



Several Succinct and Sensible Observations

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"The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new lands but seeing with new eyes."

--- Marcel Proust

This essay forcefully argues that we should give a much higher priority to the goals of creating fairer and more sustainable societies, and of leaving a livable planet to people in the future.

We are living in turbulent times in which honesty and clarity of understanding are critically needed, and yet devious dishonesty, misinformation, fomented discord and divisive political intrigue and media manipulation are having deeply undesirable effects of undermining common good goals and preventing sensible reforms, while wrongly facilitating discriminatory unfairness and political corruption.

These are times that try people's souls, as Thomas Paine was wont to say. Epic conflicts confront us, and yet the best interests of the majority of people, and of everyone in the future, are being undermined by power-abusing factions that have engaged in corrupt activities in order to greedily grab outlandish power, perks, privileges and benefits for themselves.

We live in a world chock full of persons with short attention spans, each existing in their own subjective echo chambers, and every one in general tends to be naturally very narrowly focused on their own self-interests.

Too often, the myopic focus of our drives compels us to engage in pursuits with little regard for whether our actions are consistent with the greater good. Worse yet, many people act in hubristic ways, and are skeptical and scornful toward being responsible for helping reduce harmful impacts of their actions on others. Nor do such folks seem to care about mitigating injustices and preventing cost externalities from being foisted upon others.

"Much more than we let philosophies guide our lives, we allow obsessions to drive them; and there is no doubt which has been the great driving obsession of the last one hundred and fifty years. It is money."

--- John Fowles, *The Aristos*, 1970

Inequalities, inequities and injustices have become historically extreme in the U.S.A. today because wealthy people and corporate entities have too much power, and because our political system is too easily corrupted by influence peddling. Due largely to the determinative impacts of this malign political influence, CEOs and top corporate management, and big investors, gain almost all of the benefits of our economy.

Seeking Salvation

There are three main types of social organizations on which citizens of the world place their hopes for salvation: (1) established religions, (2) corporate entities and (3) governments. And all of these organizations are failing us right now in the face of a variety of daunting existential challenges.

Established religions are highly vulnerable to being ruled by conservatives who usurp and abuse authority in their theocratic hierarchies. They cannot be trusted because they have sided, far too many times in history, with domineering political leaders, economic oppressors, fascist repressors, and those involved in repressive dictates

and genocides, pogroms, Inquisitions, burning women at the stake, priestly sexual offenses and other such things.

Big corporations in the world today are misusing their power and far-reaching influence, and the American people are bridleing under the inequities, injustices and impositions associated with this excessive corporate influence. Corporations as a whole are too ruthless and profit-prepossessed to take adequately strong stands for economic fairness, social justice, progressive politic, strong climate action or environmental sanity.

Governments are too easily dominated by corrupting influences and the demands of rich people, corporations and religions. The easiest remedy, given human nature, would be to establish strong and responsible government by enacting fair-minded reforms and writing better laws, and putting in place sensible regulations to prevent the worst abuses of influence perpetrated by rich people, CEOs, scheming politicians, demagogues, autocrats, egomaniacal madmen and intolerant religious zealots.

We are in dire need of checks and balances in all of our consequentially influential institutions, just as we need strong and effective checks and balances in government between the executive, legislative and judicial branches, and between the federal government and state governments.

Reforms are needed that will be effective in reducing political polarization and extremism. We need to prohibit extreme gerrymandering because it undermines cooperation and moderation, and favors candidates that tend to be more reactionary on the right or radical on the left. Politicians in heavily gerrymandered districts pander to extreme fringes instead of the moderate center, thereby betraying the public trust and failing to fairly represent the best interests of the vast majority of the people in their congressional districts.

We should reintroduce the fairness doctrine in public broadcasting to ensure that important topics are fairly covered, and that reasonable opposing views are not suppressed -- and the conservative media is not so disruptively successful in hijacking peoples emotions and dividing them, preventing them from coming together in common cause.

When we honestly consider the legacy we are leaving to posterity, we should remember the words of Thomas Paine in *Common Sense*: "As we are running the next generation into debt, we ought to do the work of it, otherwise we use them meanly and pitifully. In order to discover the line of our duty rightly, we should take our children in our hand, and fix our station a few years farther into life; that eminence will present a prospect, which a few present fears and prejudices conceal from our sight."

Tools That Facilitate Political Corruption

Big Money decides almost everything in our society. Moneyed interests represent a small fraction of the populace, yet exert a domineering influence on our economy and political system. Wealthy people rig the economy by wielding the power of their money, and grab the preponderance of benefits generated through the exploitation of natural resources and the labors and productivity of working people.

One way that corporate employers succeed at maximizing profits is by having their corporate managers rigorously control employee headcount and hold down wages and oppose increases in minimum wages -- and overwork their employees. Another way they maximize profits is by harmfully foisting cost externalities upon the people.

Good policy, along with sensible rules and regulation, is needed to prevent overly egregious instances of corruption and inequality and injustices. Reform efforts should be informed by Golden Rule fairness principles.

It is wrong, in the face of daunting existential problems, to allow multi-millionaires and billionaires to continue getting away with monopolizing wealth and power in our country, and to obstruct needed actions and political reforms and tax fairness.

These are indeed unprecedented times. Capitalism, corporate power and the "greed economy" are wreaking much worse havoc on society than when Joel Bakan wrote his incisive book in 2003, *The Corporation: The Pathological Pursuit of Profit and Power*. Watch the film version in his excellent documentary *The Corporation*. This catapulting havoc motivated Joel Bakan to come back to this mega issue in 2020 with a chillingly relevant sequel *The New Corporation: The Unfortunately Necessary Sequel*.

"Today, we are in the midst of a climate emergency, and mired in inequity, racism, injustice, and economic

exploitation at a scale not seen since the 1920s," reads a promotional piece online at TheNewCorporation.movie, which was trying to encourage 1,000 private screenings.

It is a simple sad truth: When special interests can buy influence, our government doesn't serve the people, but instead mainly serves the powerful few. This fact makes it clear that *We the People* must demand that Big Money and Dark Money no longer be allowed to drive our politics.

According to a landmark study published in 2014 by Princeton professor Martin Gilens and Northwestern professor Benjamin Page, the preferences of the typical American have no influence at all on legislation emerging from Congress. Gilens and Page analyzed 1,799 policy issues in detail, determining the relative influence on them of economic elites, business groups, mass-based interest groups, and average citizens.

Their pathological conclusion: "The preferences of the average American appear to have only a miniscule, near-zero, statistically non-significant impact upon public policy." This is a grave failing in our democracy, which should rightly safeguard against extreme abuses of influence and consequent injustices.

Lawmakers mainly listen to the policy demands of big business and wealthy individuals -- those with the most lobbying prowess and deepest pockets to bankroll campaigns and promote their views.

This situation is likely much worse now, says Robert Reich, because Gilens and Page's data came from the period 1981 to 2002 -- before the Supreme Court opened the floodgates to big money in the wrongly-decided *Citizens United* case, allowing outsized influence to SuperPACs and Dark Money. This was also before the 2008 financial crisis took place and Wall Street was bailed out, and before the pandemic, and before Trump's big lies about election fraud and the 2020 election being stolen from him.

Since January 2010, when the Supreme Court allowed excessive influence to Big Money in *Citizens United*, spending by SuperPACs and dark money have dramatically increased, and there have been huge corporate returns on this mountain of money. In addition to top marginal and corporate tax rates having been repeatedly slashed over the last 42 years, regulatory protections for consumers, workers and the environment have been under concerted assault, and antitrust initiatives have become so ineffectual that many corporations face little competition or constraints.

Corruption, Human Rights and Democracy

Professor Robert Reich elaborated in January 2022: "Corporations have fought off safety nets and public investments that are common in other advanced nations. They've attacked labor laws -- reducing the portion of private-sector workers belonging to a union from one-third forty years ago, to just over 6 percent now."

"They've collected hundreds of billions in federal subsidies, bailouts, loan guarantees, and sole-source contracts. Corporate welfare for Big Pharma, Big Oil, Big Tech, Big Ag, gargantuan military contractors and the biggest banks now dwarfs the amount of welfare for people."

"The profits of big corporations just reached a 70-year high, even during a pandemic. The ratio of CEO pay in large companies to average workers has ballooned from 20-to-1 in the 1960s to 320-to-1 now."

"Meanwhile, most Americans are going nowhere. The typical worker's wage is only a bit higher today than it was 40 years ago, when adjusted for inflation." And since January 2022, inflation has shockingly spiked.

"But the biggest casualty is the public's trust in democracy. In 1964, just 29 percent of voters believed that government was 'run by a few big interests looking out for themselves.' By 2013, 79% of Americans believed it."

"Corporate donations to seditious lawmakers are nothing compared to this forty-year record of corporate sedition."

"A large portion of the American public has become so frustrated and cynical about democracy they are willing to believe blatant lies of a self-described strongman, and willing to support a political party that no longer believes in democracy."

"As I said at the outset, capitalism is compatible with democracy only if democracy is in the driver's seat. But

the absence of democracy doesn't strengthen capitalism. It fuels despotism."

"Despotism is bad for capitalism. Despots don't respect property rights. They don't honor the rule of law. They are arbitrary and unpredictable. All of this harms the owners of capital. Despotism also invites civil strife and conflict, which destabilize a society and an economy."

"My message to every CEO in America: You need democracy, but you're actively undermining it. It's time for you to join the pro-democracy movement. Get solidly behind voting rights. Actively lobby for the Freedom to Vote Act and the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act. Use your lopsidedly large power in American democracy to protect American democracy -- and do it soon. Otherwise, we may lose what's left of it."

"A healthy, functioning democracy where all people can participate freely and equitably is necessary to address climate change, protect our communities, and deliver environmental justice. But in 2021, at least 19 states passed laws that restrict the freedom to vote, undermine fair voting districts, and raise the likelihood of future attempts to sabotage fair elections — and more could go into effect this year if we don't act now."

The fight to protect voting rights truly remains THE civil rights fight of our times. The vast majority of Americans have common cause in having fairer representation of their best interests, yet divide-to-conquer forces are succeeding in ruthlessly rigging our system to their own greedily selfish benefit. In case this point is not abundantly clear, read one of my latest essays, *Divide-to-Conquer Roguery*.

The Domination of the Supreme Court by Far Right Conservatives

Mark Twain famously wrote in his Notebook in 1895: "We easily perceive that the peoples furthest from civilization are the ones where equality between man and woman are furthest apart -- and we consider this one of the signs of savagery. But we are so stupid that we can't see that we thus plainly admit that no civilization can be perfect until exact equality between man and woman is included."

Republicans have managed to stack the Supreme Court with conservatives, using illegitimate tactics, and their 6-3 majority is opposed to women's rights to decide the course of their lives. These "Justices" are forcing many women in Republican-dominated states to unwillingly carry a fertilized egg for 9 months, no matter how begotten, and then bear the burden of supporting a child for life, whether they want to or not.

In doing so, conservatives are victimizing the victims of unwanted sex, rape and incest, and forcing many women to continue unwanted pregnancies and bring up unwanted children. This is antithetical to gender equity and Golden Rule fairness principles. This ruthlessly unempathetic stance is among infinite skirmishes in offensives by conservatives against women's autonomy and privacy rights, their medical prerogatives, their freedom to make personal choices, their well-being, and their dignity in self-determination.

The GOP has become not only the party of voter suppression and extreme gerrymandering, but also of dishonesty, election lies, mob insurrection and sustained insurgency. And of stacking federal courts with judges who are Republican political partisans that make prejudiced decisions against the poor and women and people in racial minorities, in favor of rich persons and big corporations and white males and Christian supremacists.

Republican politicians these woe-filled days are like sharks smelling blood in the sea, frenzied with instinctual and hyped up fervor to impose their repressive dictates on females.

An opinion piece in *The Boston Globe* laid bare just how nakedly political the conservative majority on the Supreme Court has become. "Now that they have the majority on the court, they're not even trying to appear consistent. They've been making decisions that contradict each other all over the place, but there's one key similarity: The rulings all entrench the political power of white Republican voters at the expense of racial minorities who are driving the nation's growth." This is grotesquely wrong.

SUPREME COURT DECISIONS ARE EITHER FAIR, OR WRONG. "One thing is clear: We can't rely on the Supreme Court to protect the right to vote and to have everyone's vote count equally." This should be remedied.

Pro-Life Deceit

Not long after the leak of the imminent Supreme Court ruling on abortion, 192 Republicans in the House voted

against two bills that would help get baby formula back on shelves of grocery stores and supermarkets during a severe supply-chain shortage. "That's what Republicans call being pro-life? You can't square that circle."

"It was never about life. Just take a look at a few of the policies Republicans in Congress have blocked: paid family leave, universal pre-K, the child tax credit that lifted 3 million kids out of poverty, nutritional assistance and minimum wage legislation." Some say, "You're not really pro-life, you're just pro-birth -- you don't even care what happens to the baby after it is born."

By glorifying a fertilized egg and sanctifying it by giving it the rights of personhood, anti-abortion anti-choice activists debase and degrade women who have been impregnated, even under heinous circumstances.

This is a new front of aggression in the age-old "battle of the sexes". It is one that is out of touch with the real world impacts of absolute adherence to this ideology. And it harms many women. It is also disrespectful of diversity of opinions, and diversity of people -- and drastically contrary to fairness, empathy, justice, inclusion, true morality, democracy and the greater good.

Our leaders should rightly help elevate our American society and satisfy "the hunger for community" by contributing to improving the general welfare and the prospects for social cohesion. This would desirably foster domestic tranquility. But instead, many politicians seek political advantage by dividing people and hijacking their emotions and stoking their fears, mistrust, anger, resentments and hate. In this, they double down on double-crossing the vast majority of the people by driving wedges between them, often using deceit, lies, misinformation and conspiracies.

The assault on abortion rights is intensifying. As Spring begins in 2023, abortion bans have eliminated access to some or all abortions in 19 states: Alabama, Arkansas, Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Kentucky, Louisiana, Missouri, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Wisconsin, W. Virginia, and Wyoming.

Joan McCarter of the Daily Kos staff wrote on April 11, 2022, in her opinion piece *The forced birthers who've taken over the Supreme Court, Republican Party are not 'pro-life'*: "The extreme unfairness and reactionary injustice of sexist and class discriminatory forced-birth laws in states like Kentucky, Oklahoma, Texas, Mississippi, Idaho and Florida is an outrageous indignity against the rights of women to have a say in the course of their lives."

In South Carolina, more than 20 GOP lawmakers have proposed the death penalty for women seeking abortions. "They're pro-life until it's the life of the woman exercising her right to make decisions about her own body, huh? That's the thing: This was never about protecting life. It has ALWAYS been about controlling women, plain and simple." Not good optics for the white male patriarchy!

In Texas, as in many other liberty-infringing red states, there is no exception for rape or incest in its cruel law, which is a vigilante law the Supreme Court allowed to stand when it took away a woman's freedom to choose.

"When there are no exceptions for a person who survived rape or incest, it means the state is coercing that person into a pregnancy they don't want," Michele Goodwin, a UC Irvine professor who studies law and health and is founding director of the Center for Biotechnology and Global Health Policy told the *LA Times*. Survivors have already been through one harm, "but here's the state rubber-stamping a second harm."

"For decades, forced birthers wouldn't dare go after rape and incest survivors because such huge majorities believe survivors should have access to legal abortion. Back in 2012, when that poll was conducted, there were 13 Republican Senate candidates who agreed with the Republican National Coalition for Life that they were 'unconditionally pro-life' and 'recognize the inherent right to life of every innocent human being, from conception until natural death, without discrimination.' Two of them are in the Senate now: Ted Cruz (TX), and Deb Fischer (NE). They are among the extremists who helped cram the Supreme Court with forced-birth justices."

"That's why a decade later we're at the point where Republican-dominated states think that outlawing abortion completely, without exceptions, is going to work for them to their political advantage," said Elizabeth Nash, who tracks state abortion legislation for the Guttmacher Institute, told the *LA Times*."

Republicans in state legislatures are moving "well beyond where a lot of people thought they could go 10 to 15 years

ago." They have been emboldened by Republican Justices on the Supreme Court having overturned abortion rights.

"That's extremely convenient for current Senate Republicans, from Leaders Mitch McConnell and Kevin McCarthy to firebrands like Sens. Josh Hawley (MO) and James Lankford (OK) who can say they believe the exceptions should be kept, but have helped build a Supreme Court that will allow them to be eliminated in their states."

"Even so, it's not as though having those exceptions has eased the way for survivors seeking abortion care. The states that have tried to outlaw abortion and keep the exceptions don't make it easy to use them, creating red-tape barriers like requiring police reports or doctor's signatures. A child who's been raped by a family member isn't going to have easy access to officialdom. Many rape survivors have plenty of reasons to refuse to report their assault. While little data on the use of these exemptions exist, Guttmacher studied abortion in assault survivors in 2005, finding 'just 1% of patients getting an abortion did so because of rape, and less than 0.5% did so because of incest.'"

"There are so many practical reasons that a rape exemption doesn't pan out for survivors, so it serves to feel like a salve on abortion restrictions,' said Juliana Gonzales, senior director of sexual assault services at the SAFE Alliance, an Austin, Texas-based nonprofit. 'On a practical level, the exceptions don't do anything. That's the honest truth.'"

"What they have served as is a way for the extremists to pretend that they are compassionate toward survivors, to pretend that they care about the person carrying a fetus. They're even increasingly giving up that façade. Google 'life of the mother exceptions' and you'll find link after link from the forced-birth groups and their allies attesting to the fact that they don't care, rejecting the idea that a fully realized person's life is equal to that of a fetus, much less more important." Give us a break! Embryos aren't even fetuses until the 9th week after insemination.

In Texas, District Attorney Gocha Allen Ramirez dismissed an indictment against a woman named Lizelle Herrera who had been arrested for murder for having an abortion. "That's a dim ray of hope, with a packed Supreme Court poised to do its worst. Which means two things have to happen -- we have to elect enough Democrats who will fight like hell to regain all that lost ground and codify abortion protections, and expand the U.S. Supreme Court to get it out of the hands of dangerous ideologues."

Let's Act in Good Faith!

Countless numbers of people have acted in good faith and commendable public service to do the right things during the global pandemic, which began in rippling waves of widespread disease in March 2020. This includes Dr. Anthony Fauci and heroic first responders, doctors and nurses, school teachers and administrators, and even many politicians.

Scheming dividers, however, saw opportunity, and have sought political advantage by politicizing health and safety measures. This has caused the ranks to swell of misinformation-propagating saboteurs of social cohesion and the general welfare. Such coldly calculating bad actors have stoked the incendiary flames of anger, suspicion, political polarization, fears, conspiracy theories, blame and even hatred.

In an article in *Monitor on Psychology* from the American Psychological Association, Stephan Lewandowsky, a psychology professor at the University of Bristol in the United Kingdom, is quoted: "The fundamental problem with misinformation is that once people have heard it, they tend to believe and act on it, even after it's been corrected." He added, "Even in the best of all possible worlds, correcting misinformation is not an easy task."

"Falsehood flies," wrote Jonathan Swift, "and the Truth comes limping after it; so that when Men come to be undeceiv'd, it is too late; the Jest is over, and the Tale has had its Effect...". A similar adage holds that "a lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes". This saying is often attributed to the sagacious Mark Twain, and it surely resonates with us in the world today as misinformation and disinformation seem to be growing exponentially.

Misinformation is false information that is spread both intentionally and unintentionally -- and disinformation is the deliberate spreading of false information. Such distortions of fact and truth are hard to undo and can exacerbate

community polarization, creating highly charged situations around politicized issues. Passions are running high these days, but no one should promote violence. Republican extremism and untrustworthiness is a danger to all, now and in the future.

Fundraising Scams

There are many many many worthwhile causes — and many of them are struggling to get enough funding to adequately deal with the tidal wave of problems that need fixing. I personally would prefer to give most of my donations to social justice and environmental organizations and conservationist causes.

But, unfortunately, there are more urgent matters. Politics and government are becoming ever bigger influences in our lives, especially now with hyper-divisive messaging, captured courts and women's rights being taken away.

One result of the accompanying discord is that political donations are at record highs. And anyone who donates to a political campaign knows how urgent the calls become for more of their money. Everyone who has given money to politicians would probably prefer not to be hounded so desperately by political campaigns trying to separate them from their money.

Propagated urgency and fear are emotion manipulating tactics that make it easier for shrewd schemers to divert grassroots contributions given to various causes into political campaigns. This is a form of extortion of a hyper-divided populace, and it is done intentionally to maximize the revenue generated by this über scheme. This is a tragically sad state of affairs, and it is another outcome of scheming dividers perversely harming people for power and profit. And it is a particularly perverse one.

The bottom 90% of Americans have limited amounts of money to give away, so cannot afford to support politicians to a significant extent. Donald Trump and politicians on both sides of the aisle are milking tens of millions of people of their money, and then citizens are being betraying by being given poor returns on their investments, judging by the drastic contrast between public policy and public opinion on many issues. This includes things like women's reproductive rights, public health and safety, the Affordable Care Act, high costs for prescription drugs, gun safety, climate action, and protections of clean air, clean water and the environment.

In contrast, Big Money interests of course have no problem investing lavishly in political campaigns to get advantages for themselves, frequently at the expense of the public. They have little compunction about abusing influence and perpetrating injustices -- and they get excellent returns on their investments, generally corruptly acquired.

Politics unfortunately rules. This is becoming clearer by the day as more and more politicians and judges succeed in driving wedges between people, and then follow a master plan of running roughshod over the *Common Good, Properly Understood*. They do this for the purpose of profiting, even though it means preventing the people from enjoying more expansive and peaceably inclusive liberties.

Republicans gain partisan advantages by cynically obstructing progress and acting to not solve problems. Those representatives engaged in divide-to-conquer politics are scamming us. This is demented selfishness.

Let's adopt sensible and fair and considerate Golden Rule principles!

A bottom line conclusion of my meandering exploration of the world in this manifesto is that a vast majority of Americans should all unite together in common cause to demand a reliable, responsible, non-partisan and effective Anti-Corruption Task Force, and insist that it be tasked with fixing our disorderly house, and draining the swamp in D.C. And in every State Capitol, leaders should responsibly create similar anti-corruption initiatives.

An aside: I personally give \$100 donations an average of 30 to 40 times a month. I do this because I can afford to, and thus consider it to be a social and moral obligation. An unfortunate reward of such generosity is to be overwhelmed by a veritable tsunami of repeat and new requests for money in emails, urgent texts and by mail.

This is a cause for us to bemoan the failure of Congress and the judiciary to limit political donations by rich people, and to reign in political contributions from corporations. Such actions are needed to give the bottom 90% more voice -- and to save our democracy, promote the general welfare, improve domestic tranquility and preserve sanity.

Robert Reich -- Share the Profits!

Corporations are earning record profits, yet most workers are losing ground, especially in the past year-plus, as inflation has spiked. So it would be a good idea to create strong incentives for corporations to more fairly share some of their profits with employees.

In light of news that the economy has been growing at a record rate in the past two years (and corporate profits have also hit record highs), some wonder "specifically what can be done to spread the benefits of economic growth," writes Robert Reich. Smart proposals are needed.

"One idea is an old one that was tried with great success but is now all but forgotten. It's called *profit-sharing*. It emerged from the tumultuous period when America shifted from farm to factory. In 1916, Sears, Roebuck and Co., then one of America's largest corporations with over 30,000 employees, announced that it was embarking on a major experiment — profit-sharing. The firm gave workers shares of stock, making them part owners."

Shortly thereafter, the Bureau of Labor Statistics issued a report on profit-sharing, suggesting it as a way to reduce the "frequent and often violent disputes" between employers and workers. Profit-sharing gave workers an incentive to be more productive since the success of the company meant higher profits would be shared. It also reduced the need for layoffs during recessions because payroll costs dropped as profits did. Profit-sharing proved a huge success. Other companies that joined the profit-sharing movement included Procter & Gamble, Pillsbury, Kodak, and U.S. Steel.

By the 1950s, Sears workers had accumulated enough stock that they owned a quarter of the company. And by 1968, the typical Sears salesperson could retire with a nest egg worth well over \$1 million (in today's dollars).

There was a downside. When profits went down, workers paychecks would shrink. And if a company went bankrupt, workers would lose all their investments in it.

The best profit-sharing plans have been in the form of cash bonuses that employees can invest however they wish, on top of predictable wages. At Lincoln Electric, for instance, which has had profit-sharing since 1934, employees receive a profit-sharing cash bonus worth, on average, 40 percent of their annual base earnings.

But profit sharing with employees has all but disappeared in large corporations, which since the start of the 1980s -- and the advent of corporate "raiders" (now private-equity managers) -- have focused on maximizing shareholder returns. Sears phased out its profit-sharing plan in the 1970s (and filed for bankruptcy protection in 2018).

Yet profit sharing with *top executives* has soared -- as big Wall Street banks, hedge funds, private-equity funds, and high-tech companies have doled out huge amounts of stock and stock options to their MVPs.

The result? Share prices have gone into the stratosphere while wages have barely risen. Researchers have found that increases in share prices before the late 1980s could be accounted for by overall economic growth. Since then, a large proportion of the dramatic increases in share prices have come out of what used to go into wages.

What this means is that the people most responsible for contributing to the success of the company -- almost all of its employees -- are deprived of the fruits of their labors, to give it to top management and shareholders.

Jeff Bezos, who now owns around 10 percent of Amazon's shares of stock, is worth \$210 billion overall. Other top Amazon executives hold hundreds of millions of dollars of Amazon shares. But most of Amazon's employees, such as warehouse workers, haven't shared in the bounty.

Amazon used to give out stock to hundreds of thousands of its employees. But in 2018 it stopped doing so, and instead raised its minimum hourly wage to \$15. The wage raise got headlines and was good PR, but Amazon's decision to end stock awards was more significant.

If Amazon's 1.2 million employees together owned the same proportion of Amazon's stock as Sears workers did in the 1950s -- a quarter of the company -- each Amazon employee would now own shares worth an average of over \$350,000.

America's trend toward higher profits, higher share prices, mounting executive pay, *but near stagnant wages* is unsustainable, economically and politically. How to encourage profit sharing? Corporate taxes should be lower on corporations that share profits with all their workers, and higher on those that don't.

"Sharing profits with all workers is a logical and necessary step to making the system work for the many, not the few", concluded the good professor.

Inflation and the Problems Caused by Excessive Greed

Many persons are motivated by excessive greed, and there is a hidden link between corporate greed and inflation, as Professor Robert Reich explains. "Everybody's ignoring the deeper structural reason for price increases: the concentration of the American economy into the hands of a few corporate giants with the power to raise prices."

"Inflation! Inflation! Everyone's talking about it, but ignoring one of its biggest causes: corporate concentration."

"Now, prices are undeniably rising. In response, the Fed is ... slowing the economy -- even though we're still at least 4 million jobs short of where we were before the pandemic, and millions of American workers won't get the raises they deserve. Republicans haven't wasted any time hammering Biden and Democratic lawmakers about inflation. Don't fall for their fear mongering."

"Food prices are soaring, but half of that is from meat, which costs 15% more than last year. There are only four major meat processing companies in America, which are all raising their prices and enjoying record profits. *Get the picture?*"

"The underlying problem is not inflation. It's corporate power. Since the 1980s, when the U.S. government all but abandoned antitrust enforcement, two-thirds of all American industries have become more concentrated. Most are now dominated by a handful of corporations that coordinate prices and production. This is true of banks, airlines, broadband, pharmaceutical companies, meatpackers, and yes, soda."

"Corporations in all these industries could easily absorb higher costs -- including long overdue wage increases -- without passing them on to consumers in the form of higher prices. But they aren't. Instead, they're using their massive profits to line pockets of major investors and executives, -- while both consumers and workers get shafted."

"How can this structural problem be fixed? Fighting corporate concentration with more aggressive antitrust enforcement. Biden has asked the Federal Trade Commission to investigate oil companies, and he's appointed experienced antitrust lawyers to both the FTC and the Justice Department."

"So don't fall for Republicans' fear mongering about inflation. The real culprit here is corporate power."

Big Oil companies spent \$38 billion on stock buybacks last year, and are planning to buy back an additional \$22 billion, "thanks in part to Putin," according to Robert Reich. "This is a direct redistribution from consumers paying through the nose at the gas pump to Big Oil's top execs" (and investors).

Note that inadequately regulated capitalism results in activities that are socially, environmentally and ecologically irresponsible. Greed facilitates many of the wrong things, and must give way to fairer and saner outcomes that are better aligned with the *Common Good, Properly Understood*. We must rein in irresponsible greed.

The ecological footprints and carbon footprints of people living in affluent communities are exceedingly heavy. Whereas we would currently need something like 1.7 planet Earths to satisfy the needs and desires of the average person worldwide, it would take five planets to sustainably provide for the average person living in the U.S. And for the average person in the wealthiest 1%, it would require more than a dozen planet Earths, because they can afford to profligately consume and use up resources and create voluminous quantities of both wastes and greenhouse gas emissions, almost without giving consideration to cost or negative impacts.

But one fact is glaringly obvious -- there is only one Earth. To continue to live on it unsustainably is to steal from our heirs, and to irresponsibly leave them a legacy of hardships, conflict, destitution and ruin.

A Bill of Rights for Future Generations should be embraced and ratified to dramatically improve the general welfare of people living today, as well as the prospects for those who will inherit our home planet, as we all age towards our

individual demises, "as the world turns." See my bold proposed version of such a Bill of Rights online.

Political Corruption, Graft and the Corporatocracy

Despite the fact that we are living in pandemic times, supply chain disruptions, rapid inflation and war in Ukraine, corporations are making record profits. This is an instance of the Shock Doctrine "disaster capitalism" that takes advantage of economic shocks, instability, wars, coups, and pandemics to grab bigger profits.

Summarizing the rationale for congressional hearings on the causes of inflation and inequality, Bernie Sanders stated, "We cannot continue to allow large, profitable corporations to use the war in Ukraine, the Covid-19 pandemic, and the specter of inflation to make outrageous profits by price gouging Americans in every sector of our economy. It's time we discuss how corporate greed and profiteering are fueling inflation."

Across major sectors, he stated, prices continue to rise -- including those for gasoline, heating oil, used and rental cars, furniture, beef, chicken and pork. Meanwhile, corporate profits were up 25% in 2021, to a record high of nearly \$3 trillion.

Committee witnesses and several members referenced the highest corporate profit margins in 70 years. They also cited several earning calls where corporate executives openly spoke to investors about the opportunity to increase prices. This included a Constellation Brands executive who said the company wants to "make sure that we're not leaving any pricing on the table. We want to take as much as we can."

A majority of people across the political spectrum believes that prices "are in-part rising because big corporations are jacking up prices, and passing higher costs to consumers while making record profits. Elected officials must take on powerful CEOs and rein in corporate greed to lower prices." This is needed because of the harsh reality that 64% of the U.S. population is living paycheck to paycheck.

Senator Sheldon Whitehouse introduced a windfall profits tax on big oil companies to partially remedy this, and Senator Bernie Sanders and other Democrats in Congress have expanded on this idea by introducing an Ending Corporate Greed Act that would tax windfall profits made by all big corporations in excess of their average profit level from 2015-2019 (after being adjusted for inflation). The funds raised from such a tax could be used to reduce inflationary pressures or help finance stronger social safety net programs.

It would be a good plan to pass the Ending Corporate Greed Act -- and it could pass if a decent percentage of the people upset with corporate price gouging would demand that their representatives in Congress honorably join this movement. But even that probably wouldn't be enough since fossil fuel corporations, pharmaceutical corporations, big agricultural corporations and other corporate beneficiaries of price gouging will fuel up their political campaign contributions and lobbying. A recent report says, *Big Pharma Has Raised Drug Prices 1,186 Times This Year*.

Big companies are able to do this thanks to their claimed First Amendment "free speech" rights, and assertions that "corporations are legal persons", and are thus able to prevent legislation like this from passing, or be watered down to be virtually meaningless. Reforms are required!

Excessive Corporate Power

All of this raises a legitimate question: "If corporate greed and profiteering are fueling inflation, what's ultimately fueling corporate greed and profiteering? The answer is excessive corporate power and the ability of corporations to get away with raising prices without being held accountable."

"And what ultimately fuels corporate power? Corporate 'constitutional rights' -- their ability to influence (if not write) the creation or termination of legislation and regulations (e.g., those making it easier for corporations to merge and monopolize sector after sector) or to use the courts to challenge laws and regulations as violations of their 'constitutional rights.'"

In 2003, Joel Bakan's documentary *The Corporation* offered what it took to be a bold new thesis about the way corporations work. The film seized on an enormous legal-cultural quirk: that corporations, in terms of how the government and financial sector deal with them, are in many technical ways treated as "individuals" — that is, they're treated like people. And so the filmmakers posed the question, "If a corporation is like a human being, how

would a psychiatrist choose to characterize that person? Well, let's see: Since corporations are ruled by the profit motive, they're almost by definition greedy, selfish, ruthless, and ultimately indifferent to the well-being of others. The conclusion the film came to is that the corporation, if you really look at it, has the profile of a psychopath."

This was compelling framing of how corporate entities have taken over our economy, and the resulting impacts.

In a review about Joel Bakan's new film, *The New Corporation: The Unfortunately Necessary Sequel*, Owen Gleiberman wrote in October 2020 that it is a more profound documentary than the first one. "It tells a no less chilling story, no less well, though it feels more like a call to action, more politicized."

"The film ties together the wild economic inequities of life, the chasm between the rich and the poor, and even makes room for the recent arrival of COVID-19. All this has led to a rise in corruption, a breakdown in social cohesion, and a rise in right-wing anger. It's also led to movements like Occupy, the grassroots urban resistance, new progressive politicians, and putting black and indigenous rights to the forefront."

"So, while in so many ways it seems we're fucked, there's still hope -- *The New Corporation* frames it all quite well. You may need a drink afterwards."

Creative capitalism has led to corporations trying to rebrand themselves as having a conscience, "because that's what the public expects. But this is just another deception, often in the form of disingenuous greenwashing. Corporate elites enjoy a substantial monopoly on profits earned, and pretend to be virtuous, but banks like JP Morgan often have negative impacts on communities while marketing themselves as investing in rescuing cities like Detroit. Or companies like the oil giant BP try to maximize profits by saving on costs, which can result in disasters like the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. The bottom line is that investor profits often trump the best interests of communities."

"Then we get into new corporate frames brought on by big tech, companies like Google and Facebook that have the financial heft of nations, promoting values of narcissism and materialism. Companies step into the void left by government, and when government steps away from governing, when they privatize essential public resources like utilities, corporations step in."

"And then, when corporations put on a smiling face, a progressive face, we trust them more, even while those selfsame corporations break rules, ignore regulations, and destroy the environment."

In our capitalist system, the profit motive drives almost every business activity and we are all bombarded by an incessant barrage of seductive, deceptive and hyper-manipulative advertising and marketing and promotions. Economists euphemistically call these sales strategies "extraordinary encouragements." These commercial ploys urge easily susceptible and behaviorally habitual persons to indulge their desires and go with their compulsions -- and borrow money ("thereby going into debt bondage") -- and give in to addictive behaviors -- even though it generally means suffering misfortunes.

The obvious and redundant conclusion is that we should improve government by limiting Big Money influence and the ability to peddle influence, and by reducing corporate power. Public policy must guide us in the right direction, and more intelligently limit the power of corporations to dominate our societies so pathologically harmfully.

All the founding ideals lionized in the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution would best be achieved by amending the Constitution to prevent corporate entities from having so much power to run roughshod over the common good.

Excessive stress in our societies creates negative outcomes for the poor, and for the masses. It even represents a risk and a danger to the privileged well-off financial elites, because incited injustices tend to accelerate the arrival of the day when dissatisfaction and discord will finally cause the proverbial pitchforks to come out for them.

Extremes of income and wealth inequalities actually pose a big threat to the on-going oppressive ascendancy of the millionaires and billionaires that are getting away with hoarding the benefits of our extractive economies.

Causes of Democratic Decline

Transparency International's 2021 Corruption Perceptions Index reveals a decade of democratic decline in too

many nations, and far too many abuses of human rights. The Corruption Perceptions Index ranks 180 countries and territories by their perceived levels of public sector corruption, on a scale of zero (highly corrupt) to 100 (very clean). Two-thirds of countries sadly and consequentially score below 50.

As anti-corruption efforts stagnate and deteriorate, human rights and democracy are under attack, and this is no coincidence. Governments are continuing to use the COVID-19 pandemic to erode human rights and democracy, and this may lead to sharper declines across the globe in the future.

Of the 23 countries whose CPI score significantly declined since 2012, 19 also declined on the civil liberties score. Moreover, out of the 331 recorded cases of murdered human rights defenders in 2020, 98 per cent occurred in countries with a CPI score below 45.

Transparency International calls on governments to act on their anti-corruption and human rights commitments, and for people across the globe to join together in demanding change. Daniel Eriksson, Chief Executive Officer of Transparency International said: "In authoritarian contexts where control over government, business and the media rests with a few, social movements remain the last check on power. It is the power held by teachers, shopkeepers, students and ordinary people from all walks of life that will ultimately deliver accountability."

All voters should demand greater accountability and more responsible behaviors of their representatives.

Diminishing Democracy

Last year, an international democracy think tank added the United States to its list of "backsliding democracies" for the first time. They cited a "decline in the quality of freedom of association and assembly during the summer of protests in 2020", which followed the killing of George Floyd, along with the big lie hoax Trump pushed that he lost the 2020 election due to alleged widespread voting fraud.

One reason that the United States has become a backsliding democracy is due to restrictions on voting rights in many states and the spread of misinformation and disinformation.

"It is no coincidence that antidemocratic trends like these picked up around the same time as sweeping abortion bans. Democracy and gender equity are intrinsically linked to one another, and America needs to improve on both."

Of all the injustices conservatives stand for, their coldly calculating fervor for overturning the eminently reasonable *Roe vs. Wade* decision on women's reproductive rights is perhaps the most offensive, vexatious and burdensome because it creates and reinforces inequities, and imperiously imposes them on women in red states.

This is especially objectionable because of the extremely unfair and harmful impacts it has on poor women who cannot afford to travel to blue states for their healthcare and rights to a safe and legal abortion in the first trimester of a pregnancy.

It should never be forgotten or forgiven that authority-abusing conservatives rushed to replace one of the greatest champions of gender equality and women's rights in history, the great Ruth Bader Ginsburg, with a Supreme Court Justice who is a betrayer of her gender, who is zealously eager to deprive women of their privacy, dignity and "original choice" prerogatives of having a say in their healthcare, mates and parenthood, and have determinative control over their bodies and destinies. This opprobrious effort to impose severe burdens on poor women and deny them abortion access for no legitimate medical reason -- and to deprive them of their natural right to control their own reproductive autonomy -- is anathema to principles of gender equity.

"Gender equality seems like a faraway dream these days. While some progress has been made, the numbers from groups like UN Women tell a discouraging story. Over 2 billion women don't have the same employment options as men. At the current rate, it will take about a century to close the global pay gap. While human trafficking affects men and women, women and girls make up over 70% of the world's human trafficking victims. In the face of this data, gender equality needs to be a priority. Why?"

Of "10 Reason Why Gender Equality is Important", one of the most important reasons is that it can lead to peace. "Research shows that gender equality is linked to peace, even more so than a country's GDP or level of democracy. States with better gender equality are less likely to use military force. When a country addresses major areas of gender inequality like education and employment, it fosters peace." The Equal Rights Amendment should be passed!

Jackassery While Atlas Shrugs

Conservatives are bizarrely waging a war against "woke". This is a transparent attempt to strengthen discriminatory white supremacy, and engage in overt and covert racist actions. This is backwards, and offensive. We should see slowly, deliberately, patiently -- and be lucidly aware.

Critical thinking is increasingly necessary in today's climate of distorting social media echo chambers and biased news propagated on outlets like right-wing slanted ones that include Fox News, OAN, Newsmax and Breitbart. These news sources gain power and influence (and profits!) at the public expense, and to the detriment of the general well-being, by stoking people's anger and amplifying resentments. They undesirably emulate the pro-government mouthpieces of state-controlled media in autocratic countries like Putin's Russia and Orban's Hungary.

Amping up polarizing issues can be favorable for gaining influence and political power, and for making big profits, but it is corrosive of democratic fairness, unity, social cohesion and the blessings of collaborative problem solving and peaceable coexistence.

"Conservatives" are demonstrating a growing reactionary opposition to anyone in the U.S. who is regarded as "woke". This is another aspect of aggressive culture wars. It is distinctly bizarre because there is much that people rightly should be more aware of and "woke to".

Courting controversy and acting outrageously work well for extremists who until recently were on the political fringe. As a result, more of them indulge in bad behaviors.

Being "woke" means understanding issues and being informed, educated on and aware of social injustices. Conservatives have twisted being woke into an epithet that means being overly politically correct and trying to signal virtue, and wanting to police others.

In other words, conservatives have contorted "woke" into being a vice rather than a virtue of caring about equitable treatment, inclusivity and diversity in our white male dominant society. They do this despite the obvious extent to which there are many stubbornly entrenched structural inequities along lines of class, race and gender.

According to Joe Garofoli in an article in the S.F. Chronicle, "'Woke' has devolved into another vaguely defined conservative insult like the perennial invocation of 'San Francisco values' and 'socialist.' Or how 'liberal' was demonized when Bill Clinton was president. Or how Republican George H. W. Bush railed on his Democratic opponent Michael Dukakis for being 'a card-carrying member of the ACLU' back in 1988."

"Woke" has roots in Black culture, but right-wing factions have co-opted the word, using it to deride and reject the goals of those seeking to make meaningful progress in remedying systemic racism and social injustices. Similarly, extreme right partisans blame antifa activists for social unrest, even though what they are basically doing is disparaging people who support the Black Lives Matter movement and strongly oppose fascism and lament police brutality and support remedying systemic racial injustices.

But the fact is that structural racism exists, and it has severely disadvantaged Blacks, Latinos and other racial minorities for a long, long time.

The reality is that we should rightly codify Golden Rule fairness principles in our laws, regulations and government taxation and spending policies, and in an overarching commitment to giving greater assurances to our heirs by ratifying a Bill of Rights for Future Generations.

Our country would be a far better place if voters elected more representatives in Congress and state houses who earn high scores on the League of Conservation Voters Environmental Scorecard, and thus are not selling the populace down the river to unnecessarily harsh fates. Let's throw the bums out of office who sell their souls to the highest bidder in rashly wrong schemes to peddle influence to corporations and conservative Big Money donors.

Human activities are destabilizing the global climate, with highly harmful current and future impacts and consequences. It is urgently important that we begin acting in aggregate to reduce our emissions of planet warming carbon dioxide and methane emissions. Stop the fossil fuel subsidies, and the sacrifice of public lands like in Alaska.

The Republican Party increasingly resembles Hungarian strongman Viktor Orbán's political party, Fidesz, which is

"increasingly comfortable with naked power grabs, with treating all political opposition as fundamentally illegitimate, with assuming that any checks on its dominance were mere inconveniences to be bypassed by any quasi-legalistic means."

It seems like an eminently good idea to reject whitewashed history, echo chamber indoctrination, book bans, offensives against critical thinking and other things zealously embraced by Donald Trump and Florida's "Ron Sanctimonious" and the right wing of the Republican Party. Instead, these things are being promoted and espoused for the purpose of "owning the libs" and trying to brainwash people into supporting stupid positions.

Let us seek salvation from religious bigotry, intolerance, sexism and hypocrisy — AND from dominion-demanding authoritarians and "pretenders to fascism", and other assorted charlatans.

Respectful efforts to strengthen Diversity, Equity and Inclusion may be aspects of "woke" that are easy for conservatives to attack, because they have not been effectively rolled out ... but they are unassailably proper for truer fairness, peaceable coexistence and the greater good.

How to Explain Banks Going Bust

In March 2023, a number of banks suddenly faced bankruptcy. The second and third largest bank failures in U.S. history took place when Silicon Valley Bank in California and Signature Bank in New York needed to be bailed out.

Crooked Media's *What A Day* explained the situation this way, "Republicans, of course, used this opportunity to pin the largest banking failure since 2008 on their favorite boogeyman: 'wokeness.' Right-wing trolls on social media and their king, Tucker Carlson, claimed that Silicon Valley Bank's diversity, equity, and inclusion policies 'distracted' them from, you know, banking and caused the crash. Yes, this is an argument people are trying to make. Not because of poor investment and risky strategies that depleted their cash stores and made them insolvent in the face of aggressive withdrawals, because of wokeness. Never mind that their executive team is, like most banks, is all White and mostly male! Obviously, there's no evidence to support these claims, and it was a pretty classic run on the bank, spearheaded by the scourge of wokeness himself, Peter Thiel."

"Even conservative economists and analysts agree that the recent spate of bank failures stemmed from bank mismanagement and the recent financial woes of SVB's tech and startup client base. But trying to misdirect public attention serves their dual purpose of furthering their hollow culture war while fending off the kinds of regulation that would prevent something similar from happening in the future. Great stuff!!"

Wake up, my fellow Americans. We are in another "Minsky moment" with these bank failures. After the second and third largest bank busts in American history, the main reason why is clear. Silicon Valley Bank and Signature Bank collapsed as a direct result of a toxic mix of risky management and weak supervision.

Greedy rich investors and bank executives and their lobbyists succeeded in reducing sensible Dodd-Franks bank regulations in March 2018, and Fed regulators played along. Many banks indulged in loading up on taking excessive risks, and then suddenly they were shocked by a panicked run on a number of banks, and the government rushed in to bail them out to prevent a financial crisis.

Rachel Maddow, in another instance of her providing viewers with valuably informative context, talked about the panicked bank runs that took place during the Depression in March 1933. At that time, Franklin Roosevelt gave his first "Fireside Chat" to reassure people about steps taken to stabilize the banking system. She compared FDR's words to those conveyed by President Biden in the immediate wake of the latest bank failures.

After the financial system nearly collapsed in 2008, most Republicans opposed banking reforms despite the glaring need. Fortunately, they were passed nonetheless and signed into law by President Obama in 2010 as the Dodd-Frank bill. Then in March 2018, Republicans rolled back Dodd-Frank protections that had been passed to protect against banking misdeeds that had surfaced as being a cause and consequence of the financial crisis of 2008.

Wall Street had crashed our economy and destroyed millions of livelihoods in the 2008 financial crisis, which is why Congress needed to pass the Dodd-Frank Act to strengthen protections for consumers and make sure that history wouldn't repeat itself. "Wall Street executives and their lobbyists weren't happy with it (no surprise), and they've been trying to chip away at it ever since."

In 2018, high-powered bank executives called on Congress to weaken Dodd-Frank so their banks could slip out of those stronger oversight rules. "One of those executives? Greg Becker, the CEO of Silicon Valley Bank."

Elizabeth Warren and others raised the alarm and fought hard against these deregulatory changes, but the banks won that battle. Donald Trump signed a bill into law that rolled back key parts of Dodd-Frank. Regulators, including Fed Chair Jerome Powell, took the situation from bad to worse by letting financial institutions load up on more and more risk with less and less oversight.

"Silicon Valley tycoons are famously libertarian", observed Carolyn Said in the San Francisco Chronicle. "They want the government to keep its paws out of their business so they can conjure tech wizardry free from stifling regulations. But when tech needs help — whether it's special tax breaks or laws shielding Internet companies from lawsuits — suddenly it's a different story."

"That played out in real time last week with the implosion of Silicon Valley Bank," Carolyn Said wrote on March 15, "where companies large and small had parked millions of dollars -- far above the \$250,000 backed by the Federal Deposit Insurance Corp. Suddenly, even the most stalwart libertarian tech bros took to Twitter -- and presumably to private conversations with officials -- seeking a government bailout. And, indeed, over the weekend, the Treasury Department, Federal Reserve and FDIC said they would backstop all the money in the failed bank."

"Observers from late night TV host Seth Meyers to Fox News rushed to comment. Wasn't this a shining example of hypocrisy? Didn't it validate the old saw about 'Socialism for the rich; capitalism for the rest?'"

"It's incredible how many members of the incredibly wealthy and supposedly self-reliant entrepreneurial set have spent the last 24 hours begging for government bailouts for their friends," tweeted author Hunter Walker, linking to tweets from mega investors Bill Ackman, David Sachs and Mark Cuban calling for the government to step in. "Seeing billionaires beg is just a stunning level of chutzpah." That's par for the course. We need change we can believe in!

An Aside on War

Another of the existentially worst aspects of capitalism is that it is engaged in excessive militarism.

Wars are, in general, profitable to weapons makers and corporations that directly benefit from military occupations and added access to raw materials and cheap labor. Justification for a "permanent war economy" (which best describes our national economic policy) greatly benefits a wide range of corporate entities.

"Financial corporations make more campaign contributions to federal candidates and parties than almost every other industry, and they profit from servicing U.S. Treasury debt bonds to foreign nations (since most military spending increases the nation's debt). They also profit by providing loans internationally to rebuild war-torn nations, and domestically to communities (via purchasing municipal bonds with high yields) to fill the gap of declining funding due to current and past military spending, which currently totals a whopping 48% of all federal tax dollars spent."

Federal spending priorities favor high levels of spending on the military over funding to states and communities. This deprives the government of adequate ability to provide many human and community needs, like for programs addressing poverty, health care, education, hunger, homelessness and environmental protections.

Smedley Butler, a retired Major General of the U.S. Marine Corps, gave a speech in 1935 entitled *War is a Racket*. In it, he said, "War is just a racket. There are only two things we should fight for. One is the defense of our homes and the other is the Bill of Rights. War for any other reason is simply a racket."

"It may seem odd for me, a military man to adopt such a comparison. Truthfulness compels me to. I spent thirty-three years and four months in active military service as a member of this country's most agile military force, the Marine Corps. I served in all commissioned ranks from Second Lieutenant to Major-General. And during that period, I spent most of my time being a high class muscle-man for Big Business, for Wall Street and for the Bankers."

"I suspected I was just part of a racket at the time. Now I am sure of it. Like all the members of the military profession, I never had a thought of my own until I left the service. My mental faculties remained in suspended animation while I obeyed the orders of higher-ups. This is typical with everyone in the military service."

"In short, I was a racketeer, a gangster for capitalism. I helped make Mexico and especially Tampico safe for American oil interests in 1914. I helped make Haiti and Cuba a decent place for the National City Bank boys to collect revenues in. I helped in the raping of half a dozen Central American republics for the benefit of Wall Street. I helped purify Nicaragua for the International Banking House of Brown Brothers in 1902-1912. I helped make Honduras right for the American fruit companies in 1903. I brought light to the Dominican Republic for the American sugar interests in 1916. In China in 1927 I helped see to it that Standard Oil went on its way unmolested."

"During those years, I had, as the boys in the back room would say, a swell racket. Looking back on it, I feel that I could have given Al Capone a few hints. The best he could do was to operate his racket in three districts. I operated on three continents."

Vladimir Putin and Threats Against Democracy and World Peace

Russia is waging a ruthless and indiscriminately brutal and murderous war of aggression against Ukraine and its people. And Russia's assault against Ukraine has not gone well. One reason is that Putin's advisors were terrified to tell him the truth about his military and the likely consequences of an invasion.

Russia badly miscalculated Ukrainian resolve, and how quickly and thoroughly the United States and its allies would close ranks to help Kyiv. They also misjudged how poorly the Russian military would perform in the field. "But how and why did the miscalculation occur? Did Putin's spies and military aides paint too rosy a picture? Did he disregard accurate information as too pessimistic?"

During a trip in Algeria, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said, "One of the Achilles' heels of autocracies is that we don't have people in those systems who speak truth to power, or have the ability to speak truth to power. And I think that is something that we're seeing in Russia."

There are grotesque perils associated with a misinformed Putin. One reason that Russia's invasion of Ukraine has gone badly, according to Brian Klaas, a politics professor at University College London, is that Putin blundered into the war because he didn't have anyone around to tell him what he believed -- that Ukrainians don't really have their own national identity, that the invasion would be a cakewalk -- might not actually be true.

Brian Klaas calls this the "dictator trap." In *Vladimir Putin Has Fallen Into the Dictator Trap*, Klaas writes, "Reality doesn't conform to the theory of the rational, calculating despot who can play the long game."

In a short span of time after Russian's invasion, "Vladimir Putin -- a man recently described by Donald Trump as a strategic 'genius' -- managed to revitalize NATO, unify a splintered West, turn Ukraine's little-known president into a global hero, wreck Russia's economy, and solidify his legacy as a murderous war criminal."

"How did he miscalculate so badly? To answer that question, you have to understand the power and information ecosystems around dictators", observes Klaas. "I've studied and interviewed despots across the globe for more than a decade. In my research, I've persistently encountered a stubborn myth -- of the savvy strongman, the rational, calculating despot who can play the long game because he (and it's typically a he) doesn't have to worry about pesky polls or angry voters. Our elected leaders, this view suggests, are no match for the tyrant who gazes into the next decade rather than fretting about next year's election."

"Reality doesn't conform to that rosy theory. Autocrats such as Putin eventually succumb to what may be called the "dictator trap." The strategies they use to stay in power tend to trigger their eventual downfall. Rather than being long-term planners, many make catastrophic short-term errors -- the kinds of errors that would likely have been avoided in democratic systems. They hear only from sycophants, and get bad advice. They misunderstand their population. They don't see threats coming until it's too late. And unlike elected leaders who leave office to riches, book tours, and the glitzy lifestyle of a statesman, many dictators who miscalculate leave office in a casket, a possibility that makes them even more likely to double down."

"Despots sow the seeds of their own demise early on, when they first face the trade-off between allowing freedom of expression and maintaining an iron grip on power. After arriving in the palace, crushing dissent and jailing opponents is often rational, from the perspective of a dictator: It creates a culture of fear that is useful for

establishing and maintaining control. But that culture of fear comes with a cost."

"For those of us living in liberal democracies, criticizing the boss is risky, but we're not going to be shipped off to a gulag or watch our family get tortured. In authoritarian regimes, those all-too-real risks have a way of focusing the mind. Is it ever worthwhile for authoritarian advisers to speak truth to power?"

"As a result, despots rarely get told that their stupid ideas are stupid, or that their ill-conceived wars are likely to be catastrophic. Offering honest criticism is a deadly game and most advisers avoid doing so. Those who dare to gamble eventually lose and are purged. So over time, the advisers who remain are usually yes-men who act like bobbleheads, nodding along when the despot outlines some crackpot scheme."

"Even with such seemingly loyal cronies, despots face a dilemma. How can you trust the loyalty of an entourage that has every reason to lie and conceal its true thoughts? The ancient Greek philosopher Xenophon wrote of that inescapable paradox of tyranny: "It is never possible for the tyrant to trust that he is loved ... and plots against tyrants spring from none more than from those who pretend to love them most."

"To solve this problem, despots create loyalty tests, ghoulish charades to separate true believers from pretenders. To be trusted, advisers must lie on behalf of the regime. Those who repeat absurd claims without blinking are deemed loyal. Anyone who hesitates is considered suspect."

"In Kim Jong Un's North Korea, for example, the lies have gotten progressively more ridiculous. Once a lie becomes widely accepted, the value of that individual loyalty test declines. Once everyone knows that Kim Jong Un learned to drive when he was just 3 years old, a new, more extreme lie must emerge for the test to serve its purpose. The cycle repeats itself, and a cult of personality is born."

"Plenty of people around Putin understood that dynamic, which is why they were willing to parrot Putin's outlandish claim that the Jewish president of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, is presiding over a 'neo-Nazi state. (Such myth making can happen in democracies too, if you have an authoritarian-style leader. Just consider how many Republicans have fallen over one another to endorse Donald Trump's lies about the 2020 election in order to prove their MAGA bona fides.)"

"But to stay in power, despots have to worry about more than just their advisers and cronies. They have to win over, intimidate, or coerce their population too. That's why dictators invest in state-sponsored media. In Russia, the state goes so far as to present fake presidential candidates who pretend to oppose Putin in rigged elections. The whole system is a Potemkin village, an illusion of choice and political debate."

"Again, that mechanism of control comes with a cost. Some citizens brainwashed by state propaganda will support a war that is sure to backfire. Others privately oppose the regime, but will be too afraid to say anything. As a result, reliable polling doesn't exist in autocracies, and Russia is no exception. That means that despots like Putin are unable to accurately understand the attitudes of their own people."

"If you live in a fake world long enough, it can start to feel real. Dictators and despots begin to believe their own lies, repeated back at them and propagated by state-controlled media. That might help explain why Putin's recent speeches have stood out as unhinged rants. It's certainly possible that his mind has succumbed to his own propaganda, creating a warped worldview in which the invasion of Ukraine was, as Trump put it, an incredibly 'savvy' move."

"The risks of miscalculation are compounded, psychology research has shown, by the fact that power literally flows to your head, including in a key way that may be relevant in explaining Putin's costly gambit in Ukraine. The longer someone is in power, the more they begin to get a sense of what is known as "illusory control," a mistaken belief that they can control outcomes much more than they actually can. That delusion is particularly dangerous in dictatorships, in which there are virtually no checks or balances, no term limits or free elections to boot someone from power."

"Some Russia experts, such as Fiona Hill, have recently suggested that Putin has spent much of the pandemic isolated and alone, poring over old maps of the lost Russian 'imperium.' Cumulatively, it's possible to imagine how these factors combined to convince Putin that his brutal blunder in Ukraine was a good idea."

"When despots screw up, they need to watch their own back. Yet again, they can become victims of the dictator

trap. To crush prospective enemies, they must demand loyalty and crack down on criticism. But the more they do so, the lower the quality of information they receive, and the less they can trust the people who purport to serve them. As a result, even when government officials learn about plots to overthrow an autocrat, they may not share that knowledge. This is known as the 'vacuum effect' -- and it means that authoritarian presidents might learn of coup attempts and putsches only when it's too late. This raises a question that should keep Putin awake at night: If the oligarchs were to eventually make a move against him, would anyone warn him?"

"Clearly, Putin is no fool. But as we debate possible endgames to the war in Ukraine, we shouldn't kid ourselves. Putin, like many despots, isn't behaving fully rationally. He inhabits a fantasy world, surrounded by people who are afraid to challenge him, with a mind that has been poisoned by more than two decades as a tyrant. He's made a catastrophic mistake in Ukraine -- one that may yet prove his downfall."

"Democracy isn't perfect. It's messy. It can be shortsighted. Many powerful democracies, including the United States, are dysfunctional. But at least our leaders face real constraints, real pushback for their miscalculations, and real criticism from their population. And, crucially, there's a built-in mechanism to replace our leaders when they start to behave irrationally or irresponsibly."

"That's why it's time to jettison the myth of the 'savvy' strongman, or the dictator who's a geopolitical 'genius.' Putin has fallen victim to the dictator trap -- and proved that he is neither."

Vladimir Putin's bloody attacks on Ukraine have turned him from a Russian dictator "to a straight-up war criminal", and his brutal war against Ukraine is bringing Russia to the verge of financial ruin. "Having spent his first years in office distancing Russia from its legacy of economic disrepute, he has reawakened this reputation with startling force. And unlike his first years in office, Putin can no longer make a convincing case that the country's leadership represents a break with this troubled past. Putin's destabilization of Russia's place in the world suggests that he is now pursuing a very different set of goals. So long as Putin and his party remain in power, they will serve as a reminder of Russia's long history of economic instability, and of stifling the prosperity of Russia's people and threatening that of their neighbors." Putin -- capitulate! Or, oligarchs, overthrow him.

Republican Complicity

"The Kremlin seems to think it would face fewer obstacles with Donald Trump (and by extension, Republicans) in power; that assessment, if nothing else, is worth trusting."

Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia is one of the people Rep. Liz Cheney of Wyoming has dubbed the "Putin Wing of the GOP". She is one of ten Republicans who voted against updating the 1941 Lend-Lease Act to now facilitate the transfer of military equipment to Ukraine. Ahead of that vote, Greene spent her three minutes of debate time complaining about immigration and a "massive invasion of foreigners into the U.S.", arguing off the point and failing to say anything about Ukraine and Russia.

Republican Senator Mitt Romney has said that it is "almost treasonous" for some GOP figures to back a "dictator" and "oppressor" like Vladimir Putin. He said it was "unthinkable" that anyone who loves freedom can side with Putin. He added, "And it just makes me ill to see some of these people do that," referring to his having seen conservative figures like Trump and Fox News host Tucker Carlson express admiration for Putin.

In a sharp political cartoon, Marjorie Taylor Greene is shown being sworn in on the courtroom stand, and saying:

WHAT? SWEARING TO TELL THE TRUTH
VIOLATES MY RIGHT TO FREE SPEECH!

MTG is one of the Republicans like Paul Gosar who are white supremacists that act as culture war antagonists, voting rights saboteurs, tyrannical power-abusing religious authorities, and cheerleaders for insurrection and strong opposition to fairness, democracy, ethical comportment and honesty.

For his part, Tucker Carlson is one of the most influential persons in cable news. He has managed to become the glum hero of Fox News, delivering a stew of goaded fear and resentment and white nationalism. He has harnessed anti-immigration fervor, becoming the face of flagrantly racist ideas on his Fox News program.

A rueful image of Tucker Carlson's grim visage comes to mind in his perverse musings about whites being replaced by non-whites, and in his emotion-hijacking efforts to stoke fear and grievances among whites and arouse antipathy towards immigrants and refugees, all for the purpose of increasing his own personal power and influence and profit.

He is a part of the ludicrous and perverse contradictions in Republicanland with regard to honesty and unity, and with their support of forced birthism and their opposition to women's natural reproductive rights. Carlson is a major incendiary flamethrower in stoking white supremacist sentiment and portraying people of color as threatening the established order of whites evermore being able to dominate society.

More Corporate Shenanigans

Columnist Dana Milbank wrote on March 30, 2022 in his article *Koch Industries' valentine to Vladimir Putin: "Give Koch Industries credit for consistency: It's aiding the foes of democracy at home and abroad."*

"In the two weeks since I wrote about U.S. companies that remained in Russia despite Vladimir Putin's savage invasion of Ukraine, corporations have, admirably, continued stampeding to the exits. More than 450 multinational companies have withdrawn from Russia in some form, according to the list maintained by Jeffrey Sonnenfeld and his team at Yale School of Management, sending a clear message to Russians that Putin's actions are beyond the pale."

"Some of the pullbacks from Russia have been little more than a 'smokescreen,' says Sonnenfeld. This includes candy makers Nestlé and Mondelez; sandwich-chain Subway; hoteliers Hilton and Hyatt; agricultural giants Cargill and ADM; and oil servicers Schlumberger, Halliburton and Baker Hughes. But these firms at least made symbolic gestures."

"Then there's the worst of the worst, in Sonnenfeld's lowest category -- those corporations 'Digging In' and refusing to reduce activities in Russia. Only eight U.S. companies have this dubious distinction, Sonnenfeld's team tells me: medical-device maker Align Technology, Internet company Cloudflare, International Paper, tire manufacturer Titan International, insurer FM Global, crane maker Manitowoc, laser producer IPG Photonics — and that recidivist corporate offender, Koch Industries."

"As Putin's war grinds on, other authoritarian leaders are not the only ones undermining Western efforts to maximize the economic punishment. Koch Industries, for instance, announced that it would not stop operating its factories in Russia, ignoring Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's pleas for all American companies to leave the country immediately. 'Koch Industries is shamefully continuing to do business in Putin's Russia and putting their profits ahead of defending democracy. The noxious stench of Trump still hangs over Koch Industries,' Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said in a joint statement with Senate Finance Committee Chairman Ron Wyden."

In his article *Stop buying from these companies. They're funding Putin's war*, Dana Milbank notes: "Koch chairman Charles Koch (his brother David died in 2019) is a top funder of right-wing candidates and causes, notably efforts to roll back voting rights. Now the maker of Brawny paper towels, Dixie cups and many other household brands is aiding Russia as it rolls back democracy in Ukraine rather less subtly."

"Koch, keeping two glass manufacturing plants running in Russia, says it 'will not walk away from our employees there or hand over these manufacturing facilities to the Russian government,' arguing that doing so would 'do more harm than good.'"

"Sonnenfeld called those claims 'absolutely ludicrous,' 'arrogant' and 'such a tortured logic it's beyond absurd.' Koch's website indicates that its software business Infor, its electronics business Molex and its industrial products business Koch Engineered Solutions also continue to do business in Russia. Their imports, exports and taxes help prop up the Russian economy, and therefore Putin's war effort."

"At the same time, various Koch-funded groups have been arguing against sanctions imposed on Russia by the United States. As Judd Legum and Rebecca Crosby of the newsletter *Popular Information* reported, Dan Caldwell, vice president for foreign policy at Stand Together, an umbrella group for the Koch network, said the 'Stand Together community' believes that 'broad-based economic sanctions rarely achieve their desired policy outcomes.' Caldwell previously suggested 'neutrality' between Russia and Ukraine. Similar criticism of sanctions came from people affiliated with the American Institute for Economic Research, Defense Priorities and Concerned Veterans for

America, all groups with Koch ties."

"The Koch posture toward Russia is consistent with longtime efforts by Koch interests to fight democratic protections in the United States. The Koch-funded American Legislative Exchange Council has promoted voting restrictions in states. Various Koch arms have funded initiatives and candidates that would limit voting access. Stand Together played a key role in defeating an election-reform and voting-rights package in Congress, as the New Yorker's Jane Mayer has reported."

The Values of Democratic Fairness

Remembering that Professor Robert Reich writes that capitalism and democracy can co-exist as long as democracy is in the driver's seat, recognize that this means corporate entities must help reduce the damages, inequalities, insecurities, joblessness and poverty that accompany unbridled profit-seeking.

"For the first three decades after World War II, democracy was in the driver's seat. Both the US and war-ravaged Western Europe built the largest middle classes the world had ever seen, and the largest and most buoyant democracies. The arrangement was far from perfect, but with addition of civil rights and voting rights, subsidized health care (in the US, Medicare and Medicaid), and a huge expansion of public education, democracy was on the way to making capitalism work for the vast majority."

"Then came a giant U-turn, courtesy of Ronald Reagan in America and Margaret Thatcher in Europe. Deregulation, privatization, globalization, and the dominance of finance led to the Full Monty: abandoned factories and communities, stagnant wages, widening inequality, a shrinking middle class, political corruption, and threadbare social safety nets."

"The result? Widespread anger, frustration, and cynicism. Even before the pandemic, most people were working harder than ever but couldn't get ahead, and their children's prospects weren't any better. The lion's share of economic gains went to the top."

As Americans went to the polls after 8 years of President Obama, 75 percent said they were looking for a leader who would "take the country back from the rich and powerful." Donald Trump deviously campaigned as the voice of the working class, but he betrayed most of his supporters by delivering the country more fully into the hands of the rich and powerful. He did this by stoking white supremacy and following the Demagogue's Playbook. See my essay *Demagogues and the Dangers of the Demise of Democracy* for comprehensive and convincing perspective.

Racist nationalism marks the ultimate failure of progressive politics. When the people are no longer defended against the powerful, they look elsewhere. This was the direct legacy of forty years of deregulation, privatization, globalization, and the dominance of finance. It explains what happened in 2016 -- and could happen again in the presidential contest of 2024.

"As the United States seeks to confront China and Russia by presenting the choice as between democracy and autocracy, the rest of the world is skeptical. That's because American democracy itself has succumbed to oligarchic money and racist-nationalist populism -- a kinder and gentler form than China's and Russia's, to be sure, but differing only in degree."

Trump openly envies Xi's Jinping and Vladimir Putin. Now most of his Republican Party is suppressing votes, paving the way for an anti-democratic coup, excusing the January 6th insurrectionary mob attacks against Congress, and repudiating two of the only remaining Republicans who are openly taking a stand for democracy. Thank you, Adam Kinzinger and Liz Cheney.

"But history may record the most poignant failure as that of Democrats and progressives, who, when they controlled Congress and the White House, failed to enact reforms -- such as voting rights and the expanded child tax credit -- that would have tipped the balance back toward democracy and away from America's oligarchy and Trumpist racist nationalism. Once unleashed, the forces of deregulation, privatization, globalization, and finance have stymied these reforms." Of course, it is sabotage by Republicans that has been the main factor in this failure, so they deserve most of the blame.

Truly,

Tiffany Twain
April 1, 2023