



Coronavirus and Disaster Capitalists: An Axis of Allied Forces

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This manifesto has been evolving for decades, and at the moment of the latest updates, a specter is haunting the world. The specter appears in the form of a terrible global pandemic that has infected more than 650 million people worldwide, and killed over 6.7 million. This has destabilized societies by making desperate remedial measures necessary, like social distancing, wearing masks and sheltering-in-place early during the pandemic that caused one of the most suddenly calamitous economic reversals in history.

This highly contagious coronavirus pathogen spread insidiously in a series of waves in the United States and every other country around the world. Humanity does not have any adapted immunity to this novel virus, which is easily transmitted, even by those who show no symptoms. Unfortunately, the bitter prophylactic medicine required to stop the contagion involved measures that upend the interconnected systems of production, consumption, shopping, international trade, public transportation, business and vacation travel, education and virtually every facet of normal intercourse and interaction that is basic to our safety, well-being and general welfare.

This disease is not only a harsh humanitarian healthcare crisis, but also an economic crisis that has caused dramatic spikes in unemployment and widespread hardships and severe social disruptions. Most unfortunately, instead of heeding the wise advice to BE PREPARED, which has been a motto of Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts for more than a century across the land of the free, the Trump administration was poorly prepared, and divided people against each other into a perilous state of Two Americas -- of the fortunate few who are well-to-do and have better health, and the masses who experienced glaring insecurities, desperate circumstances and higher rates of infection.

A system-shocking crisis like this presents us with powerful motivating energy, and glimpses of clarity. We should not make the existential error of failing to use "dangerous opportunities" like this to make needed reforms. Big structural changes are required, as Senator Elizabeth Warren often stresses. This remodeling should focus on helping the vast majority of people, not shoveling public funds to corporate executives and shareholders.

The United States has been in especially dire straits due to the Trump administration having allowed special interest groups to exert dominating control over our national decision-making and priority setting. As a really sad consequence, we have been excessively vulnerable to the cruel ravages of the pandemic. Our hyper polarized politics are dangerously dysfunctional, and *We the People* have been manipulatively pitted against each other in conflicting tribal camps, contributing to such dystopian outcomes.

Remember Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous words, "Of all the forms of inequality, injustice in health care is the most shocking and inhumane." He had earlier observed in his *Letter from the Birmingham Jail* in April 1963, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."

The COVID-19 public health crisis has made it clear that the U.S. for-profit healthcare system is deeply flawed. Health experts tell us that our leaders make everyone more susceptible to getting sick and dying from contagious diseases like this when they stick with a medical system that leaves tens of millions of people with only emergency medical care. Many folks recognize that healthcare should properly be regarded as a human right, and that it is dangerous for everyone to have a shoddy system that neglects the well-being of a large segment of society.

The Sad Implications of Stimulated Inequality

The Chinese word for crisis is composed of two characters, one meaning danger, and the other opportunity. And sure enough, in every crisis there are silver linings of opportunity, some for better and some for worse.

Look what crony capitalism in the USA is doing. The powers-that-be have succeeded to an astonishing degree in creating Two Americas, with one faction that has many winners enjoying economic security, and the other featuring a vast majority of the people who are financially insecure and struggling. The winners in this winner-take-all economy are allowed to pay historically low tax rates on their incomes. This grand capitalist game grinds on until a severe crisis hits, and then the motivating power of social strife and critical needs for reform sparks emergency responses and hopefully remedial structural changes. These progress-oriented plans compete with shrewd and powerful opportunists who jockey for position to hijack the great Shock Doctrine moment to gain more benefits and advantages and profiteering opportunities and bailouts for themselves at the public's expense.

The coronavirus crisis shines a glaring light on the harms engendered by the corrupted status quo, with its excessive class divide, extreme political dysfunction and often a "culture of corruption." Conservatives have been the main force behind creating this divided nation of "Two Americas", as the articulate former U.S. Senator John Edwards called it. Edwards was a candidate for vice president in 2004 and president in 2008. He spoke about this extreme social stratification in American society in a famous speech to the Democratic National Convention in 2004. He referred to haves and have-nots, and spoke forcefully about the true nature of an overarching injustice of having "the America of the privileged and the wealthy, and the America of those who live from paycheck to paycheck." ... "I have spent my life fighting for the kind of people I grew up with. For two decades, I stood with kids and families against big HMOs and big insurance companies. When I got to the Senate, I fought those same fights against the Washington lobbyists, and for causes like the Patients' Bill of Rights."

Edwards added, "We can build one America where we no longer have two health care systems: one for families who get the best health care money can buy, and one for everybody else rationed out by insurance companies, drug companies and HMOs. Millions of Americans have no health coverage at all. It doesn't have to be that way."

Referring to this *Two Americas* insight in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, John Edwards wrote: "During the campaign of 2004, I spoke often of the two Americas ... I spoke of the difference in the schools, the difference in the loan rates, the difference in opportunity. All of that pales today. Today ... we see a harsher example of two Americas. We see the poor and working class of New Orleans who don't own a car and couldn't evacuate to hotels or families far from the target of Katrina. We see the suffering of families who lived from paycheck to paycheck and who followed the advice of officials and went to shelters at the Civic Center or the Superdome or stayed home to protect their possessions."

Now, as the terrible onslaught of the coronavirus finally begins to recede after amazingly effective vaccines have been developed and widely deployed, this divide is still deep. For instance, early on, a New York Times article indicated in *The 1% Solution to the Pandemic: Escape from New York*: "Broad-scale emergencies never fail to reveal the fault lines in the American class system, and it was suddenly clear that New Yorkers were going to go about the business of combating the coronavirus differently, with more than toilet paper hoarding and Purell, because they had a powerful inoculate: secondary real estate." Elites abandoned the hard-hit Big Apple early in the pandemic to go to safer environs like their second homes in the Hamptons.

The Riggers and the Rigging

Former Labor Secretary Robert Reich explains these things, and even better, he proposes how to fix them. In his book, *The System; Who Rigged It, How We Fix It*, he exposes how wealth and power have eviscerated the middle class and undermined democracy. Professor Reich reveals how the system propagates myths about meritocracy, free markets and corporate social responsibility to distract us from truths about abused power, and how it misleads millions of Americans into voting against their own self-interest. The book is a call to action, explaining how we can win fundamental change and make democracy work for the majority once again.

In *The System; Who Rigged It, How We Fix It*, Reich says that the real divide in America today is establishment versus anti-establishment. The triumphant winners -- the comparatively few at the top -- have siphoned off much

of the wealth of the country, to the detriment of average Americans whose wages have been tightly controlled, and whose health and general welfare and general welfare have been largely ignored.

"America's political and economic systems aren't broken, they're rigged," observes Reich. "They're rigged for the rich and powerful, and defined by an unwillingness by those in power to take on the big fights like passing Medicare for All, or a Green New Deal. It's little wonder why millions of Americans have lost confidence in the politics of maintaining the status quo." In our system of "socialism for the rich", everyone else is left to endure the harsh realities of capitalism, especially blue collar workers, women and most persons in racial minorities.

Cause and Effect

The ruling class in the U.S. has created a winner-takes-all society and an economy where the top 1% owns almost half the nation's wealth. Before the pandemic, with three-quarters of all full-time working people living from paycheck to paycheck, and more than 70% of people owing personal debt, something like 40% of Americans would need to struggle to come up with \$400 for an unexpected expense, according to CareerBuilder, a leading job site.

A main reason for this state of affairs is that workers have been deprived of bargaining power in the past 40 years as corporations, and the politicians they buy, have succeeded in crushing unions and depriving working people of collective bargaining power and better representation. At the same time, according to Professor Robert Reich, "antitrust enforcement has gone into remission. The U.S. government has basically given a green light to companies seeking to gain monopoly power over digital platforms and networks (Google, Apple, Amazon, Facebook); wanting to merge into giant oligopolies (pharmaceuticals, health insurers, airlines, seed producers, food processors, military contractors, Wall Street banks, internet service providers); or intent on creating local monopolies (food distributors, waste disposal companies, hospitals)."

Professor Reich points out why and how power has become too concentrated in the hands of the few in his July 2018 opinion article, *Almost 80% of US workers live from paycheck to paycheck*. By establishing a growing monopoly on the nation's wealth, rich people have gained growing power in our Supreme Court-sanctioned influence peddling politics. "Concentrated economic power", he poignantly writes, "has given corporations more ability to hold down wages, because workers have less choice of whom to work for. And it has let companies impose provisions on workers that further weaken their bargaining power, such as anti-poaching and mandatory arbitration agreements."

"This great shift in bargaining power, from workers to corporations, has pushed a larger portion of national income into profits, and a lower portion into wages than at any time since the Second World War. In recent years, most of those profits have gone into higher executive pay and higher share prices rather than into new capital investments or worker pay. Add to this the fact that the richest 10% of Americans own about 80% of all shares of stock (the top 1% owns about 40%), and you get a broader picture of how and why inequality has widened so dramatically."

"Another consequence: corporations and wealthy individuals have had more money to pour into political campaigns and lobbying, while labor unions have had far less. In 1978, for example, congressional campaign contributions by labor Political Action Committees were on par with corporate PAC contributions. But since 1980, corporate PAC giving has grown at a much faster clip, and today the gulf is huge."

Professor Reich continued: "It is no coincidence that all three branches of the federal government, as well as most state governments, have become more 'business-friendly' and less 'worker-friendly' than at any time since the 1920s. As I've noted, Congress recently slashed the corporate tax rate from 35% to 21%. Meanwhile, John Roberts' Supreme Court has more often sided with business interests in cases involving labor, the environment, or consumers than has any Supreme Court since the mid-1930s. Over the past year it not only ruled against public employee unions but also decided that workers cannot join together in class action suits when their employment contract calls for mandatory arbitration. The federal minimum wage has not been increased since 2009, and is now about where it was in 1950, when adjusted for inflation." In 2018, "Trump's labor department was busily repealing many rules and regulations designed to protect workers."

America has experienced a long-run shift from farm to factory that was accompanied by decades of bloody labor conflict that began in the 1880s. Then a shift took place from factory to office and other sedentary jobs, which created new episodes of social upheaval. More recently, working people's diminishing bargaining power has led to

domineering power by large corporations, "and consequentially, the dramatic widening of inequalities of income, wealth, and political power." This, in turn, "has had a more unfortunate and, I fear, more lasting consequence: an angry working class vulnerable to demagogues peddling authoritarianism, racism and xenophobia."

How the Dreadful Current State of Affairs Came to Be

A considerable majority of Americans wants their representatives to work together for the common good, and to make reasonable compromises to accomplish this.

Here is a germane excerpt from *See Clearly: Sanity During Insane Times - Book Twelve of the Earth Manifesto*:

The famous economist Milton Friedman once declared: "Only a crisis -- actual or perceived -- produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes the politically inevitable." Milton Friedman is right that some of the best opportunities for dramatic change arise in a crisis. But Friedman advocated "conservative" ideas that are rather wrongheaded in many aspects, due to the consequential extent that they tend to undermine democracy and rip off and oppress the people. His ideas concerning money supply policy, deregulation, cutting taxes, privatization, "free trade" and supply-side economics have significantly influenced government policies around the world since the early 1980s, helping rationalize unacceptably retrograde priorities pushed by conservatives.

The best plan, by far, would be to collect the best ideas together, and seek out comprehensive understandings that are informed by reason, prudence, fair-minded egalitarianism, and consistency with both the greater good and expansive concepts of freedom. In other words, we need well-articulated progressive plans, not reactionary conservative plans, and these need to be articulated clearly and forcefully so that *We the People* will be saved from far right policies that are proving to be disastrous to current and future well-being.

When Congress responded to the colossal coronavirus crisis in March 2020 by passing a series of emergency remedial measures, a major point of contention was controls over a \$500 billion bailout plan for big corporate entities. If this "slush fund" was handed out without adequate transparency, as seemed likely, and no one would be held accountable for this shock doctrine boon to scheming corporations and their shareholders, this will be a tragic travesty of fair dealing. Republicans always want to give big benefits to people at the top, so they diabolically assure the citizenry that public assistance to elites will trickle down to benefit all.

After the Senate and House hammered out the CARES Act, a record large \$2.2 trillion emergency relief bill, they passed it unanimously. But only after Democrats secured assurances in the bill that a Pandemic Response Accountability Committee would ensure that the huge \$500 billion bucket of money for Big Businesses would not be used to reward favored corporations like ones in oil, gas and coal businesses, while penalizing others like ones in clean energy companies. But then the bill went to Donald Trump, and he issued a "signing statement" disclaimer in which he indicated he intended to ignore the bill's requirements related to reporting to Congress and submitting to oversight. This defiant rejection of oversight and accountability in the biggest bailout in U.S. history was another in a growing list of Republican abuses of power that arrogantly demonstrate corrupt intent. "Can they be trusted? Will details ever be disclosed? Will there be fairness? Accountability? Don't bet on it."

Smarter, fairer and more balanced plans would be vastly preferable. Instead of embracing such common good plans, Republicans as always are much more focused on comforting the comfortable, even though they thereby demonstrate a pathological lack of commitment to taking strong and effective steps to preventing the further affliction of the afflicted.

In the urgency of the current crisis moment, we should not overlook the big picture context of the opportunistic gamesmanship involved in picking winners and losers in this emergency. It would be an existential error to lose sight of the forest in our selective ministering to all the individual ailing trees.

Timeline of the Transmission of the Coronavirus

The Trump administration moved from dangerous efforts to downplay spiraling risks of the virus for many weeks to declaring a war on it. In the process of that new approach, Republicans took advantage of the situation to reduce

regulations and expand government power. The Environmental Protection Agency, headed by former coal lobbyist Andrew Wheeler, announced a sweeping and indefinite suspension of environmental rules as the pandemic got worse. Some warned that this move gave fossil fuel industries a "green light to pollute with impunity."

Clear-eyed critics like youth climate leader Greta Thunberg accused the Trump administration of exploiting the coronavirus crisis to advance its longstanding goal of drastically rolling back environmental protections. "The EPA uses this global pandemic to create loopholes for destroying the environment," tweeted Thunberg. "This is a schoolbook example for what we need to start looking out for."

Cynthia Giles, former head of the EPA's Office of Enforcement under the Obama administration, stated that the new policy was "essentially a nationwide waiver of environmental rules, for the indefinite future."

After Trump declared a national emergency on Friday, March 13, 2020, his Department of Justice asked Congress to allow the attorney general to indefinitely detain people without trial in violation of Article 1 constitutional right of habeas corpus. This offensive was similar to what several other presidents have done to take advantage of national emergencies beyond their constitutional powers. "Abraham Lincoln illegally suspended habeas corpus during the Civil War. Franklin D. Roosevelt confined people of Japanese descent in internment camps during World War II. And George W. Bush used his post-9/11 'war on terror' to launch two illegal wars, mount a program of punitive torture, conduct extensive unlawful surveillance and illegally detain people."

Knowledge and understanding can be critically important. And ignorance can be dangerous, even deadly. Consider, for instance, what can be learned from the two most famous economists of the twentieth century, John Maynard Keynes and Milton Friedman.

John Maynard Keynes (pronounced Caines) was a British economist who studied what needed lessons could be learned from the Great Depression. He had the laudable and respect-worthy intent of developing ideas, policies and strategies that would be effective in preventing another terrible worldwide economic and social cataclysm.

Keynes' insightful understandings had been forged in the crucible of the hard times of the Depression, so they recognized that desperate times call for desperate measures, and he set forth a two-faceted doctrine. First, he recommended strong federal government action to stimulate the economy during recessions, when slack demand forces businesses to lay off employees and deficit spending is desirable to get economic activity growing again. And second, he indicated that sensible measures should be taken to balance the federal budget during economic expansions, or run surpluses, in order to responsibly offset debt incurred during recessionary times. Republicans, seeking political advantages and greater opportunities for profiteering, violate this broad consensus.

Milton Friedman, in sharp contrast to Keynes, was a powerful ideological proponent of free market economic plans, and he staunchly opposed New Deal policies and remedies that arose during the devastating economic and social crisis of the 1930s. Sensationally, Milton Friedman is the veritable embodiment of understandings that ideas have real consequences. Naomi Klein shows how Friedman and people following his dogmas have repeatedly used terrible shocks to put into effect radical policies by privatizing government functions and helping contractors and other crony capitalists make big profits while people are too focused on emergencies to protect the common weal and the greater good.

In the thought-provoking documentary *The Shock Doctrine*, Naomi Klein gives a groundbreaking alternative history of the most dominant ideology of our time, Milton Friedman's free-market economic revolution. She challenges the popular myth that this movement was ushered in through peaceful means around the world. She reviews the history of the CIA-assisted military coup against the democratically elected government of Salvador Allende in Chile in 1973, and the even bloodier right-wing military coup and abuses of power in Argentina in 1976, and Boris Yeltsin's transformation of Russia's state socialist economy into a capitalist oligarchic economy. She shows historic footage of these and other economic shocks that were used to privatize industries, reduce regulations on corporations, and violate democratic principles. Highly undesirable economic turmoil and widespread unrest and violence accompanied these events. After the 9/11 attacks, the U.S. government took advantage of the ensuing crisis to wage "shock and awe" invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and a "disaster capitalism complex" arose that included a newly established sprawling Department of Homeland Security.

An Aside on Humor

Humor has its value, so a lot of the things going around the Internet are worthwhile, like the newscast about the Trump "Shitshow" and "Dumbfuckery" during the scary early months of the pandemic, and the hysterical New Jersey comedian J-L Cauvin's masterful impression of Trump about Jesus and coronavirus when the Manipulator-in-Chief was declaring he'd fire the economy back up within a few weeks, by Easter 2020. (To watch these things, search the Internet.)

Cynicism and ridicule seem like quaint, dusty and entirely inadequate means for speaking truth to power in the face of propaganda-spewing regimes and power abusers grabbing and offensively clinging to illegitimate authority. But then again, let's check in with Mark Twain. His eminence provocatively wrote in his *Chronicle of Young Satan*: "Will a day come when the race will detect the funniness of these juvenilities and laugh at them -- and by laughing at them, destroy them? For your race, in its poverty, has unquestionably one really effective weapon -- laughter. Power, Money, Persuasion, Supplication, Persecution -- these can lift at a colossal humbug -- push it a little -- crowd it a little, weaken it a little, century by century; but only Laughter can blow it to rags and atoms at a blast. Against the assault of Laughter nothing can stand."

I chuckled ruefully upon reading the news the morning after a Kentucky Republican Rep. named Thomas Massie forced hundreds of House members to rush back to Washington D.C. in late March 2020, risking their lives and wasting fossil fuels, in order to pass the unanimously approved Senate-formulated \$2.2 trillion emergency economic stimulus package. Leaders of both parties slammed the obtuse Republican attention seeker. Even Donald Trump angrily charged him with being a "third-rate grandstander." That was a well-merited insult, but it must have really stung, coming from the world's most notorious grandstander, who daily boasts and deceives and struts and frets his hour upon the stage -- and causes heightened threats to the health, security, solvency, sanity, fairly democratic representation sustainability and general well-being of the American people.

One thing we know is that the Trump administration capitalized on the opportunity to try to use the CARES small business loans and \$500 billion "slush fund" to reward cronies and favored industries like oil companies, airlines, cruise ship operators, giant agribusinesses and real estate companies, and to screw anyone who does not fawn over Trump, or dares criticize him - or who might have the audacity to demand transparency or accountability.

Throughout his career as a scheming bankruptcy-declaring real estate mogul and casino boss, Trump showed he can be 'trusted' only to cheat and lie and levy lawsuits and screw the public. His cunning self-serving self-promoting actions and highly suspect motives belie any pretense that he cares about anyone other than himself, and money, power, celebrity and scandalous notoriety and immunity from prosecution for misdeeds.

Make no mistake about it, Trump introduced a new public health risk when he politicized efforts to address the coronavirus crisis. He and his minions invidiously helped spread accusations that suggest the work of scientific experts is a hoax, or less valid than the contradictory propaganda Trump spewed on Twitter, and on the White House briefing stage.

Throughout 2020, many Trump supporters pushed the devious narrative "that health experts are part of a deep-state plot to hurt Trump's reelection efforts by damaging the economy and keeping the United States shut down as long as possible. Trump himself pushed this idea in the early days of the outbreak, calling warnings about the spread of the coronavirus a kind of 'hoax' meant to undermine him." Thereafter, Trump lost interest in trying to contain the pandemic, and desperately tried to re-open economic activities even though new cases of COVID-19 were reaching awful levels during the remainder of his tenure in office.

We can thank Trump for having accelerated the development of vaccines to protect against COVID-19, but then he and his obtuse and ambitious MAGA co-conspirators undermined that accomplishment by politicizing people getting vaccinated and other safety measures.

Winners and Losers, Revisited

Every severe crisis creates winners and losers, and in the cold calculus of authority-abusing Trumpism, MAGA Republicans want to take advantage of their positions of power to choose who will win and who will lose. Trump displays his malignant narcissism when he acts in vindictive ways, so he could not be trusted to deal fairly with his

influence in the \$500 billion "slush fund" that was included in the CARES recovery and stimulus bill.

Individuals, families and small businesses should have been given most of the relief from the catastrophic health and economic calamity, instead of so much money being borrowed to bail out businesses and investors. Instead of allowing businesses to lay off millions of workers and completely disrupt the future economy, it would have been a much better plan to emulate European countries that guaranteed wages for employees to keep them in place so that the eventual economic recovery would be easier and less disrupted.

David Brooks gave support to this idea in April 2020, stating, "I would say that, when we look at the bill that was passed by Congress a couple of weeks ago, the stimulus bill, we'll regard it as one of the worst economic packages, maybe in American history, certainly in a time of crisis. What they're doing in Europe is, they're preserving their businesses. They're keeping people employed. ... And we didn't do that. We took a more individualistic approach, we'll just give you \$1,200. We had a backstop measure, which is \$350 billion for businesses. We should increase that to \$600 billion, \$700 billion, so businesses can keep their payroll." (An increase did follow soon thereafter.)

As it was, who were the winners in the relief package?

-- Big businesses that the Trump administration favored, who got huge cash bailouts from the public treasury, especially including fossil fuel industries, Big Pharma and the gun industry, whose right-wing organization, the NRA, used the COVID-19 pandemic as an excuse to pursue their "guns everywhere agenda" and boost gun sales by exploiting spiking fears that the engineers of a dystopian future are working overtime to make worse. Fraud and corruption by NRA leaders in the organization are making it even more disgracefully discredited.

-- Speculators who jumped into the right stocks at the right time, and those who have access to inside information to use put options and call options to leverage their advantages.

Who were the losers in the relief package?

-- Public transportation systems.

-- Underpaid essential workers and those in the gig economy.

-- Working women, especially those who become pregnant, and young people and everyone in future generations.

-- Independent contractors and everyone who fell through cracks of the shoddy, hasty, extremely costly plan.

-- Everyone who has to deal with the bureaucratic red tape of trying to get relief without success.

-- Arts organizations like live theater companies and movie theaters and all manner of non-profit organizations, which are generally engaged in healthier, saner and more socially propitious activities than for-profit businesses. Non-profits like Meals on Wheels and food banks nationwide surely should have been included in the gusher of money that was borrowed by the government to try to forestall the worst impacts of this contagion.

-- And, of course, among the losers will be every person who would suffer the cruel ravages of the poorly controlled viral pathogen.

The Dangers of Economic Recession

The USA was woefully unprepared for a recession, as the insightful columnist Catherine Rampell incisively pointed out on March 12, 2020. "That's because both the Trump administration and state-level officials have spent the past few years dismantling the very programs that would normally cushion the blow."

Larry Kudlow, who was Trump's National Economic Council director, put it this way, while trying to prevent early calls for major fiscal intervention and bailouts in the face of the coronavirus contagion: "Let's not forget, we have automatic stabilizers in the budget, okay?" If the unemployment rate rises, he noted, then "unemployment insurance, food stamps, various welfare-related programs, those are automatic. You don't have to go for additional appropriation."

"What Kudlow failed to mention," observed Catherine Rampell, "is that this administration has been steadily working to make those 'automatic stabilizers' much less automatic and much less stabilizing. Soon, for instance, the Trump administration will start enforcing a new rule making it harder for Americans to get food stamps if they

can't find work. Which is presumably the time when food assistance might be most helpful."

Republicans also have been working to weaken regulations that had been put in place to protect workers and their families from harms related to chemicals, plastics, pesticides and other toxins. This is criminally pathetic.

Katrina vanden Heuvel, a columnist covering national politics and progressive movements, wrote in *The coronavirus makes a powerful case for boosting our social safety net*: "The U.S. health care safety net is fragile, with tens of millions of people having no health insurance and millions homeless." She also noted, "For too long, conservatives have failed to understand or admit that the building blocks of a strong social safety net -- paid sick leave, worker protections, universal health care, small-business assistance, as well as measures such as moratoriums on deportations and foreclosures -- are more than acts of kindness. They're also economic cornerstones that help stave off recession."

The Bane of Increased Stress

Making matters worse, strife between triumphing capitalists and struggling laborers has made the "existential cost" of financial insecurity much more dire, according to Andrew Abeyta, assistant professor in the department of psychology at Rutgers University.

Living paycheck-to-paycheck is incredibly stressful. According to the American Psychological Association, financial stress is the top source of stress for Americans. And it's a well-known, scientific fact that stress has many negative ramifications on the health of highly stressed people.

"One way that living paycheck-to-paycheck can affect your health is the tendency to blow off medical care. A 2014 survey of over 3,000 people conducted by Harris Poll revealed that one in five Americans put their health care needs on hold because they can't pay the bill. In fact, more than 12 percent admitted to skipping doctor's visits and letting health issues go because of financial concerns. One Australian study even found that financial stress can drive people to smoke, which boosts your risk of heart problems, considerably."

Stress itself does plenty to raise your blood pressure and increase risks of heart disease. "What's more, younger adults are in no way immune. Elizabeth Sweet, an assistant professor in anthropology at the University of Massachusetts, conducted a study of stress in young adults and found those in debt to be more likely to have a higher diastolic blood pressure and worse physical and mental health than those who were financially secure."

"Because we have solid evidence for the impact of debt on stress and emotional health (like depression and anxiety), it is particularly reasonable to think debt can impact aspects of physical health that are sensitive to stress, like cardiovascular disease and risk factors, obesity and metabolic function," explains Sweet. "It's also important to think about how debt, or the stress associated with debt, can impact health behaviors or coping behaviors, such as diet, exercise, substance abuse, medical care seeking or avoidance, which could all impact physical health outcomes," she says, adding that she is currently conducting more research on how living paycheck-to-paycheck or carrying debt impacts health.

Financial security, in contrast, is conducive to psychological health. One study even found a connection between financial security and the ability to find meaning in life. Andrew Abeyta explains: "An important component of psychological health involves maintaining a sense of purpose and personal significance, what psychologists refer to as meaning in life. Part of being a psychologically healthy person is feeling like you are important, and that what you do matters. People who feel like their lives are purposeful and significant tend to lead happier and more satisfied lives, and are better able to maintain a positive disposition in the face of stressful life events. Financial stress is associated with a reduced sense of purpose and significance. Relentless stress about money can undermine a person's sense of self-worth and personal meaning, making them feel worthless and like their lives are pointless -- a pattern of thinking that can lead to clinical depression, even suicidal thoughts and behaviors. It's more difficult for them to enjoy life and they're less able to psychologically adjust to stressful life events, potentially setting them on the path to persistent anxiety, depression, substance abuse, and poor health."

Obviously, the right thing for our elected representatives to do would be to create a fairer system that reduces the gaps between the haves and the have nots.

Truth or Consequences

One thing should be completely clear: Truth matters. Devious leaders who promote falsehoods threaten the general welfare and security and personal freedoms. We cannot trust our leaders to do the right thing because they are so entrenched in their positions, especially Republicans who stand for rich people and stoutly defend the privileges, prerogatives and domineering influence of their wealthy donors.

The Demagogue-in-Chief vainly strutted, preened and congratulated himself, and tried to deceive people by pushing propaganda that defends white male privilege. And he doubled down on giving lavish entitlements to the rich. He diabolically pretended to be a populist who cares about working people, at the same time he played his political base against the common good. But he lies through his teeth to advance his own self-interest rather than honestly promoting the greater good. He isn't merely temperamentally ill suited to lead, but he is a malicious force undermining public health, psychological well-being, truth, democracy, social cohesion, domestic tranquility, the general welfare, national security and the broad blessings of liberty (especially for females).

The respect-worthy former ambassador to Ukraine, Marie Yovanovitch, who Trump removed from her duties in Ukraine for corrupt reasons, said after the first impeachment trial, "It turns out that the truth matters, and epidemics can't be subdued by tweet." Ironically, the downfall of Teflon Don II was long-delayed but finally came about because of a surprising and implacable enemy, the COVID-19 disease, which doesn't give a damn about his deceit and mistakes and distorting spin, or his braggadocio and bullying and traitorous seditious conspiracy.

In February 2020, the director-general of the World Health Organization warned that "we're not just fighting an epidemic; we're fighting an infodemic. Fake news spreads faster and more easily than this virus, and is just as dangerous." False information goes viral online, and misleads people, and this can cause real world harms -- and lives to be lost. Misinformation and pernicious disinformation have gone viral with all-pervading transmission on social media. One purpose of this insidious deceit in politics is to sow doubt and undermine people's trust in their government, in order to gain political advantages and get away with swindles and abuses of authority.

The rapid transmission of misinformation, and the ease of proliferation of falsehoods, makes me think of a quote often misattributed to Mark Twain, "A lie can travel half way around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes." This idea is an echo of what Jonathan Swift had written more than 250 years ago, long before social media made viral transmission a superhighway: "Besides, as the vilest Writer has his Readers, so the greatest Liar has his Believers; and it often happens, that if a Lie be believ'd only for an Hour, it has done its Work, and there is no further occasion for it. Falsehood flies, 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." Content moderation is needed.

Trump assembled a government of Yes Men, Con Men and treacherous Dividers. In their winner-take-all games, they created structural inequities designed to keep the vast majority of the people in positions as second-class citizens in order to more rashly generate wealth and concentrate it in the hands of the few. They did so by pandering to fossil fuel companies and other big corporations in profligately stimulating the depletion of natural resources and exploiting working people and encouraging consumption -- and foisting costs and risks onto everyone in the future. This cabal of cronies treats Earth like a business in liquidation, adversely affecting the ability of natural ecosystems to propitiously continue to provide the tens of trillions of dollars in resources and ecological services they generate every year. Change must come, as the world population marches past 8 billion.

Republicans have an outsized degree of responsibility for having created this system of two highly unequal Americas, one severely afflicted by extreme inequalities and vulnerabilities to a pandemic. Their glaring lack of preparedness for this risk of contagious diseases compounds the underlying harms of an unjust healthcare system. This fact is shockingly underscored by statistics that reveal the coronavirus infected people of color in the United States in disproportionately high numbers. Blacks and Latinos have tragically suffered and died from COVID-19 in much larger numbers than their proportion of the populace.

Trump Republicans have built a house-of-cards economy on priorities that serve to maximize private profits and unjustly impose costs and risks on everyone. The overriding purpose of these perverse top priorities is to help concentrate wealth ever more narrowly and mean spiritedly.

Trump Republicans governed as if they had a strong mandate to let corporations socialize costs and risks, and to evade taxes in order to generate artificial and unsustainable profits. They acted like the citizenry wanted them to perpetuate Tax Cut swindles financed by public borrowings, to mainly benefit already advantaged people on Easy Street. They have painted America into a desperate corner instead of pursuing a more responsible approach of balancing budgets and creating rainy day funds to cover contingencies (disease epidemics or natural disasters.)

They rashly ran the economy full-speed ahead in treacherous waters like the Captain of the Titanic, for the primary purpose of generating wealth that will, by design, be monopolized by insiders and elites. There are vastly better plans for running a healthier, saner and more sustainable and peaceable society.

The self-described "grim reaper" Mitch McConnell has been staunch in his efforts to prevent government reforms and legislation consistent with the common good. He has prevented hundreds of reform bills, many of them bipartisan, which have been passed by representatives of the people in the House of Representatives from even being considered in the U.S. Senate while he was Majority Leader. He gets giddy with perverse zealotry at things like having succeeded in conspiring with the defendant in both Trump impeachment trials, having helped him stonewall and obstruct justice. He and his Senate collaborators acquitted Trump for his abuses of power and obstruction of Congress, even though the man was transparently guilty of these offenses.

A funny marquee sign at Madison Avenue Baptist Church read: "The fact that there's a highway to Hell and a stairway to Heaven says a lot about anticipated traffic numbers." Ha!

Dealing with the Disease

The Trump administration's response to COVID-19 was an unnecessarily catastrophic disaster. Millions of people got sick -- and many have died -- because of the administration's lack of preparedness and sluggish response, both of which were exacerbated by a callous disdain for science and expertise.

"They should have tested people sooner, on a massive scale. **They chose not to.**

They should have allowed public health experts to speak freely. **They chose not to.**

They should have kept all relevant outbreak data on the CDC's website. **They chose not to.**

They should have let epidemiologists in the room during strategy meetings. **They chose not to."**

"The point is, this administration's hostility towards science, expertise, transparency, and facts that don't fit their pre-determined narrative have threatened and will continue to endanger lives if we don't force them to act in accordance with what doctors and epidemiologists -- the real experts -- have been telling them for months."

"The U.S. is *still* failing at the very minimum responsibility it has to respond to the global COVID-19 pandemic: testing. That failure comes down to one thing -- the Trump administration's malign negligence. It goes beyond simple incompetence. You have to try really hard to botch something as badly as this administration has. As Tom Frieden, director of the CDC under President Obama told *The Wall Street Journal*, the early response by the Trump administration to the coronavirus 'was kind of a perfect storm of three separate failures."

David Keene, an astute political conservative and former president of the National Rifle Association recently said, "It goes almost without saying that it is foolhardy to play politics with a possible impending pandemic. Rising above politics, however, is tough for politicians and almost impossible for China's Communist rulers who always and in every way put their ideological interests above all else, regardless of the consequences to others." Tyranny!

Blaming Democrats and liberals and Hillary Clinton and President Obama was the fallback to many things Trump did. In one gruesome instance of defensiveness in the face of deserved criticism, Trump urged Mike Pence, the poorly qualified chairman of the coronavirus task force, not to reach out to Democratic governors who criticize the administration's efforts. "I want them to be appreciative," Mr. Trump said of the governors of Washington state and Michigan. "I don't want them to say things that aren't true. We've done a great job."

Asked about criticisms by Washington Gov. Jay Inslee and Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer, Trump said he advised Mr. Pence not to deal with them. But he said Pence was too nice to listen to his advice. "He calls all the governors. I tell him, 'Mike, don't call the governor of Washington, you're wasting your time with him,'" Trump said. "Don't call the woman in Michigan. It doesn't make any difference in what happens. If they don't treat you right, I don't call."

One consequence of this demagoguery: right-wingers concocted a lethal plot against Whitmer.

"I'm not talking about me," the president said. "I'm talking about Mike, talking about FEMA, the Army Corps of Engineers. When somebody for political reasons wants to blame, I view that as blaming these incredible people. These people are working 24 hours a day. I think the media and the governors should appreciate it."

It makes matters worse that the Congenital-Liar-in-Chief also became increasingly unhinged. He even tried to blame Barack Obama once again by concocting a conspiracy theory that there was some sort of perfidious "Obamagate". Trump was propped up by scheming power-abusing cronies in the U.S. Senate, and by Fox News and others in the fecklessly irresponsible conservative political media complex. The Wikipedia entry for "politico-media complex" elaborates about the true nature of this generally derogative term used to describe "the collusion between governments or individual politicians and the media industry in an attempt to manipulate rather than inform the people." The politico-media complex" is a "close, systematized and symbiotic-like network of relationships between a state's political and ruling classes, its media industry and any interactions with or dependencies upon interest groups with other domains or agencies, such as law (with its enforcement through the police), and corporations and the multinationals."

Let's do a deep dive. Donald Trump is a master manipulator of public opinion and people's emotions. He does this for self-serving purposes targeted to satisfy his compulsion to get power, attention, control and money. After Trump declared a national coronavirus emergency during a press conference on Friday, March 13, he refused to take responsibility for the persistent delays in administering tests for COVID-19. The U.S. was far slower to produce test kits than many other countries. Delays in getting tests to public-health authorities and healthcare providers in all the states contributed to an unnecessarily rapid spread of the disease.

One day before that press conference, Dr. Anthony Fauci, the nation's top infectious-disease expert and long-time director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, appeared before Congress and said: "The system is not really geared to what we need right now -- what you are asking for ... That is a failing. It is a failing. Let's admit it."

Following up on that informed understanding, NBC News White House correspondent Kristen Welker asked in the March 13th news conference: "Dr. Fauci said earlier this week that the lag in testing was, in fact, a failing. Do you take responsibility for that, and when can you guarantee that every American who needs a test has a test?"

Trump responded defensively, blaming circumstances and others, "Yeah, I don't take responsibility at all because we were given a set of circumstances, and we were given rules, regulations, and specifications from a different time that wasn't meant for this kind of an event with the kind of numbers that we're talking about." And he continued at that moment to consequentially downplay the risks resulting from life-endangering lags in testing for the disease in the United States, which has been hit much harder than anywhere else in the world.

Later in the press conference, PBS NewsHour White House correspondent Yamiche Alcindor continued to press Trump on his own responsibility in the situation. He reactively began, "Well, I just think it's a nasty question", transparently trying again to evade responsibility and pass the buck. The optics looked especially bad because he was once again reacting in a nasty way to a black woman, and he has had a history of denigrating female reporters.

Alcindor asked: "You said that you don't take responsibility, but you did disband the White House pandemic office, and officials that were working in that office left this administration abruptly. What responsibility do you take for that? Officials who worked in that office said that the White House lost valuable time because that office was disbanded -- what do you make of that?"

After calling Alcindor's inquiry "a nasty question", he preposterously said that he didn't know about the office's closing. He added, "What we've done is we've ... saved thousands of lives with the quick closing. And when you say me -- I didn't do it. We have a group of people. I could perhaps ask Tony (Fauci) about that because I don't know anything about it." That's was a gotcha moment, and one of many. Lies and evasions of responsibility can have serious consequences, and in this case, they have proved fatal.

This history got bizarrely worse when Trump fled the stage in the Rose Garden on May 12, 2020 after again declaring that a female reporter's reasonable questions were "nasty." Meanwhile, the coronavirus continued to

spread insidiously, causing paralyzing fear in the U.S., and worldwide economic disruptions and stock market volatility. In testimony before the House Oversight and Govt. Reform Committee, Dr. Fauci said it "would be nice" if the global-health unit, which Trump had eliminated, were still there, adding "we worked quite well with them."

The Federal Judiciary

Mitch McConnell and Republican Senators have stacked federal courts with record numbers of judges, many of whom are poorly qualified and excessively politically partisan. These judges have been chosen partially because they are relatively young, and selected to ensure that the bane of their life-long tenures will negatively affect *We the People* for generations. But McConnell was not content with these accomplishments; he wanted more. He even asked older federal judges to retire, so that he could replace them with more young partisan judges.

McConnell and his Republican loyalists have made the U.S. Senate into a body that is an insult to democracy, seeing as how Republican Senators represent significantly less than half of the population, yet he chose extreme partisans to install in life-long positions in the federal judiciary. It is harmful and irksome to see that one of McConnell's top priorities has been to stack federal courts with young right-wing judges who are likely to make rulings antithetical to the common good for decades into the future.

Republicans should be forced to pay restitution to the people for their wide-ranging wrongdoing. With regard to these most consequentially egregious wrongs that they have been perpetrating, every Trump-appointed judge to the federal judiciary has a tainted cloud of illegitimacy for influence by Big Money and extreme partisanship involved in their appointments. Since every judge appointed by the Trump cabal is tainted with illegitimacy, Congress should now pass a law that would require every one of those judges to run in a special election against qualified competitors. This is how we should establish an auspicious meritocracy in the important judiciary.

Mitch McConnell has been playing shrewd political games for many years, brazenly abusing power. He should be forced out of office for having turned what was once "the world's greatest deliberative body" into a partisan graveyard where remedial action is buried, with pernicious effect and deadly consequences. It is wrong that the evil McConnell refused to bring hundreds of bills to the Senate floor to even be deliberated, after they had been passed by the House of Representatives under Nancy Pelosi's leadership, many of them with bipartisan support.

McConnell and his cowed cowardly conservative cronies marched lockstep with the bullying Demagogue-in-Chief, and they should all be thrown out of office. Right now, Section 3 of the Fourteenth Amendment should be invoked to remove from office those in Congress who "engaged in insurrection or rebellion" against the United States in the January 6, 2021 attempt to prevent the peaceful transfer of power. Specifically, Reps. Jim Jordan, Paul Gosar, Scott Perry and Andy Biggs should be forced from office. And New York Rep. George Santos should also be removed from his position for his blatant lies and financial improprieties in getting elected.

Let's throw open our windows like a demented Howard Beale and shout, "I'm as mad as hell, and I'm not going to take this anymore!" Let's get angry, with equanimity and respectable resolve, and let's get even!

Truly,
Dr. Tiffany B. Twain
January 24, 2023