

# AMASS

*Magazine*

**Medicare  
(Dis) Advantage**

**Big Pharma's  
Democrats**

**Pandora  
Papers**

**Green  
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**Endless  
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# AMASS

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"CIRCUITS OF VIOLENCE"

HELI SWENSSON



## "Circuits of Violence"

Cover Design by Heli Swensson.

President Biden took a predictable hit on the Afghan crisis, but the war's flawed beginnings and mis-guided execution were caused by many of his current critics who were pitchmen for deepening our involvement. This fiasco lasted twenty years because all presidents and power players were vested in this atrocity, willing to cover up its failure with deceptions and bureaucratic lies, insulating Americans from casualties in order to continue the war indefinitely.

- John O'Kane

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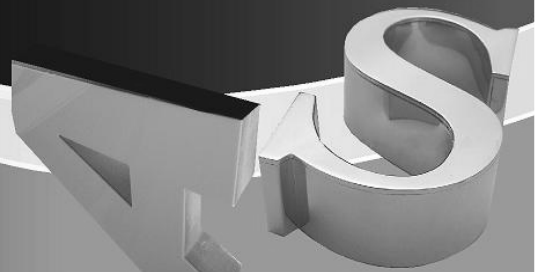


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# MEDICARE ADVANTAGE IS A FOR-PROFIT SCAM

THOM HARTMANN

**O**ver 100 Democratic lawmakers recently introduced legislation to lower the Medicare eligibility age to 60. There is one small problem that needs fixing, though: so-called “Medicare Advantage.”

This week my new book, *The Hidden History of American Healthcare: Why Sickness Bankrupts You and Makes Others Insanely Rich*, is officially available in bookstores nationwide and online. Here’s a chapter excerpt I think you’ll find interesting, particularly after all those awful TV ads with former football and sitcom stars we’ve had to endure the past few years...

## The “Advantage” War against Medicare

Medicare Advantage is a massive, trillion-dollar rip-off, of the federal government and of taxpayers, and of many of the people buying the so-called Advantage plans.

It’s also one of the most effective ways that insurance companies could try to kill Medicare For All, since about a third of all people who think they’re on Medicare are actually on these privatized plans instead.

Nearly from its beginning, Medicare has allowed private companies to offer plans that essentially compete with it, but they were an obscure corner of the market and didn’t really take off until the Bush administration and Republicans in Congress rolled out the Medicare Modernization Act of 2003. This was the GOP’s (and a few corporatist Democrats’) big chance to finally privatize Medicare, albeit one bite at a time.

That law created a brand known as Medicare Advantage under the Medicare Part C provision, and a year later it phased in what are known as risk-adjusted large-batch payments to insurance companies offering Advantage plans.

Medicare Advantage plans are not Medicare. They’re private health insurance most often offered by the big for-profit insurance companies (although some nonprofits participate, particularly the larger HMOs), and

the rules they must live by are considerably looser than those for Medicare.

Even more consequential, they don’t get reimbursed directly on a person-by-person, procedure-by-procedure basis. Instead, every year, Advantage providers submit a summary to the federal government of the aggregate risk score of all their customers and, practically speaking, are paid in a massive lump sum.

The higher their risk score, the larger the payment. A plan with mostly very ill people in it will get much larger reimbursements than a plan with mostly healthy people. After all, the former will be costly to keep alive and healthy, while the latter won’t cost much at all.

Profit-seeking insurance companies, being the predators that they are, have found a number of ways to raise their risk scores without raising their expenses. The classical strategies of tying people to in-network providers, denying procedures routinely during first-pass authorization attempts, and having very high out-of-pocket caps are carried over from regular health insurance systems to keep costs low and profits high.

But with Medicare Advantage, the big insurance companies have invented a whole new way to rip us all off while padding their bottom lines.

For example, many Medicare Advantage plans promote an annual home visit by a nurse or physician’s assistant as a “benefit” of the plan. What the companies are doing, though, is trying to upcode their customers to make them seem sicker than they are to increase their overall Medicare reimbursement risk score.

“Heart failure,” for example, can be a severe and expensive condition to treat . . . or a barely perceptible tic on an EKG that represents little or no threat to a person for years or even decades. Depression is

similarly variable; if it lasts less than two weeks, there’s no reimbursement; if it lasts longer than two weeks, it’s called a “major depressive episode” and rapidly jacks up a risk score.

The home health visits are designed more to look for illnesses or codings that can increase risk scores than to find conditions that require medical intervention. They’re so profitable that an entire industry has sprung up of companies that send nurses out on behalf of the smaller insurance companies.

In summer 2014, the Center for Public Integrity (CPI) published an in-depth investigative report titled, “Why Medicare Advantage Costs Taxpayers Billions More Than It Should.”

**But with Medicare  
Advantage, the  
big insurance  
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invented a whole  
new way to rip us all  
off while  
padding their  
bottom lines.**

— Thom Hartmann



They found, among other things, that one of the most common scams companies were running involved that very scoring of their customers as being sicker than they actually were so that their reimbursements were way above the cost of caring for those people.

#### Here Are a Few Quotes and Points From the Report:

- “Risk scores of Medicare Advantage patients rose sharply in plans in at least 1,000 counties nationwide between 2007 and 2011, boosting taxpayer costs by more than \$36 billion over estimated costs for caring for patients in standard Medicare.”
- “In more than 200 of these counties, the cost of some Medicare Advantage plans was at least 25 percent higher than the cost of providing standard Medicare coverage.”
- The report documents how risk scores rose twice as fast for people who joined a Medicare Advantage health plan as for those who didn’t.
- Patients, the report lays out, never know how their health is rated because neither the health plan nor Medicare shares risk scores with them—and the process itself is so arcane and secretive that it remains unfathomable to many health professionals.
- “By 2009, government officials were estimating that just over 15 percent of total Medicare Advantage payments were inaccurate, about \$12 billion that year.”
- Based on its own sampling of data from health plans, the report shows how CMS has estimated that faulty risk scores triggered nearly \$70 billion in what officials deemed “improper” payments to Medicare Advantage plans from 2008 through 2013.
- CMS decided, according to the report, not to chase after overcharges from 2008 through 2010 even though the agency estimated through sampling that it made more than \$32 billion in “improper” payments to Medicare Advantage plans over those three years. CMS did not explain its reasoning.
- The report documents how Medicare expects to pay the health plans more than \$150 billion this year [2014, the year the study was published]. Companies are almost never nailed for these overcharges, and when they are, they usually pay back pennies on the dollar.

For example, when the Office of Inspector General, Health and Human Services (which oversees Medicare), audited six out of the hundreds of plans on the market in 2007, they found that just those six companies “had been overpaid by an estimated \$650 million” for that one year. As the Center for Public Integrity states, “CMS settled five of the six audits for a total repayment of just over \$1.3 million.”

The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services also, in 2012, decided to audit only 30 plans a year going forward. As CPI noted, “At that rate, it would take CMS more than 15 years to review the hundreds of Medicare Advantage contracts now in force.” And that’s 15 years to audit just one year’s activity!

Things haven’t improved since that 2014 investigative report from CPI. In September 2019, Senator Sherrod Brown of Ohio and five Democratic



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colleagues sent a letter to President Donald Trump's CMS administrator, Seema Verma.

"The recent HHS Payment Accuracy Report exposes that taxpayers have overpaid Medicare Advantage plans more than \$30 billion dollars over the last three years," Brown wrote. "This report comes on the heels of a 2016 Government Accountability Office (GAO) report and a 2013 GAO report on [Medicare Advantage] plan overcharges and the failure of the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid (CMS) to recoup billions of dollars of improper payments from MA plans."

Meanwhile, during the four years of the Trump administration, CMS went out of their way to illegally promote Medicare Advantage plans (which typically cost CMS far more than a regular Medicare plan).

A February 2020 report in the *New York Times* stated, "Under President Trump, some critics contend, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, which administers Medicare, has become a cheerleader for Advantage plans at the expense of original Medicare."

The report pointed to the draft release of the 2019 *Medicare & You* handbook, which is mailed every year to all enrollees and posted online. "Advocates and some lawmakers criticized language describing Advantage as a less expensive alternative to original Medicare."

The National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) compared Medicare Advantage with traditional Medicare and found the Advantage programs to be mind-bogglingly profitable: "MA insurer revenues are 30 percent higher than their healthcare spending. Healthcare spending for enrollees in MA is 25 percent lower than for enrollees in [traditional Medicare] in the same county and [with the same] risk score."

At the same time, Medicare Advantage often screws its customers. According to the NBER study, people with Medicare Advantage got 15 percent fewer colon cancer screening tests, 24 percent fewer diagnostic tests, and 38 percent fewer flu shots.

Speculation is rife as to why CMS would allow—much less promote—privatized plans that cost Medicare far more than original Medicare to rip off taxpayers to the tune of billions of dollars a month.

One possibility is regulatory capture—people working in CMS know that if they go along and get along, very well-paid jobs are waiting for them at for-profit insurance companies after a few years of government service. This is a chronic problem at other regulatory agencies, particularly those overseeing pollution, pharmaceuticals, telecommunications, and banking.

Another answer is that the Bush administration—where Medicare Advantage started—was so enamored of the idea of privatizing Medicare to eventually destroy the program (George W. Bush campaigned extensively from the late 1970s through his presidency to privatize both Social Security and Medicare) that they turned a blind eye to abuses.

The Obama administration had other priorities, as they were trying to push through the Affordable Care 10Act and didn't want to upset the apple cart. And when



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Trump came into power, his folks saw anything that drained resources out of Medicare and into the pockets of multimillionaire health insurance executives—a group notoriously generous when it comes to making political contributions—as a plus.

### You Are Locked in to Medicare Advantage

A fellow I'd known decades ago recently bubbled back into conversation among a few of us who'd hung out together in New York back in the 1970s. Sam, I'll call him, had turned 65 and hadn't had employer-provided health insurance in years. He spent a few hours trying to figure out how to sign up for Medicare and then gave up, totally confused, figuring he'd try again in a few months.

Unfortunately, his prostate intervened. When Sam started experiencing pain urinating, he visited a local "doc in a box" urgent care clinic, where they gave him a PSA test. The result was shocking: his PSA was so high that it was a virtual certainty he had prostate cancer, and possibly it had even metastasized, a situation that is the second-leading cause of cancer death in American men.

Telling him that he'd be facing hefty doctor and hospital bills regardless of the outcome, the urgent care clinic signed him up for a Medicare Advantage plan offered by an affiliate that almost certainly paid them a commission for the sign-up. Sam was excited, though, because he now had insurance, and it was a "no dollar" plan that didn't cost him a penny.

Sam then got on the phone to find a urologist who specialized in cancer. He found that the best worked out of Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New York, and, telling them he was "on Medicare," he made an appointment to see one of their top docs. A month later, when his appointment finally opened up, the person who was checking him into the system told him that he'd have to pay cash because his Advantage plan didn't include Sloan Kettering.

In fact, more than a third of all Medicare Advantage plans nationwide do not include any of the National Cancer Institute centers, and none of the Advantage plans offered in the New York City area include the nation's most famous one, Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center.

Shocked, Sam contacted Medicare to see if



he could transfer from Medicare Advantage to regular Medicare. This all happened in fall 2020, so they told him that he could make the change during the “open enrollment period” of October 15 to December 7. He made the change and called Sloan Kettering back.

This time, they wanted to know what Medigap policy he’d signed up for to fill in the 20 percent of billing that Medicare doesn’t cover. That sent Sam back to the internet and, ultimately, to an insurance agent, who told him that while Medigap plans can’t refuse you because of preexisting conditions when you first sign up when you turn 65, if you shift from Medicare Advantage back to traditional Medicare after that first enrollment, particularly if you’re older or sick, they can simply refuse to cover you.

Reporter Mark Miller wrote for the *New York Times* in February 2020 about Ed Stein, a 72-year-old man with bladder cancer and a Medicare Advantage plan that didn’t cover the cancer docs in his area who specialized in his type of cancer. He tried to shift back to traditional Medicare to cover what promised to be complex and expensive surgery and chemotherapy. As Miller wrote, “That was when he ran up against one of the least understood implications of selecting Advantage when you enroll in Medicare: The decision is effectively irrevocable.”

As of this writing (November 2020), my friend Sam still hasn’t seen a doctor. This is the state of

healthcare in America as it’s been sliced and diced by the multibillion-dollar insurance industry.

Meanwhile, every fall, Americans are inundated with hundreds of millions of dollars’ worth of TV, direct mail, and internet advertising for Medicare Advantage plans. And where does the money come from to pay for that advertising?

It comes from the same place that provided over \$1 billion in wealth to the former CEO of United Healthcare, and over \$100 million a month in compensation to senior executives in the largest health insurance companies: denying claims while collecting risk adjustment claims from your tax dollars and mine.

The simple solution to the Medicare Advantage problem is to kill off the program. It was just a Trojan horse to privatize Medicare, and its presence will make Medicare for All even harder to implement. At the same time, the 20 percent hole that the GOP insisted on for skin in the game with real Medicare needs to go, too.

A comprehensive Medicare for All program will eliminate both of these problems.

Thom Hartmann is a talk-show host and the author of *The Hidden History of Monopolies: How Big Business Destroyed the American Dream* (2020); *The Hidden History of the Supreme Court and the Betrayal of America* (2019); and more than 25 other books in print. Reprinted from *Common Dreams*.

## PASSING THROUGH

Sixty-nine no more

Seven decades I have endured

With some humor and some sorrow

Not fretting about tomorrow

I have seen a smile on a child

Nature in the wild

My taxes I have always filed

Leaving only eternity

To become a certainty

– James O’Kane

James O’Kane is a poet and Iowa Legislator Emeritus

# A NEW WATER SOURCE

E L L E N B R O W N

**L**ack of fresh water is now a global crisis. Water shortages mean food shortages, with hunger creating death tolls substantially exceeding those of the current Covid-19 crisis. According to the United Nations, some 800 million people are without clean water, and 40 percent of the world's population is impacted by drought. By one measure, almost 100 percent of the Western United States is currently in drought, setting an all-time 122-year record. Meanwhile, local "water wars" rage, with states, cities and whole countries battling each other for scarce water resources.

The ideal solution would be new water flows to add to the hydrologic cycle, and promising new scientific discoveries and technologies are holding out that possibility. But mainstream geologists have long contended that water is a fixed, non-renewable resource—and vested interests are happy to profit from that limiting proposition. Declaring water "the new oil," an investor class of "Water Barons"—including wealthy billionaire tycoons, megabanks, mega-funds and investment powerhouses—has cornered the market by buying up water rights and water infrastructure everywhere. As Jo-Shing Yang, author of *Solving Global Water Crises*, wrote in a 2012 article titled "The New 'Water Barons': Wall Street Mega-Banks are Buying up the World's Water":

"Facing offers of millions of dollars in cash from Goldman Sachs, JPMorgan Chase, Citigroup, UBS, and other elite banks for their utilities and other infrastructure and municipal services, cities and states will find it extremely difficult to refuse these privatization offers." For developing countries, the World Bank has in some cases made water privatization a condition of getting a loan.

## Competing Theories

Geologists say that all of the water on Earth, including the atmosphere, oceans, surface water and groundwater, participates in the natural system called the "hydrologic cycle," a closed circuit in which water

moves from the surface to the atmosphere and back again. Rainwater falls, becoming groundwater which collects in aquifers (underground layers of porous rock or sand), emerging as rivers and lakes, and evaporating into clouds to again become rain. New water called "juvenile water" may be added through volcanic activities, but this addition is considered to be negligible.

The most widely held theory is that water arrived on the planet from comets or asteroids, since any water on Earth when it was first formed would have evaporated in the intense heat of its early atmosphere. One problem with that theory is that comet water is different from Earth water. It has a higher ratio of deuterium ("heavy water" with an extra neutron in it). Asteroids, too, are not a good fit for Earth's water.

A more likely theory gaining new attention is that Earth's water comes largely from within. Minerals

containing hydrogen and oxygen outgas water vapor (H<sub>2</sub>O) under intense pressure and heat from the lower mantle (the layer between Earth's thin crust and its hot core). Water emerges as steam and seeps outward under the centrifugal force of the spinning earth toward the crust, where it cools and seeps up through the fractured rock formations of the crust and the upper mantle.

Studies over the past two decades have found evidence of several oceans' worth of water locked up in rock as far down as 1000 kilometers, challenging the assumption that water arrived from space after Earth's formation. A study reported in January 2017

based on isotopes from meteorites and the mantle found that water is unlikely to have arrived on icy comets after Earth formed.

Another study, reported in *New Scientist* the same month, showed that Earth's huge store of water may have originated via chemical reactions in the mantle rather than coming from space. The researchers ran a computer simulation of reactions between liquid hydrogen and quartz in Earth's upper mantle. The simulation showed that water forms within quartz escape so the pressure builds up to such high levels that it could induce deep earthquakes. Rather than hydrogen bonding into the quartz structure as the researchers expected, it was found to disrupt the structure by bonding with oxygen. When the rock melts under intense heat, the water is released, forming water-rich regions below Earth's surface. The researchers said that water formed in the mantle could reach the surface

**Water sovereignty  
is a critical  
prerequisite  
to food  
sovereignty  
and to national  
and regional  
independence.**

— Ellen Brown



in various ways — for example via magma in the form of volcanic activity — and that water could still be being created deep inside the Earth today. If so, that means water is a renewable resource.

### New Technological Solutions

The challenge is drawing this deep water to the surface, but there are many verified cases of mountaintop wells that have gushed water for decades in arid lands. This water, which could not have come from the rainwater of the conventional hydrologic cycle, is variously called “deep-seated,” “juvenile” or “primary” water. It is now being located and tapped by enterprising hydrogeologists using technological innovations like those used in other extractive industries — but without their destructive impact on the environment.

According to Mark Burr, CEO of Primary Water Technologies, these innovations include mapping techniques using GIS layering and 3-D modeling, satellite imagery and other sophisticated geophysical data collection; radiometrics, passive seismics, advanced resistivity and even quantum physics.

Burr comments that locating “primary water” does not require drilling down thousands of feet. He says that globally, thousands of primary water wells have been successfully drilled; and for most of them, flowing water was tapped at less than 400 feet. It is forced up from below through fissures in the Earth. What is new are the innovative technologies now being used to pinpoint where those fissures are.

The developments, he says, mirror those in the U.S. oil and gas industry, which went from cries of “Peak Oil” deficiency to an oil and gas glut in less than a decade. Dominated for 40 years by a foreign OPEC cartel, the oil industry was disrupted through a combination of scientific advancements (including recognition of abiotic oil and gas formations), technological innovation, and regulatory modernization. The same transformation is under way in water exploration and production.

### Water Pioneers

These developments were pioneered in the U.S. by Burr’s mentors, led by Bavarian-born mining engineer and geologist Stephen Riess of San Diego. Riess drilled over 800 wells around the world before his death in 1985 and was featured in several books, including *New Water for a Thirsty World* (1960) by Dr. Michael Salzman, professor of economics at the University of Southern California.

Partnering with Riess until his death was Hungarian-born hydrogeologist Pal Pauer, founder of the Primary Water Institute based in Ojai, California. Pauer has also successfully located and drilled over 1,000 primary water wells worldwide, including over 500 in East Africa. One noteworthy well was drilled high on the top of a mountain in Kenya at Ngu-Nyumu. The workers drilled through rock and hit water at 300 feet, pumping at 15-30 gallons per minute. The flow, which is now being captured in a water tank, is still serving hundreds of villagers who were previously hauling water from heavily infested streams in jugs balanced on their heads.

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Another remarkable mountaintop project overseen by Pauer involved two wells drilled at a 6,000 foot elevation in the Tehachapi Mountains in California. The drill first hit water at 35 feet. The 7-inch diameter borehole proceeded to eject water at a rate estimated to be over 800 gallons per minute.

Like California, Australia is an arid land with chronic water problems. An Australian company called Sustainable Water Solutions (SWS), a partner of Burr's Primary Water Technologies, was featured on a local TV news program.

A rival company is Australian-based AquaterreX Deep Seated Water Technology. According to its website, AquaterreX is an international enterprise employing geology, environmental and earth sciences with a range of proprietary methodologies to identify and analyze geologic, hydrologic, atmospheric, and other data to locate reliable sources of Deep Seated Water with nearly 100% accuracy. Some of the company's results describe "deep-seated water" as being stored in a deeper layer of aquifers below those of the conventional hydrologic cycle.

### **Fresh Water Is Ubiquitous and Renewable**

What these researchers call "primary water" or "deep seated water" is classified by the National Ground Water Association (NGWA) simply as a form of "groundwater," since it is in the ground. But whatever it is called, these newly tapped flows have not been part of the hydrologic cycle for at least the last century. This is shown on testing by the lack of the environmental contaminants found in the hydrologic water cycle. From the time when atomic testing began in the Pacific, hydrologic water has contained traces of tritium, a radioactive isotope of hydrogen used as a fuel in thermonuclear bombs. Primary water shoots up tritium-free---clean, fresh and usually drinkable without filtration

The latest NGWA fact sheet explicitly confirms that water is a renewable resource. It states:

- About 90 percent of our freshwater supplies lie underground, but less than 27 percent of the water Americans use comes from underground sources, which illustrates the under-utilization of ground water.
- Groundwater is a significant water supply source — the amount of groundwater storage dwarfs our present surface water supply.
- Hydrologists estimate, according to the National Geographic Society, U.S. groundwater reserves to be at least 33,000 trillion gallons — equal to the amount discharged into the Gulf of Mexico by the Mississippi River in the past 200 years.
- At any given moment, groundwater is 20 to 30 times greater than the amount in all the lakes, streams, and rivers of the United States....
- *Groundwater is a renewable resource.*

Based on the NGWA's figures, AquaterreX CEO James D'Arezzo, writing in July 2021, estimates that *the Earth has enough water to supply consumption needs for 6,000 years at today's rates of use.*

### **Maximizing Public Funds While Avoiding Territorial Disputes**

If primary water is ubiquitous and the techniques for locating it are available, why aren't policymakers pursuing that alternative already? Burr says one major problem lies in regulation. Because all groundwater has been considered a derivative of rainfall, public policy has generally focused on restricting water usage or moving massive amounts of water from wet areas to dry areas, without considering deep drilling as an alternative. Water is considered a limited, non-renewable resource, so new wells are thought to infringe on the water rights of neighboring properties. But "primary water" can be tapped without causing subsidence (the gradual caving or sinking of nearby land), showing that it is independent of the existing hydrologic cycle.

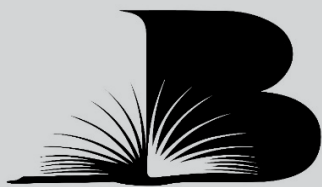
In some states, such as Texas, property owners have the right to capture the water beneath their property (called the "Rule of Capture"), but this is not true in other states. California, for example, has a complicated system of regulation requiring costly and laborious permits. Granting property-owners the right to drill wells on their own property, particularly where the water has been tested and shown to be "deep" or "primary water," could be a major step toward turning water scarcity into abundance.

According to the American Society of Civil Engineers, the U.S. needs over \$500 billion in infrastructure investment just for drinking water, wastewater, stormwater, and dams. But legislators at both federal and state levels have been slow to respond, chiefly due to budget constraints. One proposal is a National Infrastructure Bank (HR 3339) constructed on the model of Franklin Roosevelt's Reconstruction Finance Corporation. When allocating funds for water usage, however, policymakers would do well to consider investing in "primary water" wells.

Tapping into local deep water sources not only can help ease pressures on debt-strapped public treasuries but can bypass the Water Barons and relieve territorial tensions over water rights. Water sovereignty is a critical prerequisite to food sovereignty and to national and regional independence. As noted in a recent Water Today article, quoting James D'Arezzo:

"The fact is, we do not have to severely restrict water usage, if we leverage all the tools at our disposal. There is plenty of water available on the planet and we now know how to find it. We also have newer best practices that can make a dramatic difference in total usage...If we start acting now, in a short time the headlines about 'water restrictions' and grotesque pictures of dead animals and starving children can be replaced with headlines about more food production, smarter use of water and less conflict."

Ellen Brown is a regular contributor to AMASS Magazine and ScheerPost. She is the founder of the Public Banking Institute and author of thirteen books, including *Web of Debt*, a bestseller. Her latest book is *Banking on the People*. [EllenBrown.com](http://EllenBrown.com).



# ABOUT BEYOND BAROQUE

Beyond Baroque Literary Arts Center is one of the nation's most successful and influential grassroots incubators of literary art. Founded in 1968, and housed in the original Venice City Hall building in Venice, California, it is a nonprofit public space dedicated to cultivating new writing and expanding the public's knowledge of poetry, fiction, literature, and art through cultural events and community interaction. The Center offers a diverse variety of liter-ary and arts programming, including readings, workshops, art exhibits, and education. The Center also houses a bookstore with the largest collection of new poetry books on the west side of Los Angeles; the Mike Kelley Gallery, which specializes in text and language-focused visual art; and a 50,000 vol-ume archive of small press and limited-edition publications that chronicles the history of poetry movements in Los Angeles and beyond.

Few literary spaces have done more to cultivate innovative art from cultural outsiders, or to shape emerging artistic movements. Across five decades Be-yond Baroque has nurtured the Venice Beats, cradled the Los Angeles punk scene, and provided crucial support to a series of seminal experimental writ-ers and artists that include Dennis Cooper, Wanda Coleman, Mike Kelley, and Will Alexander.

It's legendary free workshops have profoundly shaped Los Angeles literature by helping to launch a number of influential careers, including those of Kate Braverman, Tom Waits, Leland Hickman, Bob Flanagan, Eloise Klein Healy, David Trinidad, Jim Krusoe, Exene Cervenkova, Amy Gerstler, Paul Vange-listi, Michael Ondaatje, Harry Northup, Brendan Constantine, Jenny Factor, and Sarah Maclay.

It's reading and performance series have exposed L.A. audiences to some of the world's most notable writers and artists, often at early stages in their ca-reers, including Allen Ginsberg, Amiri Baraka, Raymond Carver, X, Patti Smith, Viggo Mortensen, Paul Auster, Chris Kraus, Eileen Myles, Luis J. Ro-driguez, Dana Gioia, Hector Tobar, David St. John, Robin Coste Lewis, and Maggie Nelson.

Today the Center continues to provide a vital cultural forum through it's free workshops, reading series, youth programming, and artistic gatherings.

## **Beyond Baroque's Mission**

Beyond Baroque's mission is to encourage the writing, reading, publication, dissemination, and preservation of contemporary literature through program-ming, education, archiving, and services in literature and the arts.

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# THE MYTH OF GREEN CAPITALISM

KATHARINA PISTOR

**H**eat waves, floods, droughts, and wildfires are devastating communities around the world, and they will only grow more severe. While climate-change deniers remain powerful, the need for urgent action is now recognized well beyond activist circles. Governments, international organizations, and even business and finance are bowing to the inevitable – or so it seems.

In fact, the world has wasted decades tinkering with carbon trading and “green” financial labeling schemes, and the current vogue is merely to devise fancy hedging strategies (“carbon offsets”) in defiance of the simple fact that humanity is sitting in the same boat. “Offsetting” may serve individual asset holders, but it will do little to avert the climate disaster that awaits us all.

The private sector’s embrace of “green capitalism” appears to be yet another gimmick to avoid a real reckoning. If business and finance leaders were serious, they would recognize the need to change course drastically to ensure that this planet remains hospitable for all of humanity now and in the future. This is not about substituting brown assets for green ones, but about sharing the losses that brown capitalism has imposed on millions and ensuring a future even for the most vulnerable.

The notion of green capitalism implies that the costs of addressing climate change are too high for governments to shoulder on their own, and that the private sector always has better answers. So, for advocates of green capitalism, public-private partnership will ensure that the transition from brown to green capitalism will be cost-neutral. Efficiently priced investments in new technologies supposedly will prevent humanity from stepping over into the abyss.

But this sounds too good to be true, because it is. Capitalism’s DNA makes it unfit to cope with the fallout from climate change, which in no small part is the product of capitalism itself. The entire capitalist system is premised

on the privatization of gains and the socialization of losses – not in any nefarious fashion, but with the blessing of the law.

The law offers licenses to externalize the costs of despoiling the planet to anybody who is smart enough to establish a trust or corporate entity before generating pollution. It encourages the off-loading of accrued environmental liabilities through restructuring in bankruptcy. And it holds entire countries hostage to international rules that privilege the protection of foreign investors’ returns over their own people’s welfare. Several countries have already been sued by foreign companies under the Energy Charter Treaty for trying to curb their carbon dioxide emissions.

Two-thirds of total emissions since the Industrial Revolution have come from just 90 corporations. Yet even if the managers of the world’s worst polluters were willing

to pursue rapid decarbonization, their shareholders would resist. For decades, the gospel of shareholder value maximization has reigned supreme, and managers have known that if they deviate from the orthodoxy, they will be sued for violating their fiduciary duties.

No wonder Big Business and Big Finance now advocate climate disclosures as a way out. The message is that shareholders, not managers, must spur the necessary behavioral change; solutions must be found through the price mechanism, not through science-based policies. Left unanswered is the question of why investors with an easy exit option and plenty of hedging opportunities

should care about the disclosure of future harm to some companies in their portfolio.

There is obviously a need for more drastic changes, such as carbon taxes, permanent moratoria on extracting natural resources, and so forth. These policies are often dismissed as mechanisms that would distort markets, and yet they idealize markets that don’t exist in the real world. After all, governments have lavishly subsidized fossil-fuel industries for decades, spending \$5.5 trillion (both pre- and post-tax), or 6.8% of global GDP, in 2017. And should fossil-fuel companies ever run out of profits to offset these tax breaks, they can simply sell themselves to a more profitable company, thereby rewarding their shareholders for their loyalty. The script for these strategies has long been written in the law of mergers and acquisitions.

But the mother of all subsidies is the centuries-old process of legally encoding capital through property,

**“Offsetting”  
may serve  
individual  
asset holders,  
but it will do little  
to avert the  
climate disaster that  
awaits us all.**

– Katharina Pistor



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corporate, trust, and bankruptcy law. It is law, not markets or firms, that protects the owners of capital assets even as they saddle others with enormous liabilities.

Advocates of green capitalism are hoping to continue this game. That is why they are now lobbying governments to subsidize asset substitution, so that as the price of brown assets declines, the price of green ones will rise to compensate the asset holders. Again, this is what capitalism is all about. Whether it represents the best strategy for ensuring the planet's habitability is an entirely different question.

Instead of tackling such questions, governments and regulators have once again succumbed to the siren song of market-friendly mechanisms. The new consensus focuses on financial disclosure because that path promises change without having to deliver it. (It also happens to generate employment for entire industries of accountants, lawyers, and business consultants with powerful lobbying arms of their own.)

Not surprisingly, the result has been a wave of greenwashing. The financial industry has happily poured trillions of dollars into green-labeled assets that turned out not to be green at all. According to a recent study, 71% of ESG-themed funds (supposedly reflecting environmental, social, or governance criteria) are negatively aligned with the goals of the Paris climate agreement.

We are running out of time for such experiments. If greening the economy was really the goal, the first step would be to eliminate all direct subsidies and tax subsidies for brown capitalism and mandate a halt to carbon "proliferation." Governments should also place a moratorium on shielding polluters, their owners, and investors from liability for environmental damages. Incidentally, these

moves would also remove some of the worst market distortions around.

Katharina Pistor writes for *Project Syndicate* and other publications.



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# ENDLESS ENEMIES AND THE PERMANENT WAR ECONOMY

J O H N O ' K A N E

**P**resident Biden took a predictable hit on the Afghan crisis, but the war's flawed beginnings and mis-guided execution were caused by many of his current critics who were pitchmen for deepening our involvement. This fiasco lasted twenty years because all presidents and power players were vested in this atrocity, willing to cover up its failure with deceptions and bureaucratic lies, insulating Americans from casualties in order to continue the war indefinitely.

Ross Douhat contends that this failure has been known for some time, its irredeemable nature especially evident during the early Obama years when a decent political settlement couldn't be reached despite the troop surge; when our forces "blunted but did not reverse the Taliban's recovery." And subsequent efforts were devoted to merely managing stalemate versus pursuing victory ("Joe Biden's Critics Lost Afghanistan," *NYTimes*, 8/31/21).

The targeting of the Obama years is telling not only because of the surge. Mr. Obama received the Nobel Peace Prize as he entered office, giving him the defaulted moniker as the "Peace President." His acceptance speech mimicked the reasons the committee gave for granting him the prize. It voted to affirm his *desire* to achieve peace, likely swayed by the impact of his pre-election speeches, masterful pieces of rhetoric against war (and against neoliberalism as well, though effectively nullified after the election). The speech itself then was an embarrassing justification for the potential of war to produce peace. If the committee had voted after his decision to boot up the Afghan War, he would probably have gotten the prize anyway since the war's material subsidies indentured a host of players and interests and bolstered support for it. So, the rhetoric of the speech and the decision soon after to expand the

war, mesh efficiently into a saleable message that nicely smooths over an embarrassing contradiction.

The power players know it's a contradiction and their role, realized through their media influence, is too make the peace-though-war message seem uncontradictory, convince citizens who have little interest in foreign policy anyway (they typically defer to elites), to accept this as natural. Their endless repetition of this message through official venues converts falsity into "truth." An effect of this overkill is the cultivation of support for a permanent war economy, not just the hot war of the moment. We're told over and over that achieving peace is a long-term, tasking endeavor, requiring many sacrifices. And of course, it helps to say that our goal is to bring democracy to the targeted land, even rebuild its institutions. This sweetens the pot, driving home to citizens that our institutions are credible so they will overlook our democracy's flaws and become more patriotic. Patriotism of a certain kind, one that commands conformity to scripts, securing the kind of deference and support that gives the power players a free hand.

**The Soviets became  
our enemy  
immediately after WWII,  
their territorial grab  
and acquisition  
of nuclear weapons  
threats too  
difficult to ignore.**

— John O'Kane

George Orwell demonstrated how this works in *1984*, published in 1948 (the title an inversion of this date), the very moment when the Cold War military buildup began in earnest. In its society three empires control the globe, each roughly corresponding to the post-WWII power blocs. They are perpetually at war. In fact, no one living in this society can remember when war began. Their lives have only known hostilities with another empire. The telescreens repeat ad nauseam the positive results of the current campaign, presenting little else (on domestic issues only lies about increased output and the expanded production of desirable goods), and emphasizing

the light-at-the-end-of-the tunnel delusion. Suddenly, during the telescreen's babble, announcements assault viewers with the news that the society is now at war with the other empire (through alleged transgressions on their part), and that they've conquered the previous one. To supplement this barrage, it requires attendance at the daily "five minutes of hate" performances where the fictitious reasons why the current enemy deserves to be labeled evil are belabored. And Orwell makes clear that one of the major purposes of this attention to war and focus on external issues is to deflect from the already quite starved domestic agenda (the lower Party members and workers

## AT LAST

As cats nap and space expands like a child  
skipping thru a dream of endless summer.  
As I type this. As this technology compulsively divides,  
replicates and selects.  
As artificial intelligence is and there is no it there.  
As the dinosaurs died for our sins.  
As money grows on trees screaming fire in a crowded theatre.  
As the homeless seek shelter from the hard rain.  
As waters rise to meet thirsty deserts marching to the sea.  
As war invents war.  
As history repeats itself into reality.  
As strength in numbers fails to pull its weight across the finish.  
As we roll snake eyes to close the book on an illiterate future.  
As Christ climbs down irradiated.  
As Buddha awakens astonished.  
As Mohammed becomes the mountain moved.  
As humanity retreats into time before begin.  
As all is all and nothing, this old world  
shall abide and sing.

– S.A. Griffin

S.A. Griffin is the author of *Dreams Gone Mad with Hope* and co-editor of *The Outlaw Bible of American Poetry*.



live as virtual slaves).

This kind of conditioning doesn't happen here--the sources for his allegory were the authoritarian systems of Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia. Here we're conditioned indirectly, subliminally (subliminal seduction, to borrow a concept from the advertising world), to hate the enemies of the moment, the rogue nations, "terrorists" we don't negotiate with, the full axis of evil, and to make firm distinctions between us and them, the good guys and the bad guys. These messages circulate via a variety of discourses, some less than five minutes, in news blurbs justifying the conflict of the moment in defense of the freedom to protect the country; military ads that hype the warrior mystique; blips from "journalists" who casually label countries, like Russia and China, our enemies; "reports" from retired Generals who vigorously drive home the necessity for increased funding for the Pentagon because it's a dangerous world out there with many enemies jealous of our success, etc.

There are also those longer than five minutes. Like action-adventure movies that sell the need for violence against perpetually threatening enemies from chaotic territories and failed states, giving authority for superheroes to invade their land and assassinate bad actors or rescue victims; displays of weaponry at public events, like flyovers at football games; the hosting of sports spectacles from war-torn sites; "support our troops" media segments, the message often transferred to target bodies through symbols (driving home the propagandistic choice of either/or).

Few direct lectures needed, though hawkish think tanks thrive on badgering us.

The effects from this assault compound over time, get lodged in our subconscious, ready to erupt from a random trigger and present a simple option to support military ventures (like being driven inexplicably to buy a car you never thought you wanted). As a result, we don't see how the enemy-matrix is fabricated, the extent to which we also create the dangerous world with our imperial overreach. Chalmers Johnson dredges up the consequences of this fabrication and overreach in his book *Blowback*, published before 9/11 but sagely predicting it. Our greater presence in more and more foreign lands spawns the enemies we must then confront since these ventures are mere momentary forays to maintain the empire---perpetuate the permanent war economy---that recklessly disturb their cultural traditions, fracturing the occupations. The havoc from these interventions establishes the need for shifting loyalties among the players, requiring often that we join forces with our enemies. And it often converts our friends into enemies.

One of the major effects of our mammoth investment in foreign affairs that has produced the permanent war economy is, like in Orwell's fiction, the screening of attention away from the domestic issues that matter to many citizens, preventing the investments that can preserve and strengthen the middle class and make progress in eradicating the underclass. These deficits accrue from the moment the Cold War intensifies through

the next several decades to current times, though the truly damaging years are those after the rise of neoliberalism in the early 1970s. Its mandate to leave the fate of the mass of ordinary citizens to market mechanisms, its cultural blindness to the immoral effects this new material regime produced, compounded the detrimental trade-off between foreign and domestic spending. How and why was all that money passed to the military and private contractors when so many citizens had yet to be absorbed into society; yet to achieve the American Dream? Especially in the immediate post-WWII years when we were struggling to recover from the war's deficits. Even the highly productive 1960s felt the squeeze from the massive outlays for Vietnam. The neoliberal era ushers in a system that expands the numbers of excluded, constructing inequality as a normal facet of society that increases down through the years to current times.

And when the war drums sound, most Americans unwittingly---and even willingly---sacrifice for the cause, defer to the experts on foreign affairs and the Pentagon that hype the current conflict to secure support.

Since inheriting the role of imperial cop from the UK after WWII, all our wars have been offensive ones, about maintaining and expanding our inheritance. As the inheritor, ever protective of property rights, we've exercised our prerogative to intervene when and where necessary to justify them. We've justified this behavior with the idea that we're exceptional. The rules and regulations that bind others don't apply to us. We're a special nation driven by God's directives. We don't start wars, we finish them. And we use violence only as a last resort. The exports of our professed ideals were packaged with power trips to keep the empire viable, and this provoked resistance and even vengeance as we became more deeply involved in the affairs of other countries, requiring ever more intervention. The Soviets became our enemy immediately after WWII, their territorial grab and acquisition of nuclear weapons threats too difficult to ignore. But the Cold War brought a polarized world and the imperative to defeat them at any cost. This often involved the toppling of democratic regimes and their replacement with those to help build a support network. The resulting string of wars were proxies, and unwinnable since we couldn't confront the Soviets directly for fear of nuclear annihilation.

The Soviets were a definite threat, vowing to bury us economically and militarily. And early on we didn't see that their economic challenge to capitalism was very weak when stacked against their framers' goals and the people's expectations. But our anti-communism had a pathological side which blinded us from fully understanding their system. SDS's "Port Huron Statement," written in 1961, pointed to this overreaction on the part of their parent's generation, proffering the more realistic and potentially more workable perspective of "anti-anti-communism" to free up debate. What unhinged us was their nominal intent to structure equality through state-directed measures and improve their citizens' life chances from outside of the market mechanism. We didn't know then that this led to unfair leveling and restrictions on freedom, bolstering



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the elites at the expense of the masses, and hastening the country's decline. We couldn't see either that however flawed this was, at least their experiment tackled the structural problems that have plagued capitalism.

We sympathize with the plight of ordinary citizens but defer to individuals to make it happen with assistance from the invisible hand. They're encouraged to move on and beyond themselves and achieve more equality than their neighbors. But our blindness to the social structuring accomplished through our state-supported performance of the market secured the problems that have plagued capitalism.

The source of this pathology was the 1917 Soviet revolution, an event so unsettling to the elite that they proceeded to reorganize domestic society. This "Red Scare" permeated social and everyday life. It was as if the elite needed to extinguish any symptoms of liberalism, however weak, as a bulwark against a potential invasion of alien ideas, especially collectivist ones. They seemed to feel our citizens would be seduced by this new ideology and proceeded to clean house, bust the unions, persecute random liberals for being communists, and instill a culture of fear into the populace so few would dare to speak out. The chilling effect on free speech did much damage to our democratic institutions as John Dos Passos recorded in his *USA* trilogy, demonstrating how an overreaction to communism can seed strains of fascism.

The Soviet conversion to enemy status after WWII led to the repetition of these tendencies after the

social-democratic hiatus of the 1930s, and this "Red Scare" redux led to greater outlays for the military and greater damage to the home front. We crusaded forward and compounded our stockpile of weapons, vesting our future in a destructive trajectory despite President Eisenhower's late 1950s warning about the "military industrial complex," which was hardly heeded. The colossal amount of interest alone on the war debts have made his speech seem like an "investment strategy for Wall Street and American corporations" (Jeffrey St. Clair, "Taxing Representations," *CounterPunch*, 9/17/21).

Senator Joe McCarthy's hunt for commie witches successfully buffeted this dangerous course earlier in the decade, selling the idea that we must get them before their aggressions begin to topple the "free," capitalist nations like falling dominoes. But once the outlays for the military spike further in the early-to-mid 1960s due to the Vietnam War, this ascendant narrative gets modified. LBJ's obsession to expand that war along with spending for his domestic program---the "Great Society"---contributed to a stag-flationary economy.

But it wasn't just the spending on the military to the detriment of the domestic agenda that so negatively impacted the society during this stretch of time. The colossal disruption and polarization of the 1960s were spawned by the antiwar movement and its extension into the gamut of social justice issues, and the human costs were immeasurable. And despite the decades' many progressive gains, its dystopian underbelly provoked a reactionary backlash in the 1970s that helped firm up support for

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militarist solutions.

Norman Mailer zeroed in on the core of this anti-communism pathology in *Armies of the Night*, his memoir of the March on the Pentagon in October 1967. Waffling on the issue of whether to support the protestors, whom he mostly characterized as weekend liberals, and whether the war was even justified, his almost accidental participation in the event finally brought some clarity. He concluded that we should stop the war because it was unwinnable; the expended resources would likely bankrupt us; communism may be the best solution for certain types of societies, and the best option was to let them work out the kinks themselves (his words were directed to the larger issue of communism's viability as well, not just Vietnam). He believed that the existing communist systems might evolve into some hybrid that we were incapable of imagining at that moment, and it might very well be superior.

The Vietnam War would not have existed without the anti-communism fervor. It was a proxy war against the Soviet Union and China, as was the earlier Korean War. And like with the Soviet Union, Vietnam's ally status flipped quickly to that of dreaded enemy. Ho Chi Minh helped us defeat Japan in WWII, but he proved dispensable once the war ended. We took the weapons in the possession of the Japanese and transferred them to the French, giving them the means to re-colonize Vietnam (the Japanese and the French had traded off ownership of the country for years before WWII). When its neighbor, China, went Communist in 1949 we saw more dominoes falling and falsely assumed Ho was their natural ally, along with the Soviets. But it turned out that he was primarily a nationalist, resisting links to the international network. So, when he defeated the French in 1954 and we replaced them, he fought viciously.

Any moral imperative we possessed when entering Vietnam vaporized from our extended occupation that ended in defeat. It effectively turned many patriots into skeptics. The atrocities, the masses of civilians killed to prop up an undemocratic regime, the racism towards the Vietnamese, the negative impact on the home front from the mammoth transfer of resources away from needed programs (the effective start of the fraying of the safety net), and from the war-debt spiral that helped tank the economy and inaugurate the long march against the middle class, all of this trashed a generation's hopes in search of the American Dream.

If in the hiatus after our exit from Vietnam we had some sense of shame, that soon changed. The movie mythology soon kicked in. Rambo's were everywhere, refusing to surrender and selling patriotism like snake oil. It was supported by the real-life ascendance of the new right that catalyzed Ronald Reagan's victory in 1980, the weapons industries securing their interests through lobbyists, and pressure from Fundamentalists vowing to usurp the high moral ground against all heathens.

In the 1979 Iran hostage crisis we encountered the enemies of the future. Iran's youth wouldn't forget 1953 when we toppled their democratically elected president, replacing their Islamic State with a puppet

regime that endorsed the Western values of consumerism and "democracy." These activists succeeded in reviving the Islamic State and deepening the resistance to foreign occupation. Ironically this success came at a price. The extended hostage crisis helped sink Carter's re-election bid, paving the way for Reagan who cleverly forged a backroom deal to negotiate the end of the crisis after he was elected.

Ensnared in office, Reagan's revisionist attitude toward the Vietnam War reigned supreme. He blamed the media and a tepid bureaucracy for "losing" the war and proposed a stiffened approach to enemies new and old. This attitude invested subsequent events. He got big increases for the military in a final push to bring the Soviet empire to its knees while radically reducing taxes on the rich, which sent the country into an austerity tailspin. This succeeded---the Soviet Union was dismantled in 1991---though as we learned later it was already nearly broken, unable to afford both guns and butter.

This aggressive posture also led to involvement in the Soviet's war against the Afghans in the 1980s, by proxy, where we supported Osama Bin Laden's "freedom fighters." Once the Afghans succeeded, we spurned our ally and he felt betrayed. He made use of the material and knowledge we left there to strengthen Al Qaeda and planted the seeds for a strain of radical Islam---a new kind of terrorism---to thrive during the post-Cold War era when the bombings of Western sites began (many of them on our soil).

George Bush Senior's Iraq War 1 brazenly operationalized his predecessor's posture. It was a brief but not fully resolved conflict which placed many Americans on Islamic soil, a violation that compounded the ire of Al Qaeda, and contributed to the violence throughout the decade, not to mention the expanding pool of "terrorists." The real tragedy of this war was that it was essentially about oil. It was executed to build an alliance that would best secure the area's oil reserves and succeed in reversing Iraq's nationalization of the oil industry in the early 1970s.

Bill Clinton, elected just after Iraq War 1, took the baton from his predecessor and continued the permanent war economy. This was also tragic since he inherited a great opportunity for change with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. We were suddenly free from having to methodically produce piles of unnecessary weapons at such great expense to the public welfare. But we'd demonstrated, in Francis Fukuyama's infamous verbiage from the era ("The End of History and the Last Man"---1992), that our mix of capitalism and democracy was superior, and we were ready to remap societies in our image. So, the military budget barely changed. Clinton said we needed a strong military to maintain security around the bases where our companies were doing business.

Inheriting massive budget deficits from Reagan and Bush, he became a deficit hawk, responding to their effects and not the causes. The new enemies were such a big threat to our freedom that we had to redefine "welfare" to help balance the budget. AFDC, the welfare program consecrated in the New Deal, was trashed mid-decade for TANF, a new law that eliminated entitlement and the

years benefits could be collected, basically redefining the concept of welfare as a punitive one, blaming individuals for their plight. Yet there was no attention to corporate welfare, or the dismantling of the progressive tax system in the Reagan years that freed up millions to the rich and shifted the relative tax burden onto the lower and middle classes, monies that when combined with the gargantuan outlays for weapons to beat the Soviets required considerable sacrifices on the domestic front.

Meanwhile, pumped up by Fukuyama's imperative to remap societies in our image, Clinton's actions become wildly irresponsible. He gave the order to bomb a pharmaceutical plant in Sudan, claiming to mistake the site for a chemical weapons factory. This was adorned with an apology not unlike what we made recently when our drone strike in Afghanistan targeted the wrong people. Not exactly actions deterring Al Qaeda recruitment.

The wrath of our new enemies was already raging, if not immediately obvious, when George Bush II enters office, his arrogance toward foreign countries and hostility toward the Islamic nations aggravating this condition and likely a catalyst for 9/11. The ruins from this event were still smoldering when the Treasury transferred monies to corporations, many of which were not even directly impacted economically; when legislators--mostly Republicans---demanded tax cuts to counter the coming downturn. Bush did get his tax cuts, one in 2003 and another in 2006, during the very stretch when more monies were needed to fund the two wars, a shortfall covered with raids on the Social Security fund.

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Obama entered office when the financial crisis hit, and he also inherited a massive deficit from Bush. But he mostly repeated Bush's script, bolstering the military, bailing out banks and corporations---many again that weren't directly impacted---while being frugal when it came to addressing the plight of real victims, like those suffering from the foreclosure crisis (his administration failed to prosecute the real perpetrators of the crisis). He reneged on his promise to restore progressivity to the tax code and reverse the Bush tax cuts, an amount of savings that would've wiped out the deficit.

The "Peace President" continued the War at Home and pumped up the permanent war economy...

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# AFGHANISTAN

# THE FOLLY OF THE

# AFGHANISTAN WAR

## RYAN GRIM

**O**n the afternoon of October 9, 2009, President Barack Obama met with his top generals, Cabinet officials, and his vice president to hash out strategy for the war in Afghanistan. Earlier that morning, Obama learned he'd been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. The war in Afghanistan was now eight years old, and Obama had campaigned on the idea that the Bush administration's effort there had been headed in the wrong direction.

Gens. Stanley McChrystal and David Petraeus, along with much of the military brass, were pushing for a troop increase of 40,000 to 85,000 in Afghanistan. Doing so would allow for a counterinsurgency strategy, they claimed, and would give the Americans time to recruit and train a larger Afghan national army and police force. The pivotal meeting is captured in Bob Woodward's 2010 book *Obama's Wars*.

Advocates for an expanded war found their most nettlesome opponent in Joe Biden.

"As I hear what you're saying, as I read your report, you're saying that we have about a year," Biden said to McChrystal. "And that our success relies upon having a reliable, a strong partner in governance to make this work?"

McChrystal said yes, that was the case. Biden turned to Karl Eikenberry, a former general who was now ambassador to Afghanistan. "In your estimation, can we, can that be achieved in the next year?"

Eikenberry told Biden no, it was not possible, because there was no strong, reliable partner in Afghanistan. Eikenberry followed with a pessimistic 10-minute assessment of the situation and pinpointed another logical failure that would manifest itself more than a decade later. "We talk about clear, hold and build, but we actually must include transfer into this," Eikenberry said, adding that to eventually withdraw, the transfer was key.

Eikenberry said he "would challenge [the] assumption" that the U.S. and the Afghan government were even aligned. "Right now, we're dealing with an extraordinarily corrupt government," he said.

Petraeus, when he spoke, acknowledged what had become obvious. "I understand the government is a criminal syndicate," he said. "But we need to help achieve and improve security and, as noted, regain the initiative and turn some recent tactical gains into operational momentum," Petraeus said, adding that he "strongly agreed" with McChrystal's pitch for a larger force.

Biden cut in: "If the government's a criminal syndicate a year from now, how will troops make a difference?" he asked.

Biden was getting at something fundamental: Did anybody believe what the generals were proposing was actually possible? Biden's questions were largely ignored by the war planners, but the conversation held in that meeting makes clear that the answer was readily available by 2009: It was not possible and would collapse quickly once U.S. support was withdrawn. Instead of following Biden's lead, the Obama administration allowed the carnage to drag on fruitlessly for another 12 years.

Woodward's next lines are the most telling: "No one recorded an answer in their notes. Biden was swinging hard at McChrystal, [Defense Secretary Bob] Gates and Petraeus."

**Biden pressed on.  
"What's the best-guess  
estimate for getting  
things headed in the  
right direction?  
If a year from now  
there is no demonstrable  
progress in governance,  
what do we do?"**

— Ryan Grim

Biden pressed on. "What's the best-guess estimate for getting things headed in the right direction? If a year from now there is no demonstrable progress in governance, what do we do?"

Again, no answer.

Again, Biden asked: "If the government doesn't improve and if you get the troops, in a year, what would be the impact?"

Finally, Eikenberry responded. "The past five years are not heartening," he said, "but there are pockets of progress. We can build on those." In the next

six to 12 months, he added, "We shouldn't expect significant breakthroughs."

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, meanwhile, said that the dilemma was whether to focus on adding troops or better governance. "But not putting troops in guarantees we won't achieve what we're after and guarantees no psychological momentum. Preventing collapse requires more troops, but that doesn't guarantee progress." She added, "The only way to get governance changes is to add troops, but there's still no guarantee that it will work."

Richard Holbrooke, special envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, chimed in with a reality that was largely kept from the U.S. public. "Our presence is the corrupting

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force,” Holbrooke said. Woodward then paraphrased his explanation: “All the contractors for development projects pay the Taliban for protection and use of roads, so American and coalition dollars help finance the Taliban. And with more development, higher traffic on roads, and more troops, the Taliban would make more money.”

He added that the numbers were all fake, noting that he had sent staff to investigate the claims being made by contractors that they had trained a massive number of Afghan police. About 80 percent of the force was illiterate, he said, drug addiction was common, and that was for the police officers who actually existed. Many, he said, were “ghosts” who got paychecks but never showed up.

He said that with a 25 percent attrition rate, McChrystal’s projections for the growth of Afghan forces was mathematically impossible. “It’s like pouring water into a bucket with a hole in it,” Holbrooke said.

Holbrooke’s argument is largely paraphrased by Woodward because, known as somebody willing to speak uncomfortable truths in high-level meetings, he was somebody the other officials had simply begun to ignore. Wrote Woodward: “Several note takers had learned to do the same thing when Holbrooke embarked on his discourse. They set down their pens and relaxed their tired fingers. The big personality had lost its sheen. He was not connecting with Obama.”

Biden’s summation, said Woodward, returned to the theme that the project was doomed due to the failure to have built a real Afghan government. Obama thanked his advisers for getting him closer to a decision. On December 1st he announced publicly he’d be surging 40,000 new troops into Afghanistan, while preparing for an exit. The surge came, but it was left to Biden to finally lead the way out.

Ryan Grim is managing editor of *The Intercept*.

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# PENTAGON BUDGET WAYS TO CUT THE PENTAGON BUDGET NATIONAL PRIORITIES PROJECT

**T**oday the Congressional Budget Office released a new report, "Illustrative Options for National Defense Under a Smaller Defense Budget," that outlines three different options for cutting funding for the Department of Defense by \$1 trillion, or 14 percent, over the next ten years.

The report makes clear that the United States has options for reducing spending on the Pentagon—without sacrificing security. It outlines three different options for how the United States could reallocate Pentagon resources to meet the current military strategy for less.

"The U.S. military budget is now higher than it was at the peak of the Vietnam War, the Korean War, or the Cold War. This report shows that there are viable options for immediate, substantial reductions to

the Pentagon budget," said Lindsay Koshgarian, Program Director of the National Priorities Project at the Institute for Policy Studies. "We are spending far too much on the Pentagon, and too little on everything else. Facing a pandemic that is not yet over, decades of growing economic inequality, unaddressed systemic racism, and a climate crisis, the U.S. is in desperate need of reinvestment for true security," said Koshgarian.

The reduction of \$1 trillion over ten years is moderate by recent standards. The CBO reports that the outlined Pentagon reductions are smaller than those of the 1990s, and smaller than those that occurred under the Budget Control Act from 2012 to 2015.

Significantly, the report comes in the midst of a major national debate about spending, with the Biden administration's Build Back Better plan facing a reduction of as much as \$2 trillion, also over ten years, during congressional negotiations. The CBO-outlined Pentagon cuts could fund a substantial portion of the plan.

"Pentagon cuts are eminently doable, but corporate interests and poor leadership have prevented us from making even the most obvious cuts," said Koshgarian. "After twenty years of war, it's time to reexamine our security priorities and stop writing blank checks for the Pentagon and its contractors."

The report also notes that the national security strategy is a document that can be changed. A strategy that relied more heavily on diplomacy and humanitarian aid, and less on military supremacy, could prevent conflicts and maintain security for Americans, while enabling even deeper savings at the Pentagon.

The new report lays out critical considerations for the Biden administration, the Pentagon, and Congress as they plan Pentagon strategy and budgets for the next ten years. The days of blank checks for the Pentagon must end.

*The National Priorities Project inspires individuals and movements to take action so our federal resources prioritize peace, shared prosperity, and economic security for all.*



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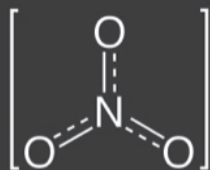
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*– George Orwell*

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# DEBT CEILING RAISING THE ROOF (AND CEILING) FOR BIDEN'S INFRASTRUCTURE BILLS

HAROLD ZIMMERMAN

**R**epublicans vow to vehemently oppose any increase in our nation's budget debt ceiling when in fact the last increase of \$8 trillion was approved unanimously by BOTH parties in 2017. At that time, President Trump wanted to keep businesses and corporations from relocating to foreign countries to save on labor costs and our then high U.S. corporate tax rate of 35 percent was lowered based on the calculation that this tax break—along with the near doubling of the federal income tax deduction providing more take-home pay for middle-class working families—would stimulate the U.S. economy to such an extent that the extra taxes generated from the resulting heightened productivity, business growth, and increased GDP and GNP would offset the reduction in income tax revenue.

However, such did not prove to be the case and here we are today facing a situation where the U.S. is literally running out of money to pay the salaries of federal workers and businesses providing services to the government.

So why won't the Republicans approve raising the U.S. federal debt ceiling?

Because they're afraid that if they did, it would pave the way for the Democrats to fund whatever increased spending was needed for Biden's \$3.5 trillion infrastructure bill, dismissing Biden's claim that it would be fully funded by its corporate capital gains, wealth tax rate increases, and stepped-up IRS auditing to make sure corporations and the wealthy pay their fair share of taxes.

Although a number of Repub-

licans have come out in favor of the smaller Biden \$1.2 trillion traditional infrastructure bill, the Democrats won't permit its passage unless it's linked with the passage of Biden's larger \$3.5 trillion infrastructure bill, which addresses the inevitable consequences of future climate change and the need to wean ourselves from fossil fuels using new green energy plus "social infrastructure" issues such as allowing women and families to better access the workplace by providing child care and elder care and helping young people to find better employment and achieve their career goals by providing free junior college education and trade

**Perhaps then  
childcare credit  
allowances might  
be revisited  
in hopes  
of softening  
Republican opposition.**

— Harold Zimmerman

school.

Addressing such issues as climate change and new green energy NOW will only help our economy by speeding up the process of creating **WHOLE NEW INDUSTRIES AND JOBS FOR THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE WHO WILL THEN BE ABLE TO PAY TAXES TO HELP SUPPORT OUR GOVERNMENT.**

Also, investing in childcare, eldercare, free junior college education, and trade school would allow those who cannot work because of family needs and obligations to enter the workforce while allowing many to secure higher paying employment. Those benefiting from these policies would be able to contribute **MORE INCOME TAX** to federal and state



governments.

Not to mention all the childcare and eldercare-related jobs—including jobs connected with the centers and facilities that would be created to provide such care—and we now have all those workers and businesses **PAYING THEIR TAXES AS WELL.**

And as more centers and facilities are opened offering care, the competition would drive down the costs of such services to working parents. Perhaps then childcare credit allowances might be revisited in hopes of softening Republican opposition.

At the time of this writing (on Sunday, the third of October), neither Biden's traditional \$1.2 trillion infrastructure bill nor his larger \$3.5 trillion "social infrastructure" package has achieved passage. Here's where the negotiations now stand:

- Biden is willing to go as low as \$2 trillion
- Moderate Democrats are prepared to go to \$2.1 trillion
- Progressive Democrats (Sanders, AOC, Jayapal, et al) continue to insist on \$3.5 trillion
- Senator Joe Manchin has proposed \$1.5 trillion but may go a little higher
- Senator Kyrsten Sinema has not weighed in with her own dollar amount

No crystal ball presently exists to show how the situation will have resolved itself when you're reading this. Or even if.

Harold Zimmerman is an attorney and former auto mechanic/repair shop owner. Currently semi-retired, he devotes himself these days to writing about the U.S. economy and how it can best achieve that "perfect balance needed to provide maximum benefit to all."



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ANDREW PEREZ

**T**he three conservative Democratic lawmakers threatening to kill their party's drug pricing legislation have raked in roughly \$1.6 million of campaign cash from donors in the pharmaceutical and health products industries. One of the lawmakers is the House's single largest recipient of pharmaceutical industry campaign cash this election cycle, and another lawmaker's immediate past chief of staff is now lobbying for drug makers.

The threat from Democratic Reps. Kurt Schrader (Ore.), Scott Peters (Calif.), and Kathleen Rice (N.Y.) comes just as the pharmaceutical industry's top lobbying group announced a seven-figure ad campaign to vilify the Democratic legislation that aims to lower the cost of medicines for Americans now facing the world's highest prescription drug prices.

At issue is House Democrats' initiative to let Medicare use its bulk purchasing power to negotiate lower prescription drug prices. That power—which is used by other industrialized countries to protect their citizens from exorbitant prices—has been promised by Democrats for years, and party leaders have been planning to include it as part of their sprawling \$3.5 trillion infrastructure reconciliation effort.

A few weeks ago, Schrader, Peters and Rice helped vote the measure down in the powerful Energy and Commerce Committee, blocking the legislation before it could come to the House floor for a vote. Even if the bill were to ultimately make it to the floor through another committee—which remains a possibility—

Democrats only have a four-seat majority that allows them to pass legislation, so they can't afford to lose any more votes.

"I understand that the pharmaceutical industry owns the Republican Party and that no Republican voted for this bill, but there is no excuse for every Democrat not supporting it," said Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders after the vote.

The trio of Big Pharma Democrats are jeopardizing a plan based on H.R. 3, the Elijah E.

prices is wildly popular—to the point where swing-state and swing-district Democrats, and even former President Donald Trump, have expressed support for it.

### Money Went In, Favors Are Coming Out

Schrader and Peters are among the two biggest recent Democratic recipients of pharmaceutical industry donations, according to *OpenSecrets*. The pharmaceutical and health products industries are collectively the

second biggest donor to both lawmakers over the course of their careers, giving them almost \$1.5 million. Peters is currently the House's top recipient of pharmaceutical industry donations in the 2022 election cycle.

Peters and his family were worth an estimated \$60 million in 2018, making him one of the wealthiest lawmakers in Congress, according to *OpenSecrets*. His wife is the president and CEO of Cameron Holdings, an investment firm whose portfolio company provides manufacturing and packaging for pharmaceutical companies.

Schrader's net worth, meanwhile, was pegged at nearly \$8 million. *The Oregonian* reported in 2008 that he received "a quite large inheritance" from his grandfather who was "vice president and director of biochemical research and development at Pfizer"—the drug maker whose political action committee is now Schrader's third largest career donor.

The congressmen on Tuesday offered their own drug pricing proposal, which would only allow Medicare to negotiate prices under limited conditions, such as when a company no longer has exclusive marketing rights on an older drug but there are no competitors.

## At issue is House Democrats' initiative to let Medicare use its bulk purchasing power to negotiate lower prescription drug prices.

— Andrew Perez

Cummings Lower Drug Costs Now Act. The Congressional Budget Office has said the drug pricing legislation, named for the late Rep. Elijah Cummings of Maryland, would save the government \$456 billion and "reduce prices by 57 percent to 75 percent, relative to current prices" for various medicines.

The measure would direct federal health regulators to negotiate prices of 25 high-priced drugs in the first year of implementation and 50 drugs in subsequent years, and the new negotiated prices would be available to both Medicare and private insurers.

Polls show that the idea of allowing Medicare to negotiate drug

That proposal was also backed by Democratic Rep. Stephanie Murphy (Fla.), the co-chair of the conservative Blue Dog Coalition, who is the House's fifth largest recipient of donations from the pharmaceutical and health products industries.

Earlier this year, Peters' campaign saw a surge in donations from pharmaceutical company executives after he organized a letter with nine other Democratic lawmakers informing House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., that they opposed H.R. 3. Schrader and Rice co-signed the letter.

It's worth noting that Peters, Schrader, and Rice all voted in favor of H.R. 3 in the previous Congress. *Politico* wrote in May that Peters "said he cast that vote knowing it had no chance of becoming law at the time. He said he supported it only to 'start a conversation about lowering the cost of prescription drugs.'"

Rice, Schrader and Peters have seats on the House Energy and Commerce Committee, which is

writing the party's prescription drug plan, and they used those positions to help block the measure, preventing it from moving to the floor.

Last December, House Democrats' steering committee voted to put Rice on the Energy and Commerce panel instead of progressive New York Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.

On Tuesday, Rice explained that she opposes the drug pricing measure because "I do not support advancing policies that are not fiscally responsible and jeopardize the bill's final passage."

### Top Aide Now A Pharma Lobbyist

Schrader's longtime top aide, Paul Gage, left the congressman's office earlier this year, according to *Legistorm*, and quickly started lobbying for Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America (PhRMA), the powerful Washington drug lobby.

Gage has been lobbying Congress on drug pricing issues and

H.R. 3, according to ethics records. PhRMA raised more than \$500 million in 2019, and the organization is one of the top lobbying spenders in D.C.

PhRMA has announced it's launching an ad campaign against House Democrats' drug pricing efforts. "Politicians say they want to negotiate medicine prices in Medicare," one ad warns. "But make no mistake: What politicians mean is they'll decide which medicines you can and can't get."

The Blue Dog Coalition's political action committee has been making monthly payments to a consulting firm led by the coalition's former communications director, Kristen Hawn.

Hawn is also a partner at the bipartisan public affairs firm ROKK Solutions, which has worked for PhRMA.

Andrew Perez writes for *The Daily Poster* and other publications.

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# INSIDE THE PANDORA PAPERS

CHUCK COLLINS

**T**he Pandora Papers, a massive expose about the secret shell games and tax avoidance schemes of the world's ultra-wealthy, has just hit headlines around the globe. This colossal undertaking involved 600 journalists from 117 countries and was coordinated by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) in what they describe as the "largest-ever journalistic collaborative."

Five and a half years ago, the ICIJ released the Panama Papers, which focused on a leak from a single law firm, Mossack Fonseca. According to ICIJ Director Gerald Ryle, the Pandora Papers are the "Panama Papers on steroids."

The Pandora Papers draws on leaks from confidential records at 14 different offshore wealth service firms in Switzerland, Singapore, Cyprus, Samoa, Vietnam, Hong Kong, as well as firms in well-known tax havens such as Belize, Seychelles, Bahamas, and the British Virgin Islands. These firms help wealthy individuals and corporations form trusts, foundations, incorporate companies, and establish other entities in low-or no-tax jurisdictions.

The Pandora Papers draw from almost 12 million files from these firms including leaked emails, memos, tax declarations, bank statements, passport scans, diagrams of corporate structures, secret spreadsheets, and clandestine real estate contracts. Some reveal the real owners of opaque shell companies for the first time.

Over the last three months,

I've spoken confidentially with ICIJ journalists from Mexico, Argentina, Spain, Sweden, Germany, and the United Kingdom, providing background about how wealth hiding systems work in the United States. Drawing from my new book, *The Wealth Hoarders: How Billionaires Pay Millions to Hide Trillions*, I explained the role of the United States and the global wealth defense industry in sequestering wealth.

The Pandora Papers are truly

firm, Alcolgal (Aleman, Cordero, Galindo & Lee), along with trusts in the British Virgin Islands and real estate purchases in Miami and around the United States.

The Pandora Papers will hopefully turn up the heat on the politicians that maintain the wealth-hiding status quo. The files list over 330 current and former politicians and world leaders from 91 countries that are implicated in transactions. This is twice the number implicated in the 2016 Panama Papers.

Political leaders include King Abdullah II from Jordan and former British Prime Minister Tony Blair (according to *The Guardian*, Jordan blocked the ICIJ web site hours before the Pandora papers release). This explains why existing political bodies seem incapable of closing down systems that enable wealth hiding and tax dodging.

"It demonstrates that the people that could end the secrecy of offshore systems...are themselves benefiting from it," said Ryle of the ICIJ. "So, there's no incentive for them to end it."

In the coming weeks we will learn more from the Pandora

Papers. For example, there are 130 global billionaires with ownership entities in secrecy jurisdictions. In 2021, 100 of them had total assets worth more than \$600 billion.

U.S. citizens are under-represented in these leaks, largely due to where the service providers were located. No U.S. wealth-advisory firms were part of the leaks. Nonetheless, over 700 companies revealed in the Pandora papers have ties to beneficial owners connected to the United States.

We will also learn more

## The Pandora Papers, a massive expose about the secret shell games and tax avoidance schemes of the world's ultra-wealthy, has just hit headlines around the globe.

— Chuck Collins

a global story, with major implications in many countries. Some of the largest revelations involve Russian nationals with connections to Vladimir Putin and elites from Latin America.

For example, journalists from the Spanish daily *El Pais* exposed the "Secret Vault of Mexican Billionaires." In Mexico they found over 3,000 wealthy and powerful Mexicans in the 11.9 million leaked files, with connections to current and previous presidents. They discovered a common pattern of wealthy Mexican elites using a single Panamanian law





# STORYLANDIA

## Issue 36 Winter 2021

Contributions from: Gordon J. Stirling, Evan Howell,  
John O'Kane, Bob Ritchie, Jhon Sanchez

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## TAX AVOIDANCE

about how the United States has become a global destination for global wealth, some of it ill-gotten. The Panama Papers, the Paradise Papers (Bermuda and Singapore), and Luanda Leaks (Angola) all reinforced the misperception that most of these financial shell games take place “off shore,” in secrecy jurisdictions and tax havens in small countries with weak banking laws.

But the Pandora Papers show that the United States, and states like South Dakota, now rival notoriously opaque jurisdictions in Europe and the Caribbean in financial secrecy. The states with the most active trusts were South Dakota (81), Florida (37), Delaware (35), Texas (24), and Nevada (14).

Findings suggest that South Dakota has sheltered billions in wealth linked to wealthy individuals previously accused of serious financial crimes and labor violations. Two examples: Brazilian orange juice baron, Horst Hoppel, was fined \$88 million in 2016 for underpaying his workers. In 2017, he moved

substantial wealth to a trust in South Dakota. Carlos Morales Troncoso was the former vice-president of the Dominican Republic. He ran a sugar company called Central Romana that was accused of human rights violations. He set up trusts for his daughters in the Bahamas that were moved, after his death, to South Dakota. The reason global money is flowing to the “Mount Rushmore State” is because of their low taxes and advantageous dynasty trusts.

The Pandora Papers will hopefully boost momentum in the U.S. Congress behind a progressive tax plan to fund the Build Back Better program—including money for IRS enforcement to ensure the wealthy pay their fair share.

As *The Guardian* notes, “in a development likely to prove embarrassing for U.S. President Joe Biden, who has pledged to lead efforts internationally to bring transparency to the global finance system, the United States emerges from the leak as a leading tax haven. The files suggest the state of South

Dakota, in particular, is sheltering billions of dollars in wealth linked to individuals previously accused of serious financial crimes.”

Chuck Collins writes for *Nation of Change* and other publications.

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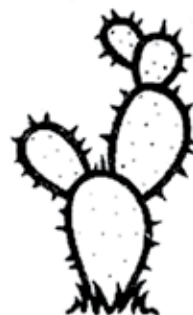
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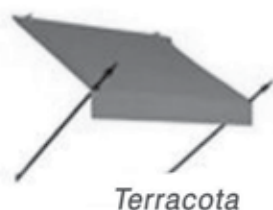
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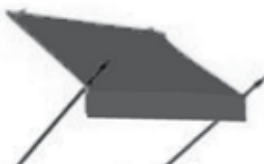
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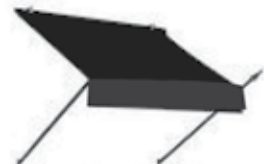
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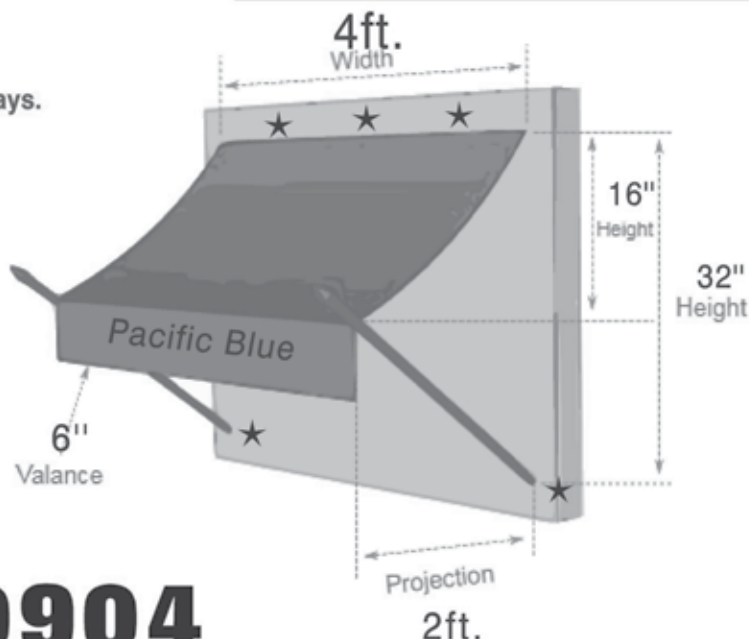
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