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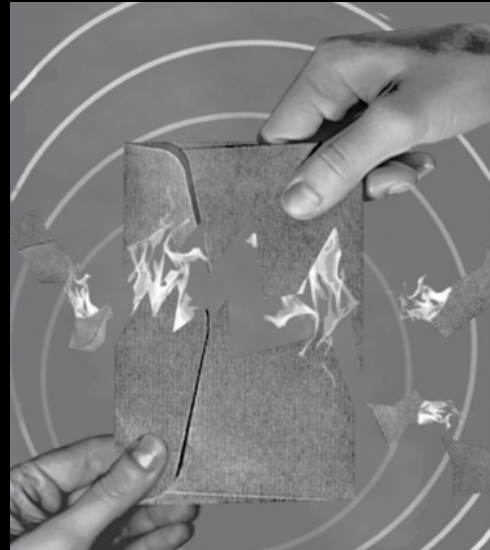
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"VOIDING VOTES"

HELI SWENSSON

**"Voiding Votes"**

Cover Design by Heli Swenson.

Today, more than 200 political scientists, legal scholars, and historians from academic institutions across the United States released an open letter calling on Congress to reject the United States' winner-take-all system of elections in the wake of a failed 2020 redistricting process and adopt multi-member districts with proportional representation for the U.S. House of Representatives. The letter's 200+ signatories include experts in fields ranging from comparative electoral politics to constitutional law. They include nine Johan Skytte Prize winners, often considered the Nobel Prize of political science: Robert Axelrod, Francis Fukuyama, Peter Katzenstein, Robert Keohane, David Laitin, Margaret Levi, Arend Lijphart, Philippe Schmitter, and Rein Taagepera. Other prominent signatories include leading voices on the perilous state of American democracy like Steven Levitsy, Jennifer McCoy, and Brendan Nyhan, as well as experts on America's current electoral system like Larry Sabato, and Matthew Shugart, among many others.

- Protectdemocracy.org.

AMASS is published by the Society For Popular Democracy and AMASS Press, 10920 Wilshire Boulevard Suite 150, Los Angeles, CA 90024. Web: www.amassmagpress.com. Email: amassmagpress@gmail.com. Subscriptions: \$16 for individuals within the US, \$20 outside these areas; \$50 for institutions within the US, \$60 outside. Single copy: \$4.95. Back issues available on website. Visuals furnished by the authors. Authority to reprint articles must be sought from publisher. Manuscripts should be submitted in duplicate and will not be returned without a stamped, self-addressed envelope. Thanks to Noah Andrews and Adrianna Marquez. Distributed by Ubiquity, New York; Angel City, Santa Monica, CA; and Ingram. Member IPA. Indexed in MLA; Alternative Press Index; Ebsco; Cengage, ProQuest. Copyright © 2022 by Society For Popular Democracy. ISSN 0193-5798d



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"Our arcane, single-member districting process divides, polarizes, and isolates us from each other," the letter says. "It has effectively extinguished competitive elections for most Americans and produced a deeply divided political system that is incapable of responding to changing demands and emerging challenges with necessary legitimacy.

"Accordingly, we urge Congress to ensure that this is the last redistricting cycle under a failed single-winner system and to adopt inclusive, multi-member districts with more proportional representation."

The letter is the latest sign of the growing momentum for proportional representation in the U.S. Despite broad-based scholarly consensus on the desirability of more proportional systems for decades, the instability of American democracy in the last few years has catalyzed greater efforts from activists and academics alike to promote a system for electing Congress that addresses the core problems facing the country.

As the 2020 redistricting cycle made clear,

America's current system of winner-take-all elections allows for gerrymandering, makes the great majority of seats uncompetitive, and fuels the extreme polarization and rigid two-party politics that cause legislative dysfunction. In a proportional system, multiple representatives per district are elected in proportion to their share of the vote, making gerrymandering obsolete, ensuring that every election is competitive, and enabling more electorally viable parties to emerge.

An Open Letter to Congress, September 19th, 2022:

As the 2020 redistricting process comes to a close, it is clear that our winner-take-all system—where each U.S. House district is represented by a single person—is fundamentally broken. We call on Congress to adopt inclusive, multi-member districts with competitive and responsive proportional representation.

According to a recent analysis of the newly redistricted House map, more than 90% of districts are effectively a lock for one of the parties this November. This

means that many millions of voters have no meaningful say in general elections, with the overwhelming majority of Congress effectively chosen by low-turnout primaries. In other words, winner-take-all increasingly means we already know the outcome of almost any given race.

This collapse in competitive elections helps explain why Congress today is so polarized and held hostage by obstructionist politics. Because 90% of House members don't have to worry about general elections and are beholden only to their district's small number of primary voters, extreme elements are overrepresented to the point where one party in our two-party system has been taken over by members that reject democracy itself.

Contrary to popular belief, geography—not gerrymandering—is the primary cause of this districting crisis. As the country has sorted geographically, with Democrats concentrating in cities and Republicans in rural areas, it is often impossible to draw competitive single-member districts that offer any semblance of geographic continuity and that keep communities of interest together. In fact, maps drawn by nonpartisan commissions in this redistricting cycle had just as few highly competitive districts as those drawn by politicians.

At the same time, our political divisions are far less dire than our electoral system implies. At the level of narrow, winner-take-all districts, only the majority opinion gets represented and we appear divided between fully Democratic and fully Republican districts. But on the scale of our communities, regions, and states, the United

**The vast –
even overwhelming –
majority of
Americans don't
fit precisely into
the ideology of
their single-member
congressional
representation.**

– Protectdemocracy.org.

States remains a diverse and complex political tapestry. In 2020, there were more Trump voters in California than any other state and more Biden voters in Texas than in New York or Illinois. The vast—even overwhelming—majority of Americans don't fit precisely into the ideology of their single-member congressional representation.

Congress has the ability to embrace this political richness by joining most other advanced democracies in moving to more inclusive, multi-member districts made competitive and responsive by proportional representation.

The effects would be far-reaching and salutary. More proportional representation would render gerrymandering obsolete and help ensure that a political party's share of votes in an election actually determines how many seats it holds in the House. Larger, multi-member districts would mean almost every voter could cast a meaningful vote, regardless of where they live. And as the Supreme Court further weakens the Voting Rights Act, proportional representation allows communities of color to have their voices reflected—and their candidates elected—at the ballot box.

This fix would require only an act of Congress. Proportional, multi-member districts are not only constitutional, they are broadly consistent with American history and political norms. In fact, multi-member House districts were common across the country for over 150 years—albeit without proportional representation, which proved a fatal flaw, as at-large districts were used to effectively disenfranchise minority groups and grossly over-represent narrow majorities. Congress must now improve upon, not ignore, this history.

This redistricting cycle is a wake-up call for voters and our elected representatives. Our arcane, single-member districting process divides, polarizes, and isolates us from each other. It has effectively extinguished competitive elections for most Americans and produced a deeply divided political system that is incapable of responding to changing demands and emerging challenges with necessary legitimacy.

Accordingly, we urge Congress to ensure that this is the last redistricting cycle under a failed single-winner system and to adopt inclusive, multi-member districts with more proportional representation.

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DEMOCRACY GLOBAL NECESSITY OF AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

JAVIER SOLANA

In his prophetic 1838 Lyceum Address, a generation before the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln predicted that the fall of the United States, if it were ever to occur, would not come from an outside threat, but rather as a result of internal division. “It cannot come from abroad,” he said, “If destruction be our lot, we must ourselves be its author and finisher.”

At grave historical moments, the fears of America’s greatest leaders re-enter the country’s political discourse. In a speech in Philadelphia last month, President Joe Biden’s concern for American democracy was eerily similar to Lincoln’s. Biden’s choice to deliver his speech outside Independence Hall, where the Declaration of Independence was debated and adopted in 1776, was meant to convey the significance of his remarks. The title of the address – “The Continued Battle for the Soul of the Nation” – reflected the polarized nature of contemporary US politics.

The US is the world’s leading power, so what happens there – good and bad – rarely stays there. Its political health affects the world’s overall stability. Without a politically stable US, we cannot effectively address any of humanity’s most pressing challenges.

I first set foot in the US in 1965 as a Fulbright scholar and lived there for five years. Lyndon B. Johnson was the president, and the country, mired in Vietnam and reckoning with the Civil Rights Movement demand for an end to legal racism, was in turmoil.

Six decades later, the US is again experiencing political upheaval, but of a very different kind. While the social conflicts that defined the 1960s revolved around unacceptable injustices for any modern society, America’s foundational institutions remained unquestioned. Nobody in 1965 questioned whether Johnson was the legitimate president. Today, by contrast, the legitimacy of the country’s democratic institutions – particularly its electoral system – is at stake.

Against this background, the US midterm elections will be immensely consequential for American democracy, as one of the parties responsible for sustaining

it has succumbed to former US President Donald Trump’s populist authoritarianism. Of the 208 candidates Trump endorsed in Republican primaries for the House of Representatives, the Senate, and state governorships, 95% will be on the ballot in November.

The international community’s ability to lead a fragmented world out of crisis will also be on the ballot. Following a pandemic from which the world has yet to recover, the war in Europe threatens to upend societies and economies worldwide. Making matters worse, the multilateral institutions created to manage the opportunities and risks of globalization are being overwhelmed by the world’s accelerating division into rival geopolitical blocs and the decoupling of its two major powers.

Given the political clout Trumpism has gained in recent years, some fear it could become a fixture of US politics. Trumpism would never have been able to take root without conservatives’ success in consolidating power, even when faced with electoral decline. After Barack

Obama was elected president in 2008, the Republican Party flipped 11 state legislatures in the 2010 midterms. While Democrats were busy carrying out their domestic and international agenda in Washington, Republicans leveraged their dominance in state politics to rig the electoral map in their favor through extensive partisan gerrymandering.

Fortunately, Trumpism is not invincible. Democrat Mary Peltola’s recent triumph over Republican former governor Sarah Palin in the special election to fill Alaska’s seat in the House of Representatives shows that even in traditionally red states, Trump-like populists can be defeated. To replicate this widely, however, Biden will have to unite Democrats and moderate Republicans, a monumental task.

But even building democratic majorities may not be enough to save democracy. One of the strengths of the US political system is its institutional architecture, which separates the federal government’s power into executive, legislative, and judicial branches, thereby preventing overreach by any individual branch. Yet the US Supreme Court is suffering a crisis of legitimacy, with recent rulings by the conservative super-majority calling into question the authority of the entire judiciary. As retired Justice Stephen Breyer recently said, if judges are seen merely as political operatives, the power of the courts to uphold the rule of law is diminished.

History and its scholars provide an invaluable guide to understanding current events and their potential implications. A month ago, Biden called a group of historians from the country’s top universities to the White

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– Javier Solana

House to analyze the current state of American society. The key takeaway was clear: political polarization is leading US democracy to the brink of collapse.

In 1838, Lincoln began his Lyceum Address with a question – “At what point then is the approach of danger to be expected?” – and gave a categorical answer that still rings true: the greatest threat to the future of democracy in the US is the internal divide. Today, Lincoln’s prescient warning is of the uttermost relevance, for Americans, and international stability.

Javier Solana writes for *Foreign Affairs*, *Project Syndicate*, and other publications.

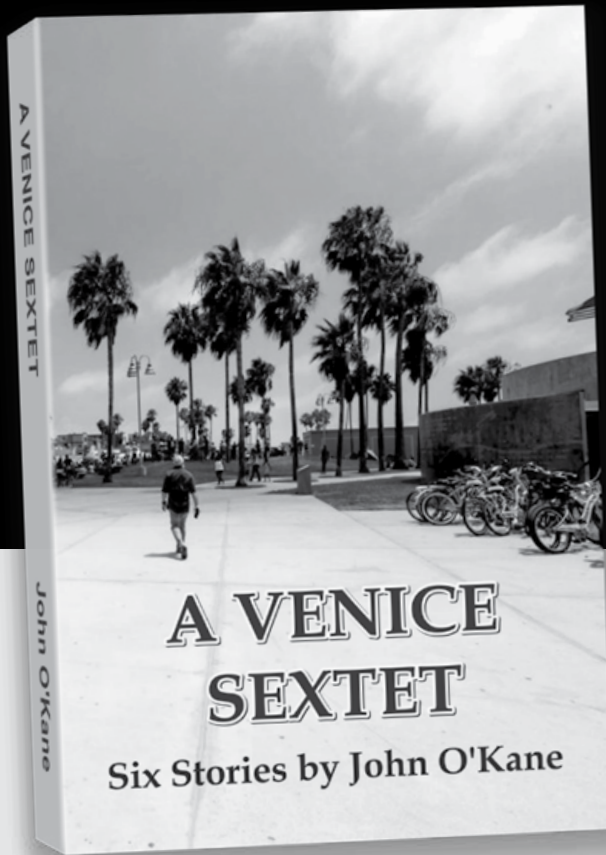


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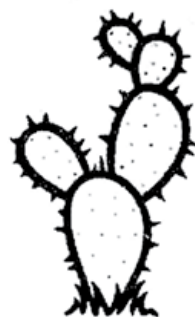
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M E D I A THE NEWS IS JUST GUESSWORK NOW

M A T T T A I B B I

On Wednesday, October 5, the *New York Times* published a blockbuster story, “U.S. Believes Ukrainians Were Behind an Assassination in Russia.” Citing “American officials” in claiming “United States intelligence agencies” now believe “parts of the Ukrainian government” were responsible for the car-bomb assassination of Russian nationalist Daria Dugina on August 19th, the paper wrote:

“The United States took no part in the attack, either by providing intelligence or other assistance, officials said. American officials also said they were not aware of the operation ahead of time and would have opposed the killing had they been consulted. Afterward, American officials admonished Ukrainian officials over the assassination, they said.”

The article is a Rubik’s cube whose stickers have been switched all over, leaving no possible solution. Turn it over as much as you like, you won’t figure out what you’re reading.

The key news is clearly the fact the article was even published. Someone in the U.S. government took an extraordinary step of outing our intelligence agencies’ supposed belief that Ukraine was involved in the bombing. Writers Julian E. Barnes, Adam Goldman, Adam Entous and Michael Schwartz do at one point address this, saying “Countries traditionally do not discuss other nations’ covert actions,” but in this case, “some American officials believe it is crucial” to “curb what they see as dangerous adventurism, particularly political assassinations.”

All this info was ascribed to a “closely held assessment of Ukrainian complicity,” also referred to throughout as an “American intelligence assessment,” which was “shared within the U.S. government last week.” Who wrote the assessment? What office? The piece doesn’t say but does add toward the bottom that

“officials from the State Department, National Security Council, Pentagon and C.I.A. declined to comment on the intelligence assessment.”

Reading the news since the invasion has become a kaleidoscopic guessing game. There are just too many factors warping the informational landscape now to make sense of anything.

Aggressive content moderation and self-censorship mean you won’t see a skeptical point of view in many if not most news reports. The blurring of lines between private press and officialdom — more on that in a moment — means you almost never know if you’re reading something leaked intentionally, or accidentally. Finally, the U.S. has been boasting for seven months now about its use of media as a war weapon, deploying special “tiger teams” of National Security Officials

who leak intelligence for strategic reasons. In those cases, leaders in Russia or China or Syria or wherever rather than the ostensible readership might be a newspaper’s real target audience.

“It’s what we used to call, when the Russians did it, information warfare,” former CIA officer John Sipher clucked proudly in *The Guardian* before the invasion.

In the extant *New York Times* piece, you don’t know if you’re reading a piece of news leaked by someone in the White House in defiance of the intelligence officials who wrote the assessment, or if it was leaked by someone in the intelligence services in defiance of the White House. It also could be a unified front of officials who brought the

story to the *Times* to send a message to Ukraine, Russia, or both. It could be the U.S. government expressing general displeasure, both with whichever of the “competing power centers within the Ukrainian government” was responsible for the assassination, and with whatever “parts of the Ukrainian government... may not have been aware of the plot.”

Along with the strings of phrases about how that the U.S. wasn’t happy about “Ukraine’s aggressive covert operations” (“took no part,” “would have opposed... had they been consulted,” “admonished,” etc) came a passage promising that despite this, there have been no “known changes” in the “provision of intelligence, military and diplomatic support to Mr. Zelensky’s government.”

**The United States
has tried carefully
to avoid unnecessary
escalation with
Moscow throughout
the conflict — in part by
telling Kyiv not to use
American equipment
or intelligence to
conduct attacks
inside of Russia...**

— Matt Taibbi



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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Taken altogether, you can read this as a thinly veiled hint, as in: “Hey, stop whacking people outside Ukraine, or we’ll cut off all the Javelins.”

That makes some sense, but then you’re right back to the first and most glaring fact of the article. You can threaten Zelensky with the yanking of weapons shipments all you want, in private. Why do so publicly, while also announcing to the world that Ukraine engaged in cross-border assassination? The State Department just last year sanctioned Russia for its “operation to assassinate or surveil” Alexey Navalny. We also expelled 60 Russian diplomats in 2018 after an ostensible poisoning involving ex-spy Sergei Skripal in England. Obviously, this is not the same situation, but you’re exposing Ukraine to a variety of accusations by declaring them guilty of the Dugina blast.

Is the point here to let the Russians know that anyone can be reached? I’m pretty sure they already know that — I guarantee the top Kremlin military brass have all seen *Godfather Part II* along with all the important hood movies — but are we just making double-sure they got the message? Is this one of those stories that is, as Sipher put it, “meant for one consumer: Vladimir Putin”? It sounds like it, here:

“Since the beginning of the war, Ukraine’s security services have demonstrated their ability to reach into Russia to conduct sabotage operations. The killing of Ms. Dugina, however, would be one of the boldest operations to date — showing Ukraine can get very close to prominent Russians.”

A million years ago, when working part-time for a newspaper in New Bedford, Massachusetts, I covered an abandoned house fire. As I watched flames lick up the side of the house, three teenagers walked up. They told me they heard that “three hoodlums” set the fire, and they were “real bold, too” because the fire was started in broad daylight. They went into deadpan detail about the “rumors” of how the crime was committed before walking off. I thought of them with a laugh when I read the “one of the boldest operations to date” line above. Is that what this is about? Credit? On the life-imitating-art front, have we really reached the *Wag the Dog* stage?

On a more serious note, how are we to interpret passages like this?

“The United States has tried carefully to avoid unnecessary escalation with Moscow throughout the conflict — in part by telling Kyiv not to use American equipment or intelligence to conduct attacks inside of Russia...”

You can see the last traces of editorial discretion on the part of the *New York Times* in the use of the word “unnecessary.” Not even the most hardcore Ukrainian-flag-emoji-bearing reader could have swallowed a line that the U.S. has “tried to avoid escalation” with Russia, with near-weekly reports of new billions in arms shipments and places like *The Intercept* telling us that the U.S. now has a “much larger presence of both CIA and U.S. special operations personnel and resources” in

theater (I fear the godlike wrath of the Brookings Institute too much to bring up the Nord Stream blasts). “Unnecessary escalation” must be a phrase both the paper and the paper’s sources can live with, but it’s frustrating that so many passages in so many stories now exist in gray areas between official statement and editorial comment.

Not long ago, a newspaper would have wrapped the whole of the above pull quote in a clear attribution, as in, “The officials the *Times* spoke with insist the U.S. has tried to avoid unnecessary escalation...” The biggest gift you can give an official source is to put his or her statement in the newspaper’s own “objective” voice, which once carried the imprimatur of apolitical fact. This is why companies paid premiums for “native advertising,” i.e. ads disguised as newspaper articles (or other typical content). It’s why the Internet melted down in 2013 when *The Atlantic* ran an “article” that was actually a Church of Scientology ad, and why the *Columbia Journalism Review* once wrote, “Editorial will forever be the cat, and native advertising, Pepe Le Pew.” Smart newspapers eschewed native advertising because it killed the proverbial cat.

No knock against the four writers in this piece, but it’s become almost impossible for ordinary readers to discern what’s cat and what’s skunk in a lot of news

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copy, particularly national security coverage, and particularly war coverage. Former CIA chief Michael Hayden in *Playing to the Edge* boasted about calling the *Times* and the *Washington Post* to “scotch” certain stories, saying he “did talk a lot to the *Times*’s Washington bureau chief, Phil Taubman,” whom he complimented for being able to balance “the needs of transparency and security.” The *Times* even then was known for killing or delaying certain stories at the request of government, and the phenomenon seems to have accelerated a great deal since, with stories involving Trump, Russia, and Ukraine in particular giving off whiffs of intense press-government cooperation.

Lastly, There’s this Passage:

“The American officials who spoke about the intelligence did not disclose which elements of the Ukrainian government were believed to have authorized the mission...United States officials briefed on the Ukrainian action and the American response spoke on the condition of anonymity, in order to discuss secret information and matters of sensitive diplomacy.”

How are we to make sense of this fretting over secrecy and tradecraft, in the context of a front page *New York Times* story? Though possible, it doesn’t feel believable that these sources fear internal retribution for leaking. The story more has the character of an

official, approved enterprise, making the *Times*’s ululations about sensitivity feel not quite believable. If this info is so sensitive, why are sources handing it to a gang of reporters? From an intelligence official’s perspective, that’s like giving a monkey a hand grenade, unless of course you control the monkey (I realize we’ve had a surfeit of animal metaphors by now). There are just too many blurred lines, and newspapers have given up trying to un-blur them for us, even though they used to consider it a primary responsibility. They have more important clients now.

Is this story ass-covering ahead of a revelation of U.S. involvement in the Dugina affair, even just on the level of providing intelligence? Is it the White House pissed at the Pentagon that it happened, the Pentagon pissed at the White House that it happened, both pissed at Ukraine, neither? Who the hell knows? Maybe they’re just “sowing discord,” not even between groups, but within our own heads? One of the few former intelligence sources I know chuckled over the story. “The CIA used to do this kind of thing to influence foreign public opinion,” he said. “Now they do it to misinform, distract, and confuse the American public.” That’s just great, isn’t it?

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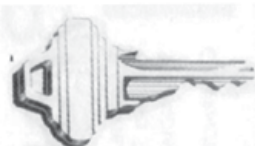


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U K R A I N E WAS THE RUSSIAN INVASION “AGGRESSION?”

M I K E W H I T N E Y

“We are not threatening anyone... We have made it clear that any further NATO movement to the east is unacceptable. There's nothing unclear about this. We aren't deploying our missiles to the border of the United States, but the United States IS deploying their missiles to the porch of our house. Are we asking too much? We're just asking that they not deploy their attack-systems to our home... What is so hard to understand about that?” – Vladimir Putin

Imagine if the Mexican army started bombarding American ex-pats living in Mexico with heavy artillery-rounds killing thousands and leaving thousands more wounded. What do you think Joe Biden would do? Would he brush it off like a big nothingburger and move on or would he threaten the Mexican government with a military invasion that would obliterate the Mexican Army, level their biggest cities, and send the government running for cover?

Which of these two options do you think Biden would choose?

There's no doubt what Biden would do nor is there any question what the 45 presidents who preceded him would do. No US leader would ever stand by and do nothing while thousands of Americans were savagely slaughtered by a foreign government. That just wouldn't happen. They'd all respond quickly and forcefully.

But if that's true, then why isn't the same standard applied to Russia? Isn't the situation in Ukraine nearly identical?

It is nearly identical, only the situation in Ukraine is worse, much worse. And if we stretch our analogy a bit, you'll see why.

Let's say, the US Intelligence agencies discovered that the Mexican government was not acting alone but was being directed to kill and maim American ex-pats on orders from the Chinese Communist

government in Beijing. Can you imagine that?

And the reason the Chinese government wants to kill Americans in Mexico is because they want to lure the US into a long and costly war that will “weaken” the US and pave way for its ultimate splintering into many pieces that China can control and exploit. Does any of this sound familiar? It is essentially the Rand Strategy for weakening Russia.

So, let's say, the Chinese are actually the driving force behind the war in Mexico. Let's say, they toppled the Mexican government years earlier and installed their own puppet regime to do their bidding. Then they armed and trained vast numbers of troops to fight the Americans. They supplied these warriors with cutting-edge weapons and technology, logistical support, satellite and communications assistance, tanks, armored vehicles, anti-ship missiles, and state-of-the-art artillery units all of which were provided with one goal in mind; to crush America in a proxy war that was concocted, controlled and micro-managed from the Chinese Capital of Beijing. Is such a scenario possible?

It is possible, in fact, this very same scenario is playing out right now in Ukraine, only the perpetrator of the hostilities is the United States not China, and the target of this malign strategy is Russia not the US. Surprisingly, the Biden administration isn't even trying to hide what they're up-to anymore. They're openly arming, training, funding, and directing Ukrainian troops to prosecute a war aimed at killing Russian soldiers and removing Putin from power. That's the objective and everyone knows it.

And the whole campaign is based on the sketchy claim that Russia is guilty of “unprovoked aggression.” That's the whole deal in a nutshell.

The moral justification for

the war rests on the unverified assumption that Russia committed a criminal offense and broke international law by invading Ukraine. But did they?

Let's see if that assumption is correct or if it's just another fake claim by a dissembling media that never stops tweaking the narrative to build the case for war.

First of all, answer this one question related to the analogy above: If the US deployed troops to Mexico to protect American expats from being bombarded by the Mexican army, would you regard that deployment as an “unprovoked aggression” or a rescue mission?

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But did they?**

– Mike Whitney



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Rescue mission, right? Because the primary intention was to save lives, not seize the territory of another sovereign country.

Well, that's what Putin was doing when he sent his tanks into Ukraine. He was trying stop the killing of civilians living in the Donbas whose only fault was that they were ethnic Russians committed to their own culture and traditions. Is that a crime?

Consider the artillery strikes that were documented in daily summaries by "observers of the Organization for Security and Co-operation (OSCE), positioned at the frontlines." The vast majority of the strikes were in the area inhabited by Russian-speaking people who have been under military siege for the last 8 years. (14,000 ethnic Russians have been killed in the fighting since 2014.) The Minsk Agreements were drawn up to resolve the issues between the warring parties and end the hostilities, but the government in Kiev refused to implement the agreement. In fact, the former President of Ukraine, Petro Poroshenko, even admitted that the treaty was just a vehicle for buying time until another full-scale offensive on the Donbas could be launched.

In short, the Ukrainian government never had any intention of reaching a peaceful settlement with leaders of the Donbas. Their goal was to intensify the conflict in order to provoke Russia and draw them into a protracted war that would exhaust their resources and collapse their economy. The long-range objective was to remove Putin from office and replace him with a Washington-backed stooge that would do as he was told. US officials -- including Joe Biden -- have even admitted that their plan involved regime change in Moscow. We should take them at their word.

These strikes provide a visual account of the events leading up the Russian invasion. It cuts through the lies and identifies the true origins of the war which can be traced back to the heavy artillery strikes launched by the Ukrainian Army more than a week before the Russian invasion. (February 24) The massive shelling was aimed at the Russian-speaking people living in an area in east Ukraine. These are the people who were being bombarded by their fellow Ukrainians.

What Really Happened?

On February 16—a full 8 days before the Russian invasion—the shelling of the Donbas increased dramatically and steadily intensified for the next week "to over 2,000 per day on February 22." As we said, these blasts were logged in daily summaries by observers of the OSCE who were on the frontlines. Think about that for a minute. In other words, these are eyewitness accounts by trained professionals who collected documented evidence of the Ukrainian Army's massive bombardment of areas inhabited by their own people.

Would this evidence hold up in a court of law if a case against the Ukrainian government was ever presented before an international tribunal trying to

assign accountability for the hostilities?

It would. The evidence is rock-solid. In fact, we have not read or heard of even one analyst who has challenged this vast catalogue of documented evidence. Instead, the media simply pretends the proof doesn't exist. They have simply swept the evidence under the rug or vanished it from their coverage altogether in order to shape a Washington-centric version of events that completely ignores the historical record. But facts are facts. And the facts don't change because the media fails to report them. And what the facts suggest is that the war in Ukraine is a Washington-concocted war no different than Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya or Syria. Once again, Uncle Sam's bloody fingerprints are all over this sorry affair.

Is This a Thoroughly Calculated Provocation? Why Does this Matter?

It matters because the vast majority of people have been hoodwinked into supporting a war for which there is no moral justification. This is not a case of "unprovoked aggression." Not even close. And Putin is not an out-of-control tyrant bent on reconstituting the Soviet Empire by terrorizing his neighbors and seizing their territory. That is a complete fabrication based on nothing but speculation. In Putin's own words, he invaded Ukraine because he had no choice. His own people were being ruthlessly exterminated by an army that acts on Washington's orders alone. He had to invade, there was no other option. Putin felt a moral obligation to defend the ethnic Russians in Ukraine who could not defend themselves. Is that aggression? Here's a bit more background from an article at *The Intercept* by James Risen:

"Despite staging a massive military buildup on his country's border with Ukraine for nearly a year, Russian President Vladimir Putin did not make a final decision to invade until just before he launched the attack in February, according to senior current and former U.S. intelligence officials."

In December, the CIA issued classified reports concluding that Putin hadn't yet committed to an invasion, according to the current and former officials. In January, even as the Russian military was starting to take the logistical steps necessary to move its troops into Ukraine, U.S. intelligence again issued classified reporting maintaining that Putin had still not resolved to actually launch an attack, the officials said.

It wasn't until February that the agency and the rest of the U.S. intelligence community became convinced that Putin would invade, the senior official added. With few other options available at the last minute to try to stop Putin, President Joe Biden took the unusual step of making the intelligence public, in what amounted to a form of information warfare against the Russian leader. He also warned that Putin was planning to try to fabricate a pretext for invasion, including by making false claims that Ukrainian forces had attacked civilians in the Donbas region of eastern



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Ukraine, which is controlled by pro-Russian separatists. The preemptive use of intelligence by Biden revealed “a new understanding ... that the information space may be among the most consequential terrain Putin is contesting,” observed Jessica Brandt of the Brookings Institution.

Biden’s warning on February 18 that the invasion would happen within the week turned out to be accurate. In the early hours of February 24, Russian troops moved south into Ukraine from Belarus and across Russia’s borders into Kharkiv, the Donbas region, and Crimea, which Russia annexed in 2014. (“U.S. Intelligence Says Putin Made a Last-Minute Decision to Invade Ukraine”, James Risen, *The Intercept*)

There’s so much baloney in this excerpt, it’s hard to know where to begin. But just review the above timeline, one that has been verified by officials from the OSCE. Can you see the discrepancy?

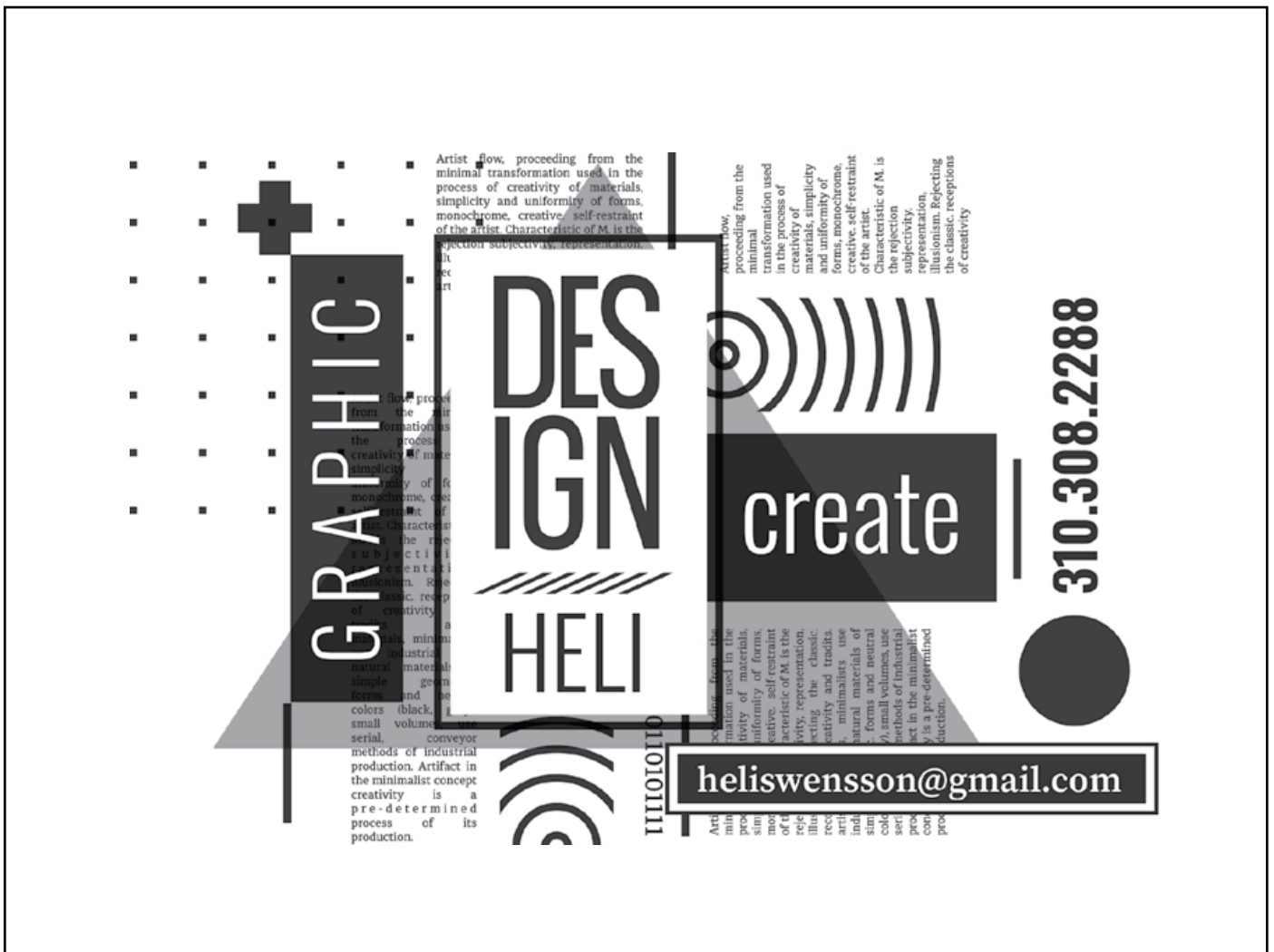
Biden issued his warning on February 18; that’s two days after monitors from the OSCE reported an intensification of the bombing in the Donbas. In other words, Biden already knew that his buddies in the Ukrainian army were bombing east Ukraine when he tried to make it look like he was privy to some sensitive,

insider information about the upcoming invasion.

Of course, he knew Putin was going to invade! They created the provocation that forced him to invade! They were bombing the hell out of the people Putin is obliged to protect. What else could he do? Any leader worth his salt would have done same thing.

What’s bothersome is that people continue to support the war in Ukraine because they have no idea of what actually happened in the lead-up to the invasion. They know nothing about the relentless bombing of civilians, or the defiant rejection of Minsk or the repeated military attacks on the Donbas, or the plan to retake Crimea through force of arms, or the laws directed against ethnic Russians. Their views on Ukraine are entirely shaped by the rubbish they read in the western media or hear on the cable news channels where the deluge of propaganda issues like a mighty river pulling the population inexorably towards another vicious bloodbath.

Mike Whitney writes for *CounterPunch*, *ICH*, and other publications.



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E L L E N B R O W N

Congress has passed two major infrastructure bills in the last year, but imminent needs remain. The 2021 Bipartisan Infrastructure Law chiefly focused on conventional highway programs, and the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022 (IRA) mainly centered on energy security and combating climate change. According to the American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE), over \$2 trillion in much-needed infrastructure is still unfunded, including projects to address drought, affordable housing, high-speed rail, and power transmission lines. By 2039, per the ASCE, continued underinvestment at current rates will cost \$10 trillion in cumulative lost GDP, more than 3 million jobs in that year, and \$2.24 trillion in exports over the next 20 years.

Particularly urgent today is infrastructure to counteract the record-breaking drought in the U.S. Southwest, where 50% of the nation's food supply is grown. Subsidies for such things as the purchase of electric vehicles, featured in the IRA, will pad the coffers of the industries lobbying for them but will not get water to our parched farmlands any time soon. More direct action is needed. But as noted by Todd Tucker in a Roosevelt Institute article, "Today, a gridlocked and austerity-minded Congress balks at appropriating sufficient money to ensure emergency readiness. ... [T]he US system of government's numerous veto points make emergency response harder than under parliamentary or authoritarian systems."

There are, however, other ways to finance these essential projects. "A work-around," says Tucker, "is so-called off-balance sheet money creation." That was the approach taken in the 1930s, when commercial banks were bankrupt, and the country faced its worst-ever economic depression; yet the government succeeded in building

infrastructure as never before.

Off-budget Funding: The Model of the Reconstruction Finance Corporation

For funding its national infrastructure campaign in the Great Depression, Congress called on the publicly owned Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC). It was not actually a bank; it got its liquidity by issuing bonds. Notes Tucker, "The RFC was allowed to borrow money from the Treasury and the capital markets, and then invest in relief and mobilization efforts that would eventually generate a return for taxpayers, all while skating past austerity hawks determined to cut or freeze government spending."

According to James Butkiewicz, professor of economics at the University of Delaware:

"The RFC was an executive agency with the ability to obtain funding through the Treasury outside of the normal legislative process. Thus, the RFC could be

used to finance a variety of favored projects and programs without obtaining legislative approval. RFC lending did not count toward budgetary expenditures, so the expansion of the role and influence of the government through the RFC was not reflected in the federal budget."

The RFC lent to federal government agencies including the Commodity Credit Corporation (which lent to farmers), the Electric Home and Farm Authority, the Federal National Mortgage Association (Fannie Mae), the Public Works Administration, and the Works Progress Administration (WPA). It also made direct loans to local governments and businesses and funded eight RFC wartime subsidiaries in the 1940s that were essential to the war effort.

The infrastructure projects of one agency alone, the Works Progress Administration, included 1,000 miles of new and rebuilt airport runways, 651,000 miles of highway, 124,000 bridges, 8,000 parks, and 18,000 playgrounds and athletic fields; and some 84,000 miles of drainage pipes, 69,000 highway light standards, and 125,000 public buildings (built, rebuilt, or expanded), including 41,300 schools. For local governments that had hit their borrowing limits on their taxpayer-funded general obligation bonds, a workaround was devised: they could borrow by issuing "revenue bonds," which were backed not by taxes but by the revenue that would be generated by

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— Ellen Brown

the infrastructure funded by the loans.

A bill currently before Congress, HR 3339, proposes to duplicate the feats of the RFC without increasing the federal budget deficit or taxes, by forming a National Infrastructure Bank (NIB).

China's State "Policy Banks"

China is dealing with the global economic downturn by embarking on a stimulus program involving large national infrastructure projects, including massive water infrastructure. For funding, the government is drawing on three state-owned "policy banks" structured like the RFC.

The Chinese government is one of those systems referred to by Todd Tucker as not being hampered by "a gridlocked and austerity-minded Congress." It can just issue a five-year plan and hit the ground running. In May 2022, it began construction on 3,876 large projects with a total investment of nearly 2.4 trillion yuan (about \$350 billion).

Funding is coming chiefly from China's "policy banks" set up in 1994 to provide targeted loans in areas where profit-driven banks might be reluctant to lend. They are the China Development Bank, the Export-Import Bank of China and the Agricultural Development Bank of China. As noted in a June 30 article in the Washington Post, China could also draw on its "Big Four" banks – Industrial & Commercial Bank of China Ltd., China Construction Bank Corp., Agricultural Bank of China Ltd., and Bank of China Ltd. – but "they are essentially profit-driven commercial banks that can be quite picky

when it comes to selecting borrowers and projects. The policy lenders, however, operate on a non-profit basis and are often recruited to pour cheap funds into projects that are less attractive financially but matter to the longer-term development of the economy."

Like the RFC, the policy banks mainly get their funds by issuing bonds. They can also get "Pledged Supplementary Lending" directly from the Chinese central bank, which presumably creates the money on its books, as all central banks are empowered to do.

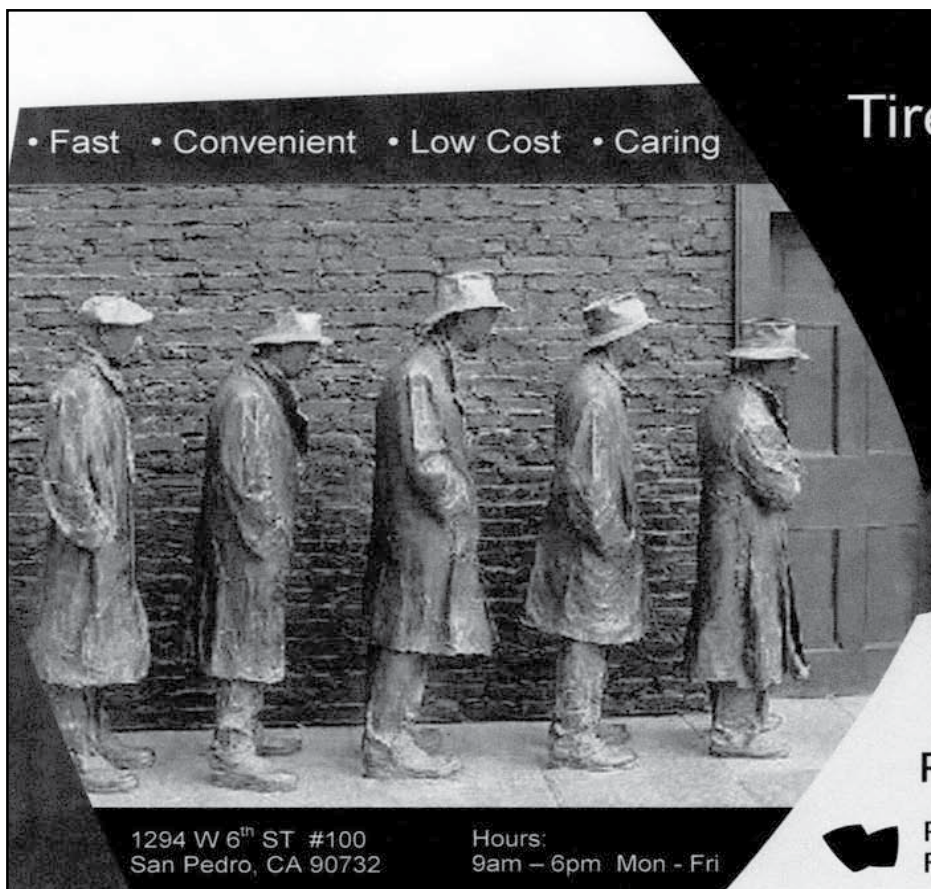
Dealing with China's Water Crisis


According to the Xinhua News Agency, on July 7 construction began on a project linking China's two mega water infrastructures – the Three Gorges Project and the South-to-North Water Diversion Project – transferring water from the water-abundant south to the arid northern region of the country. The goal is a national water grid, increasing the quantity of water available for use nationally by about 20% and increasing China's irrigated area by about 10%.

The South-to-North Water Diversion Project is already well underway. The middle route, the most prominent one due to its role in feeding water to the nation's capital, begins at the Danjiangkou Reservoir in the Hanjiang River in central China's Hubei and runs northeastward to Beijing and Tianjin. It was completed and began supplying water in December 2014. The eastern route began supplying water in November 2013, transferring water from Jiangsu to areas including East China's Shandong Province. The new project will channel water

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The total estimated investment for China's national water grid is about 2.99 trillion yuan (U.S. \$470 billion). This is comparable to the \$400 billion the National Infrastructure Bank Coalition proposes to allocate through HR 3339 to address the serious drought in the U.S. Southwest.

As in China, one alternative being considered by the NIB team is to divert water from areas that have it in excess. One proposal is a pipeline to ship Mississippi River floodwaters to the parched Colorado River via a Wyoming tributary. Another option is to pump water from the Columbia River in the Pacific Northwest to California via a subterranean pipeline on the floor of the Pacific Ocean – not upstream water used by Washington and Oregon residents, but water from the ocean outflow where the river feeds into the Pacific and its freshwater becomes unusable saltwater.

Those are doable alternatives, but political and regulatory obstacles remain. Ideally, sources of water would be found that are new not just to the Southwest but to the surface of the planet. This is another proposal being explored by the NIB team – to tap “deep seated water” or “primary water,” the plentiful water supplies below normal groundwater tables.

Studies have found evidence of several oceans' worth of water locked up in rock as far down as 1,000 kilometers below the Earth's surface. (See The Smithsonian Magazine, “How the Earth's Mantle Sends Water Up Toward the Surface,” June 2022.) This water is not part of the hydrologic cycle (clouds to rain to ground to clouds again), as shown on testing by its lack of environmental contaminants. 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.

There are many verified cases of mountaintop wells that have gushed water for decades in arid lands. This water 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.

Funding Through the National Infrastructure Bank

Critically needed water and other infrastructure projects can be funded without tapping the federal budget, with funds generated through a national infrastructure bank. Unlike the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, the publicly owned bank proposed in HR 3339 is designed to be a true depository bank, which can leverage its funds as all depository banks are allowed to do: with a 10% capital requirement, it can leverage \$1 in capital into \$10 in loans.

For capitalization, the NIB will follow the model of Alexander Hamilton's First U.S. Bank: shares in the

bank will be swapped for existing U.S. bonds. The shares will earn a 2% dividend and are non-voting. Control of the bank and its operations will remain with the public, an independent board of directors, and a panel of carefully selected non-partisan experts, precluding manipulation for political ends.

The NIB is projected to lend \$5 trillion over 10 years, or roughly \$500 billion per year. That means each year the NIB will have to add \$50 billion in new capitalization in the form of debt for equity swaps. The incentive for investors is the extra 2% yield the NIB provides on its preferred stock, plus a government guarantee. The U.S. Postal Service, the fourth largest holder of U.S. Treasuries globally, is one possible investor. Others are pension funds and builder associations with investment portfolios, all of which need a certain number of triple-A-rated investments. NIB bonds will have a better rate of return than Treasuries, while achieving the laudable purpose of filling the critical infrastructure gap.

To clear checks from the newly created loan deposits, the NIB will bring in cash from incoming customer deposits, loan repayments, NIB-issued bonds, and/or borrowing from the Federal Reserve. How much cash it will need, and its timing, depends on how many infrastructure companies maintain their deposit accounts with the NIB.

The \$5 trillion the NIB lends over 10 years will add \$5 trillion to the total money supply; but the “productive” loans it will be making are the sort that do not add to price inflation. In fact, they can reduce it – by raising GDP growth, increasing the supply side of the supply-versus-demand inflation equation.

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Ellen Brown is an attorney, chair of the Public Banking Institute, and author of thirteen books including *Web of Debt*, *The Public Bank Solution*, and *Banking on the People: Democratizing Money in the Digital Age*. She also co-hosts a radio program on PRN.FM called “It's Our Money.” EllenBrown.com.

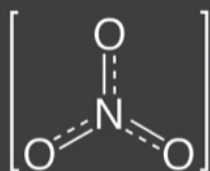


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THE WAKE

JOHN O'KANE

“I don’t think I’ve ever...met him,” says the woman mostly to herself, scoping the portable plasterboard-stand near the entrance pasted with clippings and reminiscences, like something there might help her be more decisive.

“Why did you come, then?” I ask.

“Oh, I heard he was a real cool guy and...my coworker said he was comin’ and he usually knows where the action is.” She turns toward me gradually as she speaks.

“Where are you...oh!” She pulls away sharply and utters a stifled shriek. “Was that you speaking to me?” Who are you?” She now speaks without looking directly at me.

“I think so...I’m a... just a member of the crowd.” She ponders this for a few seconds and rushes away into the path of another woman.

Have I met her before?

“Hi, Cheryl...great to see you!” says the woman. I haven’t seen you since the crafts fair down in the Port. Oh, these vibes! I’m so glad we came.”

“Wouldn’t miss an Irish wake, especially when it’s in the hood. This is my daughter, Eulene. We’re hopin’ this will be a good play date for her. What was your name...again?”

“Dorota.”

“Oh, sure. I remember.”

“Did you ladies know the...guest of honor?” I ask, wedging between the two. Dorota effervesces a silent shriek as Cheryl pivots to face me, her hesitation suggesting she anticipated someone else, the voice tone revealing an anxious recognition. “Did you...know him?”

“As much as I could under the...circumstances.”

“What cir...cumstances do you mean?” asks Dorota, now staring directly at me. A woman steps between us, defraying the answer and scrambling her stare.

“Norma...is that you?” asks Cheryl. “I haven’t seen you for years!” Cheryl pulls her away from me to a table as Dorota sashays through the crowd.

I can’t believe she’s here!

“Did you see that clipping on the board, Norma?” quips Cheryl. “Remember the guy who climbed up the Thomas Bridge and screamed at everybody? They had to get a crane to get him down. This is him.”

“Seems like I remember something like that. How long ago was it?”

“Oh, it said it was...”

“...I remember that well. It was about four years ago. But there were a lot of different opinions about what really happened,” I add.

“Did you know him...personally?” asks Cheryl.

“Well...in a certain way.”

She seems to be trying to capture my whole appearance without showing it. Why is she so stern and cross-eyed?

“You mean he was a family member or...a relative?”

She winces while looking at me straight on, nervously glomming all details of my appearance like she’s trying to commit them to memory.

“Something like that.” I angle my face slowly away and slip through a lane of conversations as she lofts her voice toward me.

“I think I saw your picture...somewhere.” She stretches to glimpse me slip into a denser group of partiers around a small stage where a few musicians are stroking their wares. The muted instrumental covers of the Pogues piped into this spacious cabin are being replaced by tin-whistle-and-fiddle rhythms.

Ah, a roost behind the refreshments table. They really laid it out. I wonder who was responsible.

Cheryl wends through the fringe of the

area to the rear with a perplexed expression on her face as the music electrifies the crowd, transforming complacent mourners into stricken performers.

Should I participate? These posters on the wall... where did they get them? I have to get a double shot of Jameson’s. Alan the bartender doesn’t give me a second look. Why is he so...dour? I didn’t think he was capable of mourning.

Cheryl appears, her expression now absorbed in the music, and delivers a monologue to the assembly, rapturous until fixing on me with a blank stare. The crowd expands and seems to consume her.

— John O’Kane

"I think he...an argument with..." A twenties something woman nearby, attired in ripped denim and an ILWU tee who's gyrating on the lap of a portly bearded male, can barely be heard over the din of the music decibels. Less than fully engrossed in the physical contortions, she peruses the crowd like she's trying to find someone.

"I don't recognize him," says the male.

She was at Leland's Café last year, kicking off the run to Diablo Canyon!

"You said he had an argument...who with?"

"His ex, or girlfriend from what I heard. It got out of control I guess and..."

Why is she looking at me like that?

She swivels off the male's lap but loses a direct sightline toward me as she plants her feet. I slip behind a nearby couple.

I never really knew her. What is she thinking?

"Didn't we party with him that one night at..."

Probably the loft down on 7th but...I don't remember this couple.

I ease away from them and slip across the room to a nook that partially shields me from a group feasting on the amenities, mostly the liquid form, while scoping the crowd for more surprises.

I don't recognize these people or anyone else.

"Let's head over to Leland's...this place is...I don't know anybody here and...who're they celebrating anyway?" The voice blusters from a male bug-eyed with boredom and robed in the colors of a local biker club. He fidgets with his keys and turns sharply to the woman next

to him as if soliciting her opinion.

"I'm for that! Why did we come here anyway? Never heard of this dude. And where's the body?" The woman, with frizzed-out blondish hair fanning out from her face like her body is plugged into a nearby circuit, is gripping her empty glass protectively with both hands. She looks around the space, poring over every detail several times.

What is she looking for? Does she really think there's a body somewhere in this building?

"There isn't one!" spurts a tall and wispy blonde dancing with herself nearby. "Heard a woman who claims to be his legal wife snatched it...wanted to make sure she'll cash in on the dude's goodies."

"Likely excuse," says the male. "Probably isn't one anyway. These people...aren't they known for their make-believe worlds? Let's get otta here!"

Good riddance. He should believe in something!

I rise and inch stealthily from the nook, the woman jerking a glance in my direction. But she quickly jerks back like she doesn't seem to see anything. I slide past the table and lock on her. She zooms my face and holds her glance for a few seconds before turning away with a frightened expression, her glass crashing to the floor.

I thought I recognized her. Where was it?

Pondering this question, I wend through the thicket of revelers toward the rear where there's a jam session taking shape. Microphone tests and amplifier screeches give way to a mottled rendition of U2. The crowd seems much different here, more like committed music fans who could be performing anywhere.

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"Did you know the guest of honor?" I ask a woman riveted to the rhythms. No answer. I repeat the question and she swivels toward me, giving the entire space a quizzical glance before resuming her trance. I tap her on the shoulder, and she swivels around again but stays focused on one space.

"Oh, there you are...I couldn't quite...see you...could you be quiet...they're workin' on a demo."

I meander to the front, the crowd so thick I have to squeeze between immovable bodies. One of them refuses to budge despite my mannerly overture. The more I push to create a space the more vigorously this person fills it. I see now that it's a woman. Her head is draped in a multi-colored gypsy scarf. She finally turns to face me and bolts backward, pushing the bodies with her, leaving ample space for me to shuffle through. She wraps her arms around herself as if she's experiencing a slight shiver.

I make it through the crowd, stopping not far from the entrance, and pivot around for a glance while stepping to the exit. It cascades into a discordance of whispers. Then some backstep gingerly while Cheryl and Dorota

and a new male face, lurch forward. The whispers reverse cascade to silence.

"Is it...him?" blurts an anxious voice from the rear.

"I can't...tell," adds another closer to the front. "Could you move into the light so we can see you better?"

"Yes...yes, we want to see your face more clearly," says Cheryl. "I thought I recognized you earlier from somewhere."

I step a few paces to the left. Several faces in the crowd develop enlightened expressions and begin to converse quizzically, taking ever more frequent glances at the front.

"We still can't make you out," interjects Dorota.

"I guess I have one of those...faces."

A woman slips free from the crowd and approaches the front stealthily, squinting. "It is you. Why are you here?" Amid riveting gawks someone screams, and I inch toward the doorway.

"Thanks for coming!" blurts Cheryl.


He vanishes through the doorway.

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– George Orwell

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ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN OVERTURNING ROE

S A M B I D D L E

When the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*, the country's top internet companies quickly responded with commitments to help employees in states that moved to ban abortion. In an implicit signal of support for abortion rights, the companies said they would help those employees seek abortions in states where the procedure remains legal.

In the years leading up to the seismic reproductive rights decision, however, the tech giants sponsored a controversial group that's worked tirelessly to put the Supreme Court under conservative control, setting the stage for *Roe's* reversal.

The Independent Women's Forum traces its origins back to the 1991 fight to confirm the Supreme Court nomination of Clarence Thomas. Since then, the group has expanded into promoting a litany of perennial right-wing causes like climate denial, immigration alarmism, and deregulation, but a conservative-dominated Supreme Court remained a focus.

Public relations plays a key role in its operation. With savvy self-branding as a pro-woman organization, the group fought for the appointment of conservative justices to the Supreme Court. The IWF couched support for Brett Kavanaugh as good feminism and any opposition to Amy Coney Barrett as sexism — despite well-founded concerns that their ascensions to the court would spell the end of *Roe*. The IWF wields a skillful mix of media placement, op-eds, television punditry, and other contributions to the conservative content ecosystem.

The group also takes advantage of quieter influence peddling as well. In 2020, IWF chief and Vicks VapoRub heiress Heather Higgins boasted to a closed audience of Virginia conservatives about how instrumental the group was in rallying congressional support for

Kavanaugh's nomination. Higgins told the group that the IWF circulated a confidential strategy memo on the Hill. "Most important," Higgins said, "Susan Collins told me that without that memo, she would not see how to support him," referring to the Republican senator from Maine.

Independent Women's Forum and its sister organization, Independent Women's Voice, draw on donations from right-wing financial mainstays like the Koch brothers, but in recent years the groups have enjoyed financial support from Facebook's parent company, Meta; Google; and Amazon. In 2017, Google sponsored an IWF gala at the "gold" donor level, according to brochures from True North Research, a progressive watchdog group. Other brochures show that Meta (which at the time still using the name Facebook) sponsored IWF galas in 2018, alongside Google, and 2019. Honorees at IWF events have included notable anti-abortion figures like Rep. Lynne Cheney, R-Wy.; top Trump administration official Kellyanne Conway; and Vice President Mike Pence.

In the years leading up to the seismic reproductive rights decision, however, the tech giants sponsored a controversial group that's worked tirelessly to put the Supreme Court under conservative control, setting the stage for *Roe's* reversal.

— Sam Biddle

Corporate disclosures from Amazon show that the company donated undisclosed sums to the IWF in 2018, 2019, and 2020. Amazon, Google, Meta, and the IWF did not respond to a request for comment.

True North founder Lisa Graves characterized the IWF's efforts as an attempt to launder conservative ideology. "They act as a distaff," she said in an interview, "in essence providing a woman's face for the right wing's critique or attack on progressives and its advance of this extreme and regressive, repressive agenda."

Despite the public perception of Silicon Valley's alignment with progressive values and liberal causes, tech companies, particularly those fearing state regulation, have long funneled money to right-wing groups like the IWF. At the same time, the IWF routinely pushes policy positions that are highly favorable to its corporate donors.

The IWF has consistently espoused tech industry-friendly positions on labor, antitrust, and other issues, without disclosing its donors' interests. Take, for example, an April IWF blog post that warned that antitrust enforcement against Big Tech would prove disastrous. "Tech innovation has been nothing short of miraculous over the past few decades," wrote Patrice Onwuka, director of IWF's Center for Economic Opportunity and

its go-to defender of powerful tech firms.

Few issues in tech have galvanized the IWF and Onwuka like the bipartisan American Innovation and Choice Online Act, which would block tech companies from leveraging their enormous reach to favor their own services over competitors. In a December 2021 piece titled “Amazon Prime may not be around to save the day next Christmas,” Onwuka claimed, “Senator Amy Klobuchar and others are on a path to end services like Prime’s fast and free shipping and other services that we depend upon.” Onwuka then linked to a blog post by the Amazon-funded Chamber of Progress that claimed, dubiously, that the law would “ban Amazon Prime.”

In June, Onwuka wrote a jeremiad against congressional antitrust efforts: “The conveniences that make life and work easier and faster and save consumers money may disappear.” Later that day, Onwuka appeared on Fox Business, again protesting antitrust enforcement against the tech industry. “I’m more worried about the impact on small business owners and on women and families that rely on some of the benefits that some of these big four tech companies provide,” she said.

While shielding Big Tech from antitrust scrutiny has proven a priority for the IWF, the group also stands up directly for its benefactors. In 2019, Onwuka wrote an entire post dedicated to sticking up for Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg after *Politico* reported that he had attended dinners with notable conservative commentators and lawmakers. “Zuckerberg is a private citizen who can eat dinner with whomever he wants,” Onwuka wrote. “His dinner has a clear business purpose and that’s part of doing business.”

The cordial treatment of industry giants is of course a linchpin of conservatism, and the IWF would almost certainly be warning that antitrust will bring us back to the Bronze Age even without Google sponsoring its gala dinners. But fueling the right-wing punditry mill is a large, ever-expanding facet of Big Tech’s political strategy.

While there’s no evidence that Zuckerberg or Google CEO Sundar Pichai have any personal opposition to abortion access, their companies no doubt benefit from their support of a broad, thriving conservative discourse ecosystem in which any government regulation is anathema. For tech company leadership, the reality that this ecosystem pushes not just Facebook-friendly laissez-faire economics, but also climate denial and abortion bans is considered a perhaps unfortunate but worthwhile byproduct.

Silicon Valley’s patronage of right-wing think tanks and campaigns is an arrangement in which there is ample plausible deniability to go around. When *The Guardian* reported in 2019 that Google was donating to some of the nation’s most notorious climate-denial organizations, a company spokesperson retorted, “We’re hardly alone among companies that contribute to organizations while strongly disagreeing with them on climate policy.”

The multitude of topics on which the IWF engages, and its careful avoidance of publicly opposing

A B O R T I O N

abortion access have helped it avoid a reputation as an anti-abortion group. “Institutionally they have no position on abortion, that’s their stated position,” explained Graves, of True North. “But organizationally, they have backed the most aggressive anti-choice slate of judges we’ve ever seen.”

Sam Biddle writes for *The Intercept* and other publications.

THE INNOCENCE OF EXCESS

Nice unit.

Thanks, I just picked it up.

“One Adam 12,

See the Woman.”

A toast (clink)

To what was.

To what will

never be again.

LA lost her promise:

She ran out of room.

— James O’Kane

James O’Kane is a poet and Iowa Legislator Emeritus

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SOCIAL SECURITY SOCIAL SECURITY IN GRAVE DANGER

JAKE JOHNSON

Social Security and Medicare defenders warned Tuesday that the popular government programs will be “in grave danger” if Republicans win control of Congress in the upcoming midterms, pointing to new reporting on GOP plans to use a looming fight over the nation’s debt ceiling to pursue benefit cuts.

Citing interviews with four House Republicans hoping to serve as chair of the chamber’s budget committee, *Bloomberg Government* reported that “Social Security and Medicare eligibility changes, spending caps, and safety-net work requirements are among the top priorities” for the GOP if it retakes the House in next month’s elections.

Reps. Jason Smith (R-Mo.), Jodey Arrington (R-Texas), Buddy Carter (R-Ga.), and Lloyd Smucker (R-Pa.) signaled that “next year’s deadline to raise or suspend the debt ceiling is a point of leverage” to extract concessions from Democrats, including potentially raising the retirement age and reducing Social Security benefits, the outlet noted.

Such a strategy would fit with the House GOP’s recently released policy agenda, which opens the door to Social Security and Medicare cuts—something Republican candidates have repeatedly hinted at on the campaign trail despite the programs’ popularity.

“Our main focus has got to be on nondiscretionary—it’s got to be on entitlements,” Carter told *Bloomberg Government* on Tuesday.

In a statement, Social Security Works president Nancy Altman stressed that “entitlements” is “a term with pejorative underpinnings” that Republicans frequently use “in hopes that voters don’t under-

stand what they’re saying.”

“But it’s clear what their intentions are: reaching into the American people’s pockets and stealing their hard-earned benefits,” said Altman. “Republicans plan to use the debt limit as the hostage to demand these cuts, even though Social Security doesn’t add a single penny to the deficit. If Republicans take control of one or both chambers

**In recent years,
Republicans have used
recurring debt ceiling
fights as opportunities
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and other austerity
measures—and it appears as
if they plan
to draw from the same
playbook once again
following the
November midterms.**

— Jake Johnson

of Congress, our earned benefits are in grave danger.”

The debt limit is a completely arbitrary figure that establishes the amount of money the Treasury Department is legally allowed to borrow to cover U.S. financial obligations.

As long as the debt ceiling remains intact, failure to raise it once the Treasury Department reaches its borrowing limit could result in a default and a financial crisis. Treasury is set to hit its current borrowing limit early next year.

In recent years, Republicans have used recurring debt ceiling fights as opportunities to push spending

cuts and other austerity measures—and it appears as if they plan to draw from the same playbook once again following the November midterms.

“Republican politicians are dripping with animosity towards our Social Security and Medicare,” Altman said Tuesday. “Even with an election less than a month away, they can’t stop themselves from talking about their burning desire to cut and end these so-called ‘entitlements.’”

In a column last month, *The Washington Post*’s Greg Sargent explained that Democrats have the power to prevent the GOP from weaponizing the debt ceiling to push Social Security cuts and other elements of their right-wing agenda.

Short of eliminating the debt ceiling entirely, as some Democrats have advocated, “they can use the reconciliation process to pass a 2023 budget outline (with only Democrats and no Republicans), which would allow them to raise the debt limit (again without Republican support) to an amount unlikely to be reached for President [Joe] Biden’s full term and well beyond,” Sargent observed.

“If Democrats don’t use their power to act against this threat,” Sargent wrote, “it will be a serious dereliction of duty.”

Jake Johnson writes for *Commondreams.org* and other publications.

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PUBLIC RELATIONS.
— George Orwell

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CEO PAY HAS SKYROCKETED SINCE 1978

JOSH BIVENS AND
JORI KANDRA

What the Economic Policy Institute finds. Corporate boards running America's largest public firms are giving top executives outsize compensation packages that have grown much faster than the stock market and the pay of typical workers, college graduates, and even the top 0.1%. In 2021, we project that a CEO at one of the top 350 firms in the U.S. was paid \$27.8 million on average (using a "realized" measure of CEO pay that counts stock awards when vested and stock options when cashed in and ownership is taken). This 11.1% increase from 2020 occurred because of rapid growth in vested stock awards. Using a different "granted" measure of CEO pay, which counts the value of stock awards and options when announced (or "granted" rather than realized), average top CEO compensation was \$15.6 million in 2021, up 9.8% since 2020. In 2021, the ratio of CEO-to-typical-worker compensation was 399-to-1 under the realized measure of CEO pay; that is up from 366-to-1 in 2020 and a big increase from 20-to-1 in 1965 and 59-to-1 in 1989. CEOs are even making a lot more than other very high earners (wage earners in the top 0.1%)—almost seven times as much. From 1978 to 2021, CEO pay based on realized compensation grew by 1,460%, far outstripping S&P stock market growth (1,063%) and top 0.1% earnings growth (which was 385% between 1978 and 2020, according to the latest data available). In contrast, compensation of the typical worker grew by just 18.1% from 1978 to 2021.

Why it matters. Exorbitant CEO pay is a contributor to rising inequality that we could restrain without doing any damage to the wider economy. CEOs are getting ever-higher pay over time because of their power to set pay and because so much of their pay (more than 80%) is stock-related. They are not getting higher pay because they are becoming more productive or more skilled than other workers, or because of a shortage of excellent CEO candidates. This escalation of CEO compensation and of executive compensation more generally has fueled the growth of top 1% and top 0.1% incomes, leaving fewer of the gains of economic growth

setting corporate tax rates higher for firms that have higher ratios of CEO-to-worker compensation; using antitrust enforcement and regulation to restrain the excessive market power of firms—and by extension of CEOs; and allowing greater use of "say on pay," which allows a firm's shareholders to vote on top executives' compensation.

Key findings of the Report.

- **Growth of CEO compensation (1978–2021).** Using the realized compensation measure, compensation of the top CEOs increased 1,460.2% from 1978 to 2021 (adjusting for inflation). Top CEO compensation grew roughly 37% faster than stock market growth during this period and far eclipsed the slow 18.1% growth in a typical worker's annual compensation. CEO granted compensation rose 1,050.2% from 1978 to 2021.

- **Growth of CEO compensation during the pandemic (2019–2021).** The dramatic increase in CEO compensation during the pandemic is remarkable. While millions lost jobs in the first year of the pandemic and suffered real wage declines due to inflation in the second year, CEOs' realized compensation jumped 30.3% between 2019 and 2021. Typical worker compensation among those who remained employed rose 3.9% over the same time span.

- **Changes in the CEO-to-worker compensation ratio (1965–2021).**

Using the realized compensation measure, the CEO-to-worker compensation ratio reached 399-to-1 in 2021, a new high. Before the pandemic, its previous peak was the 372-to-1 ratio in 2000. Both of these numbers stand in stark contrast to the 20-to-1 ratio in 1965. Most importantly, over the last two decades the ratio has been far higher than at any point in the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, or early 1990s. Using the CEO granted compensation measure, the CEO-to-worker

**Exorbitant
CEO pay is a
contributor to rising
inequality that
we could restrain
without doing
any damage
to the wider
economy.**

— Josh Bivens and Jori Kandra

for ordinary workers and widening the gap between very high earners and the bottom 90%. The economy would suffer no harm if CEOs were paid less (or were taxed more).

How we can solve the problem. We need to enact policy solutions that would both reduce incentives for CEOs to extract economic concessions and limit their ability to do so. Such policies could include reinstating higher marginal income tax rates at the very top;

compensation ratio rose to 236-to-1 in 2021, significantly lower than its peak of 393-to-1 in 2000 but still many times higher than the 44-to-1 ratio of 1989 or the 15-to-1 ratio of 1965.

• **Changes in the composition of CEO compensation.** The composition of CEO compensation is shifting away from the use of stock options and toward the use of stock awards. Vested stock awards and exercised stock options averaged \$21.9 million in 2021 and accounted for 80.1% of the average realized CEO compensation.

• **Changes in the CEO-to-top-0.1% compensation ratio.** Over the last three decades, compensation grew far faster for CEOs than it did for other very highly paid workers (the top 0.1%, or those earning more than 99.9% of wage earners). CEO compensation in 2020 (the latest year for which data on top wage earners are available) was 6.88 times as high as wages of the top 0.1% of wage earners, a ratio 3.7 points greater than the 3.18-to-1 average CEO-to-

top-0.1% ratio over the 1947–1979 period.

• **Implications of the growth of CEO-to-top-0.1% compensation ratio.** The fact that CEO compensation has grown far faster than the pay of the top 0.1% of wage earners indicates that CEO compensation growth does not simply reflect a competitive race for skills (the “market for talent”) that also increases the value of highly paid professionals more generally. Rather, the growing pay differential between CEOs and top 0.1% earners suggests the growth of substantial economic rents (income not related to a corresponding growth of productivity) in CEO compensation. CEO compensation, it appears, does not reflect the greater productivity of executives but the specific power of CEOs to extract concessions—a power that stems from dysfunctional systems of corporate governance in the United States. Because so much of CEOs’ income constitutes economic rent, there would be no adverse impact on the economy’s output or on

employment if CEOs earned less or were taxed more.

• **Growth of top 0.1% compensation (1978–2020).** Even though CEO compensation grew much faster than the earnings of the top 0.1% of wage earners, that doesn’t mean the top 0.1% did not fare well. Quite the contrary. The inflation-adjusted annual earnings of the top 0.1% grew 385% from 1978 to 2020. CEO compensation, however, grew nearly four times as fast!

• **CEO pay growth compared with growth in the college wage premium.** Over the last three decades, CEO compensation increased more relative to the pay of other very-high-wage earners than did the wages of college graduates relative to the wages of high school graduates. This finding indicates that the escalation of CEO pay does not simply reflect a more general rise in the returns to education.

Josh Bivens and Jori Kandra are researchers with the Economic Policy Institute.



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but a crumb

or when you turn just so
and somebody is there with
the right kind of eyes to catch
your falling star inside
their wonder

then the light breaks thru
and the messenger dove
arrives with the news

long live the song of yourself
that knows the pilgrim child

that knows your dream

the one that you
rode in on

never know where
you are going and you will
always get there

bet on it
and ride

– 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.

AWNINGS




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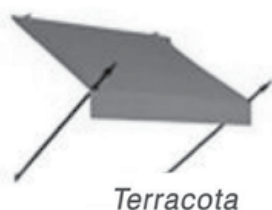


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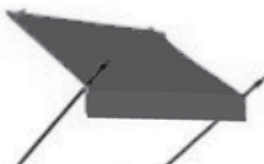
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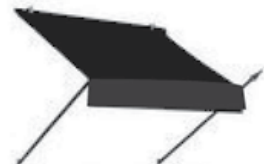
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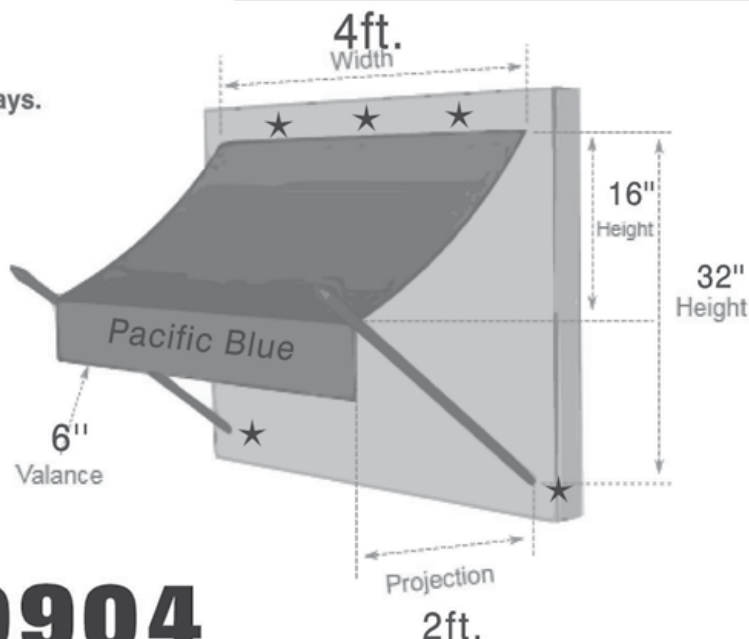
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SETBACK
IN ITALY

SAM PIZZIGATI

In any unequal society becoming substantially *more* unequal, democratic forces better directly address that growing inequality. Or else get prepared to face the consequences.

In Italy, established democratic parties have spent years leaving that inequality unaddressed. Now they're facing those consequences. Just a few weeks shy of the 100th anniversary of our modern world's first fascist putsch, Italian voters gave a smashing triumph to a party with deep roots in the neofascist movements that emerged after the fall of Benito Mussolini, Italy's first fascist head of state.

Italy's new leader, Giorgia Meloni, in no way stylistically resembles Mussolini. She comes across as smiley and perky, a far cry from the dour Mussolini we see in all those old grainy newsreels. No goose-steps with Meloni. But she's promoting the essential heart of the core neofascist political playbook. Her *Fratelli d'Italia* party — "Brothers of Italy" — has been steadfastly ignoring the growing economic divides that poison Italy's future and scapegoating the country's most vulnerable instead.

The media-magnet Meloni has been taking a grinning victory lap to celebrate her electoral triumph, and a sweeping triumph she has certainly scored. In the new Italian parliament, *Fratelli d'Italia* and its two smaller partner parties may end up with about triple the legislators connected to its center-left opposition.

But a closer look at the elections shows no massive public roar of approval for a neofascist-leaning Italian future. What the elections do show: A massive

popular frustration with a center-left government unwilling to challenge Italy's increasingly concentrated distribution of income and wealth and unable, as a result, to meaningfully address the needs of average working people.

The clearest sign of that public frustration: The meager election turnout. Only 64 percent of Italians voted, notes Italian political historian David Broder, "easily the lowest" turnout in the republic's entire history. More of those who *did* vote, observes activist philosopher Lorenzo Marsili, cast ballots for parties in the "liberal-left camp." But the right-wing parties ran as partners while their democratic

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— Sam Pizzigati

opposition remained "fractured."

Giorgia Meloni and her fellow Brothers of Italy candidates ran as outsiders to the existing "national unity" government led by Italy's center-left Democratic Party and topped by Mario Draghi, an Italian economist whose work at Goldman Sachs and the Bank of Italy had previously prepped him for the presidency of the European Central Bank. Draghi's government, note analysts at Italy's Forum on Inequality and Diversity, has done essentially

nothing significant to confront the nation's swelling maldistribution of income and wealth.

Italy, as *Forbes* reported this past spring, now sports more billionaires (52) than either France (43) or the UK (49). Italy's top 1 percent overall, add analysts Paolo Acciari, Facundo Alvaredo and Salvatore Morelli, upped their share of the nation's wealth from 16 to 22 percent in the two decades after 1995, at the same time the nation's poorest 50 percent was watching its national wealth share plummet from 11.7 to 3.5 percent.

Draghi's center-left government, points out Morelli, a leader within Italy's Forum on Inequality and Diversity, did initially advance a tepid inheritance tax proposal, but then quickly left the initiative "*de facto abandoned*." And the center-left Democratic Party, Morelli adds, never challenged Draghi's core perspective that the government, at tax time, should dare not put its "hands in the pockets" of even the richest of Italian households.

That same Democratic Party made no real effort to oppose the widespread right-wing political and media assault on Italy's most substantial anti-poverty effort, the minimum "citizenship income," the *reddito di cittadinanza*. Nor did the party speak to the needs of young people facing youth unemployment rates that had left nearly 30 percent

of Italy's 25-29 age group without either jobs or student status, a level almost twice the European Union average.

Giorgia Meloni's hard-right Brothers of Italy party, meanwhile, campaigned with no answers for the growing economic squeeze on average Italian families. Her winning center-right coalition spent the bulk of its campaign effort attacking the lazy "undeserving" poor and promising not to raise taxes on anyone.

Italy's richest can now look forward to *lower* taxes if Meloni's Brothers of Italy and its allies make good another of their campaign promises: to replace Italy's progressive income tax with a "flat tax" that subjects rich and poor alike to the same modest tax rates.

The political tragedy in all this? At the activist grassroots level, notes Italy's progressive Forum on Inequality and Diversity, the nation is teeming with a "wealth of ideas and innovations that have been developing within the country's social ferment."

Some of these ideas even made onto the platforms of the center-left parties contesting for votes. But these parties "rarely discussed the proposals contained in their own programs or engaged with social and labor entities, with citizens" on the campaign trail, the Forum on Inequality and Diversity points out.

They never communicated "passion and hope." They relied instead "on worn-out symbolism and images." They opened the door to a neofascist triumph.

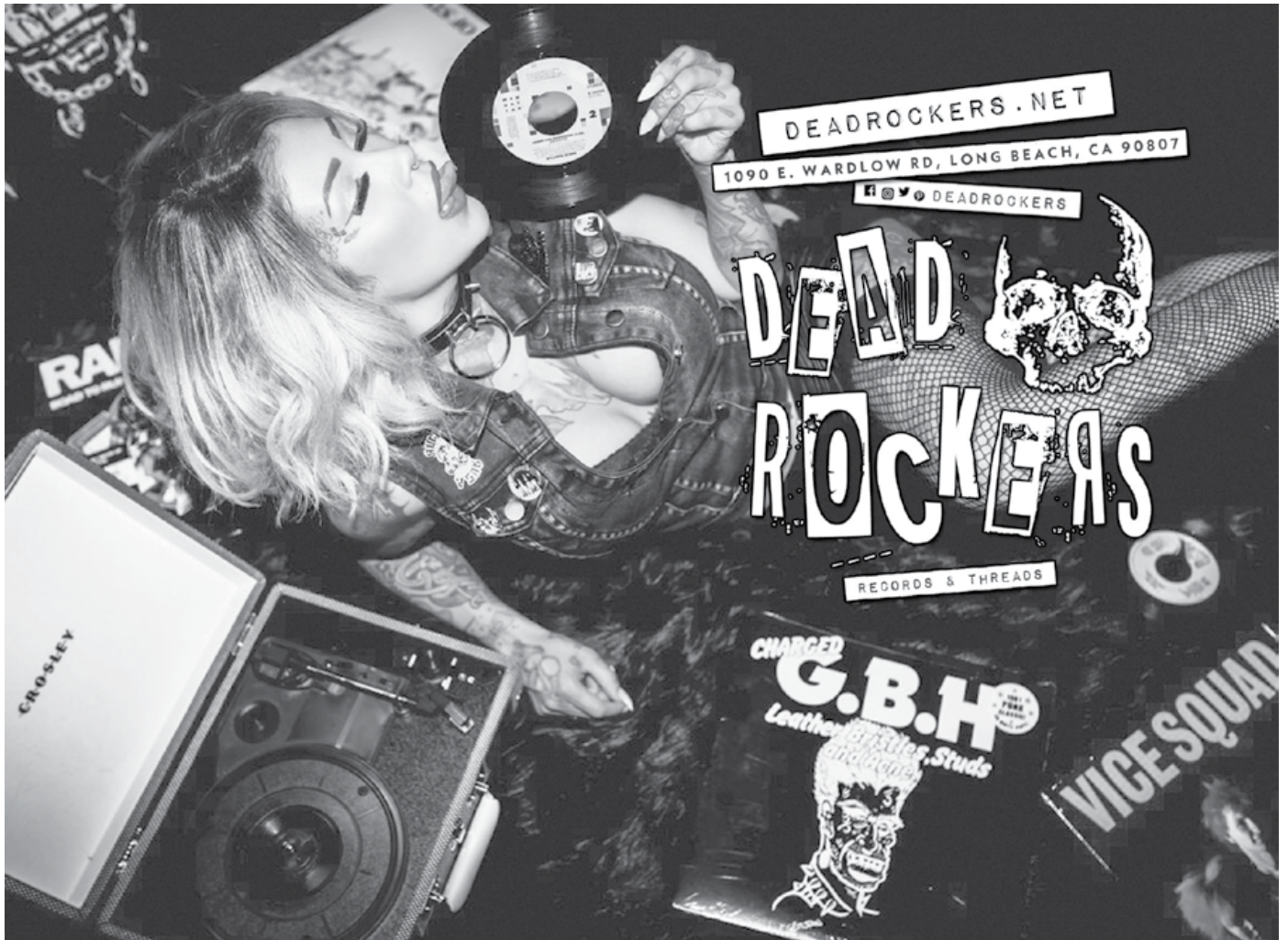
What next for Italian activists? Many are planning for a November 5 nationwide protest that's evoking the spirit of the worldwide Women's March on the day after Donald Trump's inauguration. These activists will be demonstrating against inequality and for ecological transformation, for decent social services and against violations of fundamental labor and women's rights. Hundreds of local, regional, and national groups have already endorsed the day's agenda.

In the wake of this electoral debacle, many of these same insurgent social forces are also hoping to start building what the Forum on Inequality and Diversity calls a "party of social and environmental justice," a party

that can offer Italy's "social ferment" a "democratic space for power-sharing on visions, content, and leadership," a party "capable and brave enough to bring radical proposals for change to European and international negotiating tables."

That vision seems a tall order at the same moment Giorgia Meloni's Brothers of Italy stands poised to remake Italy into a dependable partner for ruling ultra-right-wing European autocrats like Hungary's Viktor Orbán. But Meloni's party, we ought to remember, only polled 4 percent just four years ago, in Italy's 2018 elections. If Italy's grassroots activists blow hard enough together, the political winds can change in ways that no one now expects.

Sam Pizzigati co-edits Inequality.org. He is the author of *The Case for a Maximum Wage*, and other books.



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