mode of mind and attendant modus operandi – apropos, the spoils gained by the capitalist class by means of their acts of perpetual plunder perpetrated against all of humanity and the whole of nature.

Speaking of which, the coal and steel processing company town, Birmingham, Alabama, where I was born was a colonized place. The small, Southern city, squatting at the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains, was founded, built and controlled by Northern industrialists. The homes of the city's affluent management class, known among us economic lessers as the Big Mules, luxuriated in the clear, fresh air upon Red Mountain (on which stands an imposing, iron ore cast statue of Vulcan, the Roman version of the Greek's Hephaestus) while the white laboring class and city's Jim Crow-shackled African-American community were relegated to dwelling in the industrial smog below.

As is the case with colonialist socio-economic structures, worldwide, in which a region's wealth is generated by a local, under-compensated labor force, it was imperative for the anger and resentment of the colonized masses to be shunted away from the colonizers. The time-tested method of racial animus did the trick. In my memory, the air of Birmingham was ridden with a heavy industry-generated,

sulfuric, rotten egg-smelling reek that was inseparable from the miasmatic rage of white working-class men such as my father.

The reasons for their fuming resentment included: When my father would ask for a raise, the stock reply from management was, "You know, I can go over to Colored Town, right now, and hire five n*gg*ers for what I pay, your narrow ass."

Thus the anger of Birmingham's Jim Crow era among working men was always close to the surface, and, at the slightest provocation, would come boiling forth like phalanxes of fire ants from a disturbed bed. Exposing the hateful social milieu of the Jim Crow-ruled South to the world at large was a primary factor in the decision of Martin Luther King et. al. to bring the Civil Rights cause to the city of my birth.

Denuded Empathy

For the maintenance of a colonized order to be maintained, empathy must be denuded, fear and antipathy of the alien other must be perpetuated thereby obstructing any inclination towards mutual respect and incipient feelings of affinity between the tribe granted a favored, dominant position and the tribes subjugated into positions of low status. Alliances among the exploited would prove dangerous to the elites whose fortunes are dependent on perpetual racial and ethnic division and divisiveness. Then, as now, class consciousness must be suppressed by the fomenting of racial resentments. When one gazes upon the sorehead denizens of the so-called alt-right, one becomes witness to the workings of a colonized – and wounded – psyche.

In my father's case, the following reveals how he transmigrated the howling abyss of his displaced rage into the precincts of empathy.

My father injured his back in a fall from a freight car while loading a cache of pig iron; as a consequence, he, on a permanent basis, could no longer perform manual labor – the primary type of work available to the working-class men of Birmingham. During his convalescence, he taught himself photography, and, by the advent of the Civil Rights Movement, he was freelancing to Black Star Syndicate and became Life Magazine's primary stringer in the region. I have memories of him arriving home from work, his clothes redolent of tear gas, his adrenal system churning, his mind buffeted, unable to process the brutality he witnessed being perpetrated by both city officials and ordinary citizens on the streets of the city.

On a Sunday, in late summer of 1963, my sister and I were immersed in Blakean innocence playing in the sandbox in the backyard of our family's apartment when he returned from the site of the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing. There was a

quality about his stare that I found unnerving. His gaze kept returning to my sister and me. Being a father now myself, I know what thoughts were gripping and grappling him... "what if it had been them. My god ... what if it had been them."

Empathetic awareness has its starting point by evincing a sensitivity to the feelings, hopes, and aspirations of those close to one's heart yet cannot stall out there. The quality must ripple out to distance shores inhabited by the alien other. In this manner, the process of de-colonization of one's mind can begin.

Denial of the reality of Climate Change, albeit outside the cynical ranks of obscenely compensated Big Energy Industry lobbyists and shills, is borne of a similar, life-negating dynamic, i.e., an ossified egotism winnows down awareness to manageable bits of casuistry:

"I just shoveled three feet of snow from my driveway. Global Warming...my frozen butt." "I think too much political hay is made from weather. Our ancestors braved it and it was part of their lives," arrive the (verbatim) quotes as seen on my Facebook newsfeed.

The declarations reveal an inner colonization, manifested by a monoculture of the mind. Because the natural world and the human psyche emerged from the same evolutionary schematic, circumscribing down one's consciousness to ad hoc rationalizations for maintaining a destructive status quo, as is the case with climate denialism, amounts to psychical ecocide thus mirrors the fate of the earth, now in the throes of the sixth great extinction, due to the predation attendant to hyper-industrialization and consumerist addiction. The exponential loss of biodiversity is mirrored in the collective psyche of the consumer-scape, as if a massive fishing trawler has stripped all signs of life from the oceanic heart of humankind.

Going On

"I can't go on...I'll go on." – final two sentences of Samuel Beckett's novel, *The Unnamable*.

Yet, at times, I'm baffled as to how we, the scant and scattered few, who refuse to close our eyes and block our hearts to the realities of the day continue to go on. What force restrains one from reeling into the street seized by lamentation?

One foot is placed before the other. One word follows the next on the page. An ineffable understanding draws us into communion with the world and each other, even as the din of disconsolate angels braces the mind and cleaves the heart.

I know I am not alone in this. Nor are you. Even though, it seems so. What is

the common prayer for those who cannot close themselves off from the agonized soul of the colonized world – for those of us who are ants who dream we are Atlas, and our visions crush us as if it were the weight of the earth itself upon our shoulders?

We face a vast aloneness together. An affinity of isolation binds us like a prayer of sacred vehemence. Empathy enjoins us thereby bestowing preternatural strength. Otherwise, the immense sadness of the earth would crush us into oblivion.

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America Not Immune from Chaos

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

By Ann Wright

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

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

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

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

And then there is the politically driven violence, such as is occurring in

Burma/Myanmar with Rohingya villages burned, thousands murdered, and over 400,000 people fleeing into Bangladesh to escape Buddhist Burmese/Myanmar military attacks.

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

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

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

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

U.S. wars killing people around the world and the glorification of this organized violence as an answer to geopolitical problems can't help but influence the thinking of some troubled individuals who may see random violence as the answer to their own personal problems. Easy access to guns in the United States is simply out of control.

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

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

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

Galveston's BioLab Amid Global Warming

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

By Joe Lauria

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

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

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

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

The GNL's website says the lab can withstand a Category 5 storm and 140 mph winds, though Category 5 storms on the Saffir-Simpson wind scale begin at 157 mph. Though Ike flooded most of Galveston and damaged university back-up generators, the Category 2 storm packed only 100 mph winds, which the lab buildings withstood.

"Hurricane Ike was devastating," David Walker, director of UTMB's Center for Biodefense and Emerging Infectious Diseases, told the Texas Medical Center magazine. "But there was one really good outcome, an unmitigated, beneficial

effect: it proved that the GNL had been designed appropriately. It was the only building that was completely undamaged. Everyone was criticizing us for building a BSL4 lab on a barrier island that's constantly hit by hurricanes, but this proved that we had designed our facility soundly and it could function safely."

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

Hurricane Harvey

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

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

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

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

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

Two weeks after the storm, Kramer, the former Sierra Club official, spoke out again about the lab. He told me he had lost none of his concerns before and

after Harvey hit. "My reaction when I first heard that the bio hazards lab had been located in Galveston was, 'Say what? That's crazy.' That's still my feeling," he said in an email. "I think that was a questionable decision."

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

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

The Director Speaks

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Intensified Storms

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

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

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

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

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

Galveston is Also Sinking

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

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

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

"They also tend to have very low elevations, making it easy for water to wash over and submerge the island," *Live Science* said. "Many have questioned the wisdom of choosing to build on and develop barrier islands, given their risks."

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

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

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

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

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

The Trouble with the Labs

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

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

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

"Oversight of biological research labs is fragmented, often secretive and largely self-policing, the investigation found. And even when research facilities commit the most egregious safety or security breaches – as more than 100 labs have – federal regulators keep their names secret.

"Of particular concern are mishaps occurring at institutions working with the world's most dangerous pathogens in biosafety level 3 and 4 labs – the two highest levels of containment that have proliferated since the 9/11 terror attacks in 2001. Yet there is no publicly available list of these labs, and the

scope of their research and safety records are largely unknown to most state health departments charged with responding to disease outbreaks. Even the federal government doesn't know where they all are, the Government Accountability Office has warned for years.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

there need security clearances.

How the Media Misplayed It

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Flacking for the Lab

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

Today, too many journalists, driven by careerism, identify with the powerful

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

published a clarification, thanking Ferguson by name and promising to do a better job in the future.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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The Military’s Warning on Global Warming

The U.S. military, which gets called on to cope with unrest tied to global warming, is taking the climate threat seriously as opposed to civilian politicians who are pandering to special interests, says ethicist Daniel C. Maguire.

By Daniel C. Maguire

It wasn’t supposed to be this way. The really neat American idea was that the military’s zest for battle would be restrained by the measured judgment of a civilian-led government. But the spreading perception internationally is that President Trump’s generals are the last-ditch guarantors of common sense in a deranged White House.

Let’s admit it. The military can be right. Secretary of State Colin Powell, a retired general, warned President George W. Bush privately against the crazy invasion of Iraq though he later betrayed his own good sense and joined the criminal conspiracy.

What the military recognizes and the civilian government does not, is that the biggest security threat, the biggest security threat our species has faced in 10,000 years, is global warming. The military doesn’t call it a hoax. The 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review calls climate change “an accelerant of instability” and a “threat multiplier.”

In October 2015 a diverse group of experts, including three former Defense Secretaries, said that climate change is “shaping a world that is more unstable, resource-constrained, violent, and disaster-prone.”

Africa is a case in point. Andrew Holland writing in *Scientific American* writes: “In northern Nigeria deforestation, overgrazing and increased heat from global warming have turned what was once productive farmland and savanna into an extension of the Sahara Desert. Lake Chad has lost more than 90 percent of its original size from drought, mismanagement and waste.”

The population of already overcrowded Africa is likely to double by 2050 leading to explosive conditions already in evidence.

It is precisely from the chaos of this toxic mix that radical groups like Boko Haram have sprouted. The military knows this. The Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences USA said that climate change fueled Syria's civil war. Deep and long droughts, influenced by climate change, drove hundreds of thousands of people from their farms into cities like Aleppo and Raqqa making fertile breeding ground for ISIS, Al Qaeda and other jihadist groups.

The New York Times reports that as pasture land has dried up in places like Kenya violent and murderous battles are being fought just to get grass for the animals. Climate change is a driving factor in all of this. It is a "threat multiplier" and the threats do not stay within the borders of the poorest most affected nations. Despair also goes global and explodes in our streets and in the streets of Europe and elsewhere.

A Primer for Denialists

President Trump calls anthropogenic global warming "a hoax," drops out of the historic Paris climate accord and guts the Environmental Protection Agency. Maybe his generals could don their uniforms, sit Trump down and give him a little primer on this epochal threat to planetary security. Here is the primer.

We have had 378 months of above average temperatures. That's no hoax. Scientists say Arctic ice is in "a death spiral." That's no hoax. People fish off Bangladesh in what was once a busy market before rising seas claimed it. That's no hoax.

Temperatures rose in Iraq and Kuwait to 129 F in July 2016 and to 112 F in parts of France and Italy in August 2017. That's no hoax.

"For every degree Celsius that temperature rises, agricultural scientists calculate, wheat yields drop 10 percent in the Earth's hotter midriff," as Alan Weisman reports in his tellingly entitled book *Countdown*. That's no hoax.

Environmental refugees no longer come only from Island states like the Maldives and Tuvalu and from Bangladesh. They come from Houston and Florida and will be coming from inundated cities on our coasts.

On top of all that we are awakening the sleeping giant in the earth. As volcanologist Bill McGuire says changing climate triggers earthquakes, tsunamis, and volcanoes, unleashing forces that make our destructive power seem puny. And that is coming and that is no hoax. Hurricanes Harvey and Irma, energized by the heated waters of the sea, are portents of a "new normal." The records they are

breaking are not a hoax.

Climate scientist Clive Hamilton reports that “the reluctant conclusion of the most eminent climate scientist is that the world is now on a path to a very unpleasant future and it is too late to stop it.” He describes the scientists’ mood as one of “barely suppressed panic.” He says this in his book ominously entitled *Requiem for a Species*.

Stephen Hawking has so little hope for humanity on this planet that he says our long-term future must be in space. (One can question his idea that we should take our failures and export them into space!) The root of the problem he says is humanity’s “selfish and aggressive instinct.”

In other words, according to Hawking, it is not a scientific problem: it’s a moral problem. An ethical problem for an ethically skewed species. These expressions of near despair are not uttered as a hoax.

Any Hope Anywhere?

Fear is our greatest need: denial our most ingrained and fearsome talent. Acute fear can stoke action. We got scared of small pox and an international effort ended it. We got really scared with the shrinkage of the ozone over Antarctica and we responded internationally. In World War II, the United States transformed its entire economy and its industrial production in a matter of months. The problem is we are not afraid of an incipient apocalypse even as our TV’s blaringly report on it.

We have nothing to fear but the absence of fear. We need fear. Green fear. In a kind of homeopathic medicine, we should add green greed to the mix. Creative experiments in many countries are showing that there is money to be made by harnessing renewable natural energy.

Job one for generals is detecting danger and sounding needed alarms. Maybe the generals can be our ecological Paul Revere’s. Maybe.

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The World's Shift to Electric Cars

Exclusive: Despite resistance from the oil industry and Team Trump, the transition to electric vehicles is accelerating, with key foreign countries and some U.S. states taking the lead, writes Jonathan Marshall.

By Jonathan Marshall

Even as the Trump administration scrubs federal web sites of data about climate science and clean energy and appoints coal industry lobbyists to senior policy positions, other nations are responding vigorously to the reality of global warming.

Great Britain and France have recently announced ambitious timetables for phasing out fossil-fueled cars by 2040. Even bolder are Norway, which expects all new cars sold by 2025 to be electric, up from 37 percent today, and India, which set 2030 as its target date for going all-electric.

Together with the rising domestic popularity of all-electric and hybrid electric vehicles, the potential political contagion from such foreign programs is spurring major U.S. fossil fuel producers into spending millions of dollars to kill clean transportation alternatives.

A shadowy outfit called Fueling U.S. Forward, devoted to promoting greater use of oil and natural gas, recently produced a misleading attack video called "Dirty Secrets of Electric Cars." The *New York Times* exposed the group as "a public relations group for fossil fuels funded by Koch Industries, the oil and petrochemicals conglomerate led by the ultraconservative billionaire brothers David H. and Charles G. Koch."

The stakes, both financial and environmental, are high. The U.S. transportation sector currently consumes 14 million barrels of petroleum products every day. Transitioning away from all that gasoline and diesel to cleaner electric transportation will be critical to lowering carbon emissions before global warming wreaks havoc on human civilization and natural ecosystems. It will also help alleviate vehicle air pollution that kills an estimated 50,000 people each year in the United States alone.

Unlike the power sector, where the renewable energy revolution is well underway across the nation, transportation remains largely stuck in the last century. In my car-friendly state of California, for example, thanks to a boom in solar and wind energy, electric power today accounts for only about 20 percent of statewide greenhouse gas emissions. Transportation, by contrast, contributes 36

percent, far more than any other sector.

When charged by clean solar, wind, hydro or nuclear power, electric cars and trucks contribute almost no greenhouse or toxic air emissions. Even in states with a high proportion of coal-fired generation, efficient electric vehicles (EVs) account for fewer emissions than the average new gas-powered car.

With coal-burning plants increasingly giving way to cleaner natural gas-fired plants and renewable generation of energy, more than 70 percent of Americans now live in areas where EVs cause fewer emissions even than the cleanest conventional cars, according to recent research by the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS). On average, across the country, EVs create as little carbon pollution as gasoline-powered cars that get 73 mpg – if such cars even existed.

Critics, like the Koch-funded Fueling U.S. Forward, complain that it takes more energy to manufacture an electric car than a gas-powered car, mostly because of the need for big batteries. But those manufacturing emissions are more than offset by the reduced emissions from driving a mid-sized electric car after just 5,000 miles, the UCS report notes.

Electric Vehicles on a Roll

Electric vehicles today number only about 2 million, or just 0.2 percent of all light passenger vehicles in use globally today, according to the International Energy Agency (IEA). The good news is that their numbers are growing about 60 percent per year. In the United States, customers bought 53,000 electric and plug-in hybrid vehicles in the first six months of 2017 – not counting Tesla sales – up from 33,000 in the same period a year ago.

Momentum is growing in the EV industry. Tesla briefly this year enjoyed the highest market cap of any U.S. automaker. In July, Volvo announced that it plans to produce only hybrid or all-electric vehicles by 2019. China, which now leads the world in EV sales, has tough incentives to increase them further. A multi-nation coalition called the Electric Vehicles Initiative – including Canada, China, Finland, France, Germany, India, Japan, Korea, Mexico, Norway, South Africa, Sweden, United Kingdom, and, for now, the United States – is encouraging the global deployment of 20 million EVs by 2020.

IEA cites estimates that the global stock of electric cars will range between 40 million and 70 million by 2025, if governments continue to support R&D, purchase incentives, and charging infrastructure. The transition to EVs may accelerate if, as some experts forecast, they become fully cost competitive with gasoline-powered cars within a decade.

Bloomberg New Energy Finance projects that “cars with a plug [will] account for

a third of the global auto fleet by 2040 and displace about 8 million barrels a day of oil production – more than the 7 million barrels Saudi Arabia exports today.”

The Trump administration can be counted on to do what it can to slow this revolution, but 10 states have aggressive programs to promote the adoption of electric vehicles: California, Connecticut, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, Oregon, Rhode Island and Vermont. Just as with renewable energy, their success may pave the way for similar programs in other states, even “red” ones.

Fiscal conservatives should applaud their efforts to jump-start the EV market. A [study by the American Lung Association in California](#) last year documented health costs of \$24 billion a year – for lost work days, respiratory illnesses, and premature deaths – from vehicle emissions in just those 10 states. The report estimated an additional \$13 billion in climate-related costs (agricultural losses, flooding, fires, etc.). Converting two-thirds of cars on the road to electric vehicles by 2050 would save those states about \$21 billion a year, well worth the effort.

And if they succeed, proponents may also prove instrumental in helping U.S. automakers like Tesla, GM, and Ford remain world leaders in the fast-growing market for electric vehicles. The United States can’t afford to be stranded in the slow lane of adapting its economy to climate change while the rest of the world speeds ahead.

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Trump Isolates America from the World

In 2016, American voters faced a painful dilemma, electing a proven war hawk or a climate-change denier – and somehow the climate denier won – as Donald Trump just reminded the world, notes ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

Donald Trump’s inexcusable withdrawal from the Paris climate change agreement was widely expected and amply telegraphed by Trump himself, of course. And yet, there were reasonable grounds for hope that this might have been one place where Trump would move from being a demagogic campaigner to being a real president, one who deals not just with applause lines but with real U.S. interests and with

America's place in the world.

The substantive importance of the issue is unsurpassed, involving the fate of the planet. The main reasons to stay with the agreement are compelling, involving not only the habitability of Earth but also economic dynamism, U.S. leadership, and U.S. credibility. The non-binding nature of the agreement meant that there was not some unbearable onus that could be removed only through withdrawal.

And even though Trump has made much of fulfilling campaign promises, he already has allowed himself to be deflected from some such promises when they have collided with reality. He has not torn up the nuclear agreement with Iran, in the face of Iran's compliance with that accord. And on the very day Trump announced the pull-out from the Paris agreement, he signed a paper that keeps the U.S. embassy to Israel in Tel Aviv, in the face of what would be certain uproar, deleterious to any prospects for peace, if he had moved the embassy as promised to Jerusalem.

The withdrawal from the Paris agreement is indefensible, and thus Trump's statement announcing the move has much hot air, foreshadowing the increased hot air that everyone will be feeling without increased efforts to arrest global warming. There is, for example, the usual Trumpian assertion about being able to get a better deal, as if this were possible with an agreement that has 195 signatories and with respect to which, given Trump's withdrawal, the United States is now virtually alone.

He harangues about how the Green Climate Fund that the agreement established is "costing the United States a vast fortune." Barack Obama committed \$1 billion to the fund and promised a total of \$3 billion through 2020; for comparison, the proposed increase in military spending in Trump's budget for fiscal 2018 is \$53 billion.

Trump repeatedly complains about what China will be allowed to do while ignoring completely the leadership role that China is assuming in moving to clean energy. He predicts economically crippling blackouts and brownouts under the agreement while ignoring completely the rapid progress in implementing generation of renewable energy. He avows that he "cares deeply about the environment," which is a laughable claim in light of what Trump has been doing not only to climate change but also to the Environmental Protection Agency and to stewardship of public lands.

Ideology Over Realism

Opposition to the Paris agreement reflects, as Heather Hurlburt observes, some

larger patterns within American political ideology that go beyond the President himself and that Trump has exploited. Those patterns, as Hurlburt notes, are related to the unusual American experience of being a superpower, an experience that also underlies several other unconstructive American habits of perceiving and dealing with the outside world.

But the President's withdrawal is also very much a statement about Trump himself. Given the reasons that one might have expected a better decision on this issue, the decision demonstrates that Trump's worst and most destructive qualities are deeply entrenched. It demonstrates that things are unlikely to get much better, with many other issues, under Trump.

The episode shows that Trump will continue to play to a narrow base that squeaked him through to victory last November rather than being president of all the people, let alone a leader of the free world. It shows that campaign themes and the urge not to do whatever Obama did will continue to be more important to him than will enlightened interest, even enlightened self-interest.

It shows that he will continue to shove aside even the most glaring and indisputable facts if they conflict with the themes. It shows that his capability to focus is very short in terms of both time and space. And it shows a deficient moral sense, including in the respects in which morality is involved in what a generation bequeaths to future generations.

As citizens brace and prepare for three years and seven plus months more of this, the problem of climate change itself should be at the top of issues that require not just bracing and preparation but also creative thinking about how to deal with the issue as long as this kind of destructive force is in control of the U.S. government. A reminder is in order that Americans are citizens not only of the United States but also of states, localities, and civil society and also – uniquely important to this issue – citizens of the world, the same world that climate change endangers.

Regarding the smaller units, what states, cities and the private sector are doing to transition to clean energy deserves all the support it can get. Regarding citizenship of the world, Americans will have to consider carefully how to respond to the rest of the world's response to the irresponsibility on this issue in Washington.

The responsible posture may entail not just respect and understanding but also support for some of those responses. Martin Wolf of the *Financial Times* has even written about sanctions as a response to U.S. withdrawal from the Paris agreement. More plausible, more worthy of support from individual Americans, defensible under the rules of the World Trade Organization, and already talked

about among foreign government officials, would be a carbon tariff applied to U.S. exports.

Our children and grandchildren, feeling increasingly the effects of climate change, will read about what Trump did and wonder how our generation could have placed such a small-minded man in such a position of power with such lasting and damaging consequences.

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.)

Trump Tosses Red Meat to Red States

Cornered by the expanding Russia-gate investigation, President Trump reached back to his hardcore "base" by tossing out the Paris climate accord, but the move may hurt U.S. interests, says JP Sottile.

By JP Sottile

President Trump just yanked the Yanks from a treaty that was intentionally designed to be mostly non-binding because the Senate would never pass a binding treaty on climate. It was, however, a significant global political agreement to move toward goals that would create a working framework built on an unprecedented consensus. Mostly, Paris was an important admission that there is a problem ... like an environmental AA meeting.

So, what just happened?

Trump used the Paris Climate Agreement as a buttress. This was a political ploy to shore up support among his loyalists out in the vast swath of Red on that electoral map he recently hung in the White House. This was a move meant to give the President a chance to say he's fulfilling promises. This was about serving red meat to demoralized Trumpist media outlets. This is about generating a much-needed point of agreement with increasingly uncomfortable conservatives in Congress. This is about selling a new catchphrase: "Pittsburgh before Paris." And this speech signaled the return of Steve Bannon.

Trump rehashed the grievances of his campaign with all its incessant whining about the ways the world is taking advantage of America. It doesn't matter that

the global system was constructed by the U.S. ... in the interest of the U.S. ... and with American corporations and financial “leaders” always benefiting from this system.

It doesn't matter that the American people have benefited mightily from this system, too. America is less than 5 percent of the global population, but it consumes over 26 percent of the world's resources. America's middle class was enriched by America's domination of the global system it created. But now the world is leveling out a bit and Trump is telling the people they should moan and groan because the benefits of the post-World War II system are waning ... because America isn't getting everything.

Yet the truth is that America's wealth isn't being stolen by wily Chinese or shady Indians or conniving Europeans. The people who've hoarded the wealth are not only a lot like the people in Trump's cabinet ... some of them are in Trump's cabinet. Ivanka and Jared are hoarders, too. And so, too, have the oil industry and the defense industry held a death-lock grip on this system. In fact, the intersection of weapons and crude is the nexus of the system Trump slugs-off as some global conspiracy to deny Americans their birthright. And it is a big reason why the Paris Agreement was needed in the first place.

But that's okay. Why? Because Trump is unintentionally creating space for the rest of the world to finally have a real say in the way the global system works. He's catalyzing even more leveling-off of an imbalanced system long tilted by America in America's favor.

Trump has been totally played by President Xi of China. Outmaneuvered by Vladimir Putin of Russia. Dismissed by Chancellor Merkel of Germany. And now he's shown the world that America is more fallible than ever. It is moving backwards. It is retreating. And that's more room for China and Europe and Russia.

Maybe that's not so bad. Maybe it is a good thing that America is the laughingstock that Trump, in a perfect moment of solipsistic irony, said he wanted to forestall. One thing is for sure, the rest of the world shouldn't wait around for America to clean up its own mess ... because that's something it was loath to do well before Trump body-slammed the body politic and put the future in a headlock. Alas, that's a wrestling match America is now having with itself ... and the rest of the world should just head for the exits.

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