Government-financed health insurance: public plan? single payer?

John Morearty

Premiums balloon, and 40 people die each week in 40 (18,000 to 22,000 a year nationwide) for lack of health insurance. Amid this misery, three very different proposals for "health care reform" are being discussed.

One is, trust the insurance companies to clean up their act, require everyone to buy their policies, and subsidize those who can't afford it. I call this the Taxpayer-to-CEO Pipeline.

The second is, create some kind of optional public insurance plan, financed through the government, to help (as Obama says) "keep the private sector honest." He has recently taken to the stump to support this Public Plan in Congress.

The third is Single Payer, an "Everybody In-Nobody Out" U.S. government-financed insurance plan, a sort of Medicare-for-All, which cuts the insurance companies (and their 31% rake-off) out of the loop. The California legislature approved such a plan (SB840) on the state level in each of the last two sessions, only to see it vetoed by the governor; it will return next year as SB810.

How can a thoughtful person decide?

To help, San Joaquin Grassroots Action (founded by Obama campaign volunteers) recently sponsored a Community Health Care Forum at Delta College. Eighty people sat for three hours to hear and question two knowledgeable speakers.

Linda Leu, a Master of Public Health with Health Access and HCAN, www.HealthCareForAmericaNow.org, made the case for including a Public Plan Option:

* Government would watchdog private insurance companies so they can't deny coverage or raise rates based on health history, age or gender.
* There would be choice of doctors and hospitals.

In reply to Leu, Rose Roach, a twenty-year union organizer with the California School Employees Association (CSEA), passionately advocated Single Payer Health Care. "When I go into negotiations for our workers," she said, "I don't ask for some compromise have-to-settle-for-it bottom line. I ask for what's right. And Single Payer is the right way-it is true Doctor-Patient health care, with no insurance company in the middle to say 'No, you're not covered for that.' In Single Payer you choose your HMO or your doctor, and the two of you decide what you need.

"Health insurance premiums are rising several times faster than inflation or workers' earnings," Roach said. "87% over the last five years. The money is there in the American health care system right now, between the premiums we're paying, Medicare, Medicaid and so on. The insurance companies skim about thirty percent. The number of physicians in the U.S. has about doubled since 1970; the number..."
US economic diagnosis: terminal, if not treated soon

Bruce Giudici

Contrary to media reports, we are still in the midst of a financial Katrina, tearing at the economic foundations of our nation. The coming few months will determine the economic future of the United States and its place in the world. Should the United States fail to make the long-term shift away from the good of all, rather than for the profit of a few, countries less committed to individual freedom will overtake our debt-ridden economy, taking the financial lead into the 21st century—leaving our ideals and dreams for a better world behind. Right now, health care is up.

At this moment in time, we are at a crossroads. There will be no second chances. For the past 30 years, we have put off important decisions. Choices in fixing our health care system, financial system, energy system, and defense system must now be made. These systems make up most of the United States economy, and by now, everyone can see that all are failing. We also know that the choices have always been the same: public benefit versus private interest, non-profit versus capitalist, poor versus rich. History acknowledges the unending fight for power and the resources on which it depends. Only now, there is a crisis in which the viability of each system is in question. All are unaffordably bloated beyond any historical measure; consequently, the Federal government has been forced to doctor the patient. In such a crisis, the window for public action has opened a crack. In what remains of our democracy, we the people have a voice. It’s time to speak up.

In this issue, our local friends in the health care fight are making progress—and they need your help. Monied interests determined to squeeze the last dime from patients are actively working Congress to keep both the public insurance option and a single payer health care system off the agenda. This cannot stand. Clearly, the days of private health insurance are numbered—no where else on earth could a society afford such a system of inhumane inefficiency, incompetence and ineffectiveness. Only now, in the midst of a major recession, can we speak a listened truth to the weakened power of the medical industrial complex. Read, join and push to a more effective and humane health care future.

The financial system, in ICU but stable, has growing unemployment (from the housing bubble recession and the bankruptcy of the car companies) feeding a second helping of lower lending, higher foreclosures and increased credit card debt defaults. While the banks have had their way with the government response thus far (ensuring short-term profitability for their shareholders at taxpayer expense), future bailouts must be approved by a Congress that listens to both money and voters. You’re a voter—give your rep a call demanding answers from and accountability for those who profited while destroying our economy.

The energy system is terminal, yet symptoms are being kept under wraps until the oil companies can finish bleeding us dry. Again, the climate change agenda is being set by industry. The market-based cap-and-trade approach to “lowering” pollution, without imposing new regulations (which has been an administration option since a 2007 Supreme Court decision declaring carbon dioxide to be a pollutant under the Clean Air Act), amounts to a voluntary emissions reduction system with numbers included. With the public initially giving away 85% of the permits, the price of polluting will not be enough to encourage investment in pollution reduction technologies—which is the point of the whole system. At this point in the crisis, we can no longer push the problem off for another 20 years. Fairly applied global regulation, laws, taxes and penalties starting with Obama’s EPA will effect more positive change for our climate, and more quickly. There is not a moment to lose.

The defense system is obese, always hungry for more money, blood, bodies—you name it. Choosing to continue both Iraq and Afghan wars, to increase the use of contractors and to make no major structural changes in the armed services ensures a siphoning off of significant dollars into wasteful projects that benefit few but the war profiteers and the congresspeople they have purchased. Throwing away money on any wasteful project is shameful; in defense, it means something else got underfunded that got someone killed or injured. From Mr. Obama, we must demand better—for less.

When a hurricane destroys one’s home, a family has the opportunity to re-build a stronger structure that can better withstand future disaster. As we re-build the systems on which our economy is based, we the people must insist that the old blueprints be discarded and that new plans be used. In all of these broken systems, money is flagrantly wasted, spastically flowing to the same cost-plus contractors who bought the last election. As to California, it’s time we create a property tax system (changing Prop 13 restrictions) that pays for the education, health and security systems we demand. The opportunity for change at this point is so great—and we have the tools to re-build our future. Call your friends and governmental representatives to share your ideas. If you don’t, we all will lose.
The fundamental point is that
healthcare is a public good.

Both are supported by Single Payer San Joaquin, info@jpbfcsaj@hotmail.com or 951-0490.


Other articles in this issue of Connections.

ACTION: Congressman Dennis Cardoza, 946-0361; Congressman Jerry McNerney, 476-8552; Senator Barbara Boxer, 202-224-3553 or 559-497-5109; Senator Dianne Feinstein, 202-224-3841 or 559-485-7430

Government-financed health insurance (continued from page 1)

of health care administrators has multiplied twenty five times. Dr. David Himmelstein of Harvard Medical School says 'We do so much useless and even harmful medical care, and we waste so much on bureaucracy. Single Payer would save $400 billion a year on paperwork alone. We could actually do everything that we know is useful for every American for what we're now spending.'

"Subsidizing people to buy private insurance makes no sense, and it doesn't work," Roach said. "It's been tried in a number of states over the last twenty years, and failed: Massachusetts, Oregon, Tennessee, Vermont, Minnesota, Maine. Insanity is defined as expecting different results."

The fundamental point, said Roach, is that Single Payer is an investment model for health care.

* It assumes that healthcare is a public good (like fire or police protection, or schools) and invests in the needed services for the whole population. Everybody is in, nobody out; one big pool to spread the risk.

* It pays for people who are sick now.

* It pools money and pays for health care directly.

* It's an efficient allocation of health care dollars, getting rid of fragmentation and administrative waste. (The overhead in Medicare is below 5%.)

* It's not "socialized medicine": doctors, hospitals and other providers remain private.

RESOURCES: On the California state level, Single Payer is SB810, and on the federal level H.R. 676.

Big breakthroughs for single-payer health care

Paying for single payer is much easier as the waste, fraud, abuse and bureaucracy of the health insurance industry--totaling $400 billion annually--would go to providing health care.

- The Public Insurance Option is opposed by Republicans and the insurance industry. While several schemes have been reported to make the public choice option ineffective, it is causing deep divisions. Single payer is the most popular health care reform among voters, doctors, nurses and economists because it provides all Americans with a choice of doctors and providers.

- The business community is questioning the pro-insurance reforms because they will include mandates on business requiring them to pay for health insurance. At this critical time, business needs relief not burdens. Single payer will provide businesses with economic relief by reducing the costs of health care and leveling the playing field among all businesses and allowing them to compete internationally with other countries with single-payer systems.

In an effort to save the faltering pro-insurance reforms, President Obama announced his administration would be getting directly involved in health care negotiations with Congress. And, he announced town hall meetings throughout the US. President Obama will find that at all of these town hall meetings, single payer will be the most popular reform among Americans. He needs to listen to voters. When Obama was in the Illinois Senate he said he supported single payer, but that before Americans got it, they needed to win back the House, Senate and presidency. Well, all three are now in Democratic Party control. It is time for President Obama to advocate for the people and push for single payer and the multi-payer system as the insurance industry is the root cause of the problems in health care.

Kevin Zeese is a former Independent candidate for US Senate in Maryland. He was one of 13 single-payer health care advocates who stood before a Senate panel chaired by Senate Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus, a Montana Democrat, and demanded that a voice for single-payer health care be allowed to participate in the hearing. Baucus refused, and all 13 who stood demanding to be heard were arrested and removed from the hearing room by Capitol police.

Source: truthtoday.org

Kevin Zeese

Less than a month after 13 single-payer advocates were arrested protesting the exclusion of single payer, it is at the table in both Houses, making progress while the multi-payer pro-insurance reform is faltering. When we started our campaign one month ago to put single-payer national health insurance on the table, we were ignored. When we stood up and demanded that single payer be part of the debate, we were arrested. Today, single payer is breaking through, while the multi-payer pro-health insurance reform is faltering.

Single payer is making advances while the multi-payer pro-insurance industry reform bill is faltering.

There are deep divisions over how to pay for the reform with the very unpopular taxing of health benefits now being considered. This was something President Obama opposed during the 2008 campaign.

Paying for single payer is much easier as the waste, fraud, abuse and bureaucracy of the health insurance industry—totaling $400 billion annually—would be applied to providing health care. Single payer pays for itself while multi-payer will add to the deficit.

- Mandating that people buy insurance or face fines, another provision President Obama opposed during the campaign, is gaining popularity among pro-insurance company legislators. And, the mandates would provide subsidies to the poor so they can purchase insurance—of course, this is also a subsidy to the health insurance industry. The working class which cannot afford to purchase insurance will feel the burden of this requirement. Under single payer, people are provided health care without these costs, which is one reason it is the most popular reform among voters.

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Source: truthtoday.org

Kevin Zeese
On single payer health, Pelosi won't listen

Jerry L. Bailey

I wanted to believe that in our American democracy, citizens had the right and, yes, obligation to inform and petition their elected representatives regarding issues being deliberated by our government. Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi and the security guards at the San Francisco Federal Building proved that wrong on May 29, 2009.

A group of senior healthcare advocates were denied admission to the building because they posed a potential threat to the inhabitants of the building. The group of elderly men and women had received permission to gather on the plaza in front of the Van Ness Federal Building for one hour to peacefully chant, sing songs, and carry picket signs advocating for the healthcare bill HB676 and to enter the building in an orderly manner to deliver handwritten postcards. The youngest participant that I could determine was a youthful 63-year-old.

Through e-mail and telephone communications previous to the rally, organizers of the event and Pelosi’s office had developed a working plan. The permit allowed six people at a time to enter the Federal Building to proceed to Congresswoman Pelosi’s office on the fourteenth floor. This process was given a one-half hour time frame. Each participant in the rally was given directions for the rally, including information on entering the Federal Building.

The rally committee members named five “hall monitors” to assure that rally participants found the correct office and were least intrusive on the business of the building. The process started in what the elderly rally participants thought was a rational and orderly process. The five hall monitors ascended to the fourteenth floor to wait for the groups of six petitioners. We waited over twenty minutes.

No other participant came into the building. One of the hall monitors descended to the front door security station to inquire why no participants were entering the building.

The security guards reported that no other rally participant could enter the building until the five hall monitors left the building. … Throughout the negotiations period to allow more access (approximately 30–40 minutes), about fifteen rally participants were allowed to enter the building. Perhaps another dozen had entered the building through another door. Many rally participants had never before visited an office of a member of the U.S. Congress and were very disappointed that they were not allowed to do so. All of the elderly participants were frustrated that they as citizens of this democracy were perceived as threats to the personnel and building that represented their country. Some had served in the military. All had worked in election campaigns to support political candidates.

The receptionist in Pelosi’s office deferred the process. “We can’t override the security. They are Federal agents here to protect the safety of the building.” Finally, an event organizer requested that the receptionist send someone down with a box to collect the postcards.

The organizer explained that the actions taken against a group of peaceful people denied access to a public official’s office did not bode well for the Congresswoman. Frustration with the process would be directed at Pelosi.

The elderly participants wanted to rally at this office because, in the past, Nancy Pelosi has stated that single payer health care is “off the table” in spite of the fact that over 65 congressmenors have endorsed the Costco bill, HR676. A companion single payer bill has been introduced into the U.S. Senate, which indicates that there is support for the single payer concept for healthcare.

The participants in this rally were petitioning their representative in Congress to consider a certain viewpoint on an issue before Congress.

While all those involved (Pelosi staff and two levels of security) in preventing access to a democratic process did so with pleasant smiles, to the elderly participants, it appeared that the friendly façade masked a coordinated and previously planned denial to constituents, passive activists, to have their voices heard in what is our supposed democracy. To the rally participants, it appeared to be a blatant and perhaps illegal denial of access to the office of a publicly elected official.

Jerry L. Bailey is a co-convener of the California Alliance for Retired Americans.

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Trigger will kill health reform

Robert Reich

I poked around Washington today, talking with friends on the Hill who confirm the worst: Big Pharma and Big Insurance are gaining ground in their campaign to kill the public option in the emerging health care bill. You know why, of course. They don’t want a public option that would compete with private insurers and use its bargaining power to negotiate better rates with drug companies. They argue that would be unfair. Unfair? Unfair to give more people better health care at lower cost? To Pharma and Insurance, “unfair” is anything that undermines their profits.

So they’re pulling out all the stops—pushing Democrats and a handful of so-called “moderate” Republicans who say they’re in favor of a public option to support legislation that would include it in name only. One of their proposals is to break up the public option into small pieces under multiple regional third-party administrators that would have little or no bargaining leverage. A second is to give the public option to the states where Big Pharma and Big Insurance can easily buy off legislators and officials, as they’ve been doing for years.

A third is to bind the public plan to the same rules private insurers have already wangled, thereby making it impossible for the public plan to put competitive pressure on the insurers.

Max Baucus, Chair of Senate Finance (now exactly why does the Senate Finance Committee have so much say over health care?) hasn’t shown his cards but staffers tell me he’s more than happy to sign on to any one of these. But Baucus is waiting for more support from his colleagues, and none of the three proposals has emerged as the leading candidate for those who want to kill the public option without showing they’re killing it. Meanwhile, Ted Kennedy and his staff are still pushing for a full public option, but with Kennedy ailing, he might not be able to round up the votes. (Kennedy’s health committee released a draft of a bill today, which contains the full public option.)

Enter Olympia Snowe. Her move is important, not because she’s Republican (the Senate needs only 51 votes to pass this) but because she’s well-respected and considered non-partisan, and therefore offers some cover to Democrats who may need it. Last night Snowe hosted a private meeting between members and staffers about a new proposal Pharma and Insurance are floating, and apparently she’s already gained the tentative support of several Democrats (including Ron Wyden and Thomas Carper).

Under Snowe’s proposal, the public option would kick in years from now, but it would be triggered only if insurance companies fail to bring down healthcare costs and expand coverage in the meantime.

What’s the catch? First, these conditions are likely to be achieved by other pieces of the emerging legislation; for example, computerized records will bring down costs a tad, and a mandate requiring everyone to have coverage will automatically expand coverage. If it ever comes to it, Pharma and Insurance can argue that their mere participation fulfills their part of the bargain, so no public option will need to be triggered. Second, as Pharma and Insurance well know, "years from now" in legislative terms means never. There will never be a better time than now to enact a public option. If it’s not included, in a few years the public’s attention will be elsewhere.

Much the same dynamic is occurring in the House. Two members who had originally supported single payer told me that Pharma and Insurance have launched the same strategy there, and many House members are looking to see what happens in the Senate. Snowe’s "trigger" is already buzzing among members.

All this will be decided within days or weeks. And once those who want to kill the public option without their fingerprints on the murder weapon begin to agree on a proposal—Snowe’s "trigger" or any other—the public option will be very hard to revive. The White House must now insist on a genuine public option. And you, dear reader, must insist as well.

This is it, folks. The concrete is being mixed and about to be poured. And after it’s poured and hardened, universal health care will be with us for years to come in whatever form it now takes. Let your representative and senators know you want a public option without conditions or triggers—one that gives the public insurer bargaining leverage over drug companies, and pushes insurers to do what they’ve promised to do. Don’t wait until the concrete hardens and we’ve lost this battle.

Source: Robert Reich’s Blog 6/6/09,
Single Payer Health

Pressing Wolk, Galgiani and McNerney on health care

Carol Bailey

In the morning, representative members from the rally at large, met in the conference rooms at the offices of Senator Lois Wolk, for a combined meeting with the office of Assemblymember Galgiani and in the afternoon at the office of Representative Jerry McNerney.

Dillon Delvo, Legislative Aide to Senator Wolk, and Darin Forrest Walsh, Sacramento Executive Assistant to Senator Wolk, listened and responded to our six representatives in the meeting. Due to current budget issues, SB 810 (Leno) is in Appropriations Suspense on the Senate side until January, 2010. We believe, however, that it is important to keep the issue of single payer front and foremost; anytime is the “right” time to make the moral decision for constituents and for Senator Wolk and Assemblymember Galgiani to co-author SB 810 (Leno). The reality is that little will be changed her vote to “Aye”.

We view this new legislative session as a new opportunity. We are optimistic that Assemblymember Galgiani recognizes the needs of her community. We believe that there will be continued dialogue regarding the crucial issue of access to health care and for the need of a single payer system for her constituents. We look forward to ongoing dialogue and involvement.

McNerney

Five miles north, however, was a different scenario. It was delightful to arrive at the Grand Canal Blvd. office of Representative Jerry McNerney, where Ms. Olilia Trevino, Staff Assistant to Representative McNerney, greeted constituents and guests, had sign-in sheets available, accepted letters to Representative McNerney and circulated through the gathering. Sodas and cookies were available. After entertaining Ms. Trevino with some of our CARA Single Payer songs, the constituent committee of six met with Cherie Clausen, Legislative Aide from the Pleasanton Office and Nicole Alioto, District Director, also from the Pleasanton Office. Both legislative staff members expressed an interest in working with our group. Unfortunately, the concerns of our group were not resolved: There is apparent strong support for HR 676 (Conyers) by multiple groups of constituents, but Congressmember McNerney is still apparently unwilling to become a single payer health care advocate for his constituency. We do not have a clear picture of his concerns—just that he is not yet ready to co-sponsor HR 676 (Conyers). It is our understanding that he is just going to wait until a bill is presented and then take action.

Much of our meeting was spent dealing with, to us, a baffling concern regarding the financing structure of HR 676 (Conyers)—the 10% tax imposed on the top 1% of wage earners. (All wage earners would pay a 4.75% tax on earnings. No premiums, co-pays, or deductibles. The top 1% would pay the additional tax.) Both Ms. Clausen and Ms. Alioto expressed concern that this additional tax would cause the top wage earners to leave the country, thus creating an undue burden on the lower and middle class wage earners.

We were assured that when a bill is presented to the House Floor, we will be able to consider its merits. Waiting for a bill is obviously too late in the process. That dialogue must begin now. Perhaps through ongoing dialogue we can help Congressperson McNerney gain the information and insight he needs to become an advocate and supporter for his constituents.

We left the meeting with the concept that Congressmember McNerney knows what it is like to take on a cause that seems defeatable and to win that cause. His constituents also know what it is like to help achieve that win. Single payer must become that cause.

In short, single payer must prevail. The government already pays for 60% of all health care costs. We do not need any small steps or acquiescence to the health insurance industry to go that additional 40% to cover all Americans with universal, comprehensive, affordable access to health care.

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Global weapons spending hits record levels

Richard Norton-Taylor

US accounts for more than half the total increase to $1.4 trillion. China is now second biggest spender in world league table. Worldwide spending on weapons has reached record levels amounting to well over $1tn last year, a leading research organisation reported today. Global military expenditure has risen by 45% over the past decade to $1.46tn, according to the latest annual Yearbook on Armaments, Disarmament, and International Security published by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (Sipri).

Though the US accounts for more than half the total increase, China and Russia nearly tripled their military expenditure over the decade, with China now second only to the US in the military expenditure league table. "China had both the largest absolute and the largest relative increase," says the Sipri report. The increase "has roughly paralleled its economic growth and is also linked to its major power aspirations," it adds. Other regional powers, including India, Brazil and Algeria, also substantially increased their spending on arms, the report says.

The idea of the 'war on terror' has encouraged many countries to see their problems through a highly militarised lens, using this to justify high military spending," said Dr Sam Perlo-Freeman, head of Sipri's military expenditure project. "Meanwhile, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have cost $903bn in additional military spending by the USA alone."

Sipri's yearbook also lists the top 100 arms producing companies, excluding Chinese ones, for which figures were unavailable. Boeing remained the top arms producer in 2007 —the most recent year for which reliable data is available— with arms sales worth $30.5bn. All the top 20 companies are American or European. Their aggregate arms sales amounted to $347bn in 2007, an increase of 5% in real terms over 2006.

Sipri estimates that in total there are about 8,400 operational nuclear warheads in the world, of which almost 2,000 are kept on high alert and capable of being launched in minutes. Counting spare warheads, those in storage and those due to be dismantled, there are 23,300 nuclear weapons in the arsenals of eight states—the US, Russia, China, the UK, France, India, Pakistan and Israel, according to the yearbook.

The number of people forcibly displaced by conflict has also increased in recent years, with internally displaced persons (IDPs) reaching 26 million, more than twice the number of refugees, says the Sipri report. "For a large share of these people, no sustainable solution is in sight. Mass population displacement is often a result—and even a goal—of violence against civilians."

Top 10 military spenders in 2008 ($bn)

1  USA       607
2  China     84.9
3  France    65.7
4  UK        65.3
5  Russia    58.6
6  Germany   46.8
7  Japan     46.3
8  Italy     40.6
9  Saudi Arabia  38.2
10 India    30.0


250K military contractors, more to come

Jeremy Scahill

A couple of years ago, Blackwater executive Joseph Schmitz seemed to see a silver lining for mercenary companies with the prospect of US forces being withdrawn or reduced in Iraq. "There is a scenario where we could as a government, the United States, could pull back the military footprint," Schmitz said. "And there would then be more of a need for private contractors to go in." When it comes to armed contractors, it seems that Schmitz was right.

According to new statistics released by the Pentagon, with Barack Obama as commander-in-chief, there has been a 23% increase in the number of "Private Security Contractors" working for the Department of Defense in Iraq in the second quarter of 2009 and a 29% increase in Afghanistan, which "correlates to the build up of forces" in the country. These numbers relate explicitly to DoD security contractors. Companies like Blackwater and its successor Triple Canopy work on State Department contracts and it is unclear if these contractors are included in the over-all statistics. This means, the number of individual "security" contractors could be quite higher, as could the scope of their expansion.

Overall, contractors (armed and unarmed) now make up approximately 50% of the "total force in Centcom AOR [Area of Responsibility].” This means there are a whopping 242,657 contractors working on these two U.S. wars. These statistics come from two reports just released by Gary J. Motsek, the Assistant Deputy Under Secretary of Defense (Program Support): "Contractor Support of U.S. Operations in USCENTCOM AOR, IRAQ, and Afghanistan and "Operational Contract Support, State of the Union."

"We expect similar dependence on contractors in future contingency operations," according to the contractor “State of the Union.” It notes that the deployment size of both military personnel and DoD civilians are “fixed by law,” but points out that the number of contractors is “size unfixed,” meaning there is virtually no limit (other than funds) to the number of contractors that can be deployed in the war zone.

At present there are 132,610 in Iraq and 68,197 in Afghanistan. The report notes that while the deployment of security contractors in Iraq is increasing, there was an 11% decrease in overall contractors in Iraq from the first quarter of 2009 due to the "ongoing efforts to reduce the contractor footprint in Iraq."

Both Pentagon reports can be downloaded here <http://www.acq.osd.mil/log/PS/hot_topics.html>.


Source: Rebel Reports 6/1/09 http://rebellereports.com

Global military expenditure has risen by 45% over the past decade to $1.46 trillion

6 Connections July 2009
Pakistan choices

Kathy Kelly

Shortly after arriving in Pakistan, we met a weaver and his extended family, numbering 76 in all, who had been forcibly displaced from their homes in Fathepur, a small village in the Swat Valley. Fighting between the Pakistani military and the Taliban had intensified. Terrified by aerial bombing and anxious to leave before a curfew would make flight impossible, the family packed all the belongings they could carry and fled on foot. It was a harrowing four-day journey over snow-covered hills. Leaving their village, they faced a Taliban checkpoint where a villager trying to leave had been assassinated that same morning. Fortunately, a Taliban guard let them pass. Walking many miles each day, with 45 children and 22 women, they supported one another as best they could. Men took turns carrying a frail grandmother on their shoulders. One woman gave birth to her baby, Hamza, on the road. When they arrived, exhausted, at a rest stop in the outskirts of Islamabad, they had no idea where to go next.

While there, the weaver struck up a conversation with a man whom he’d never met before. He told the man about the family’s plight. Hearing that they were homeless, the man invited them to live with him and his family in a large building, which he is renovating. He offered to put the reconstruction on hold, so that the family could move into the upper floor where plans were already being made to turn the top floor into a school for the children.

Several tents led me upstairs to meet their grandparents. The elderly couple sat cross-legged on cots. When we entered, the grandmother stood, embraced me and then softly wept for several minutes. Soon, about 20 men, women and children clustered around the cots. All listened attentively while one of the weaver's brothers, Abdullah Shah, spoke with pride about the school in Fathepur where he had been a headmaster. The village had three schools and his school was so successful that even Talibani families sent their children to study there. Now, the Talibani has destroyed all of the schools in Fathepur.

He and his brothers wonder what their future will be. How and when can they return to their village? And how will they start over? The crops are ruined, livestock have died and land mines have been laid. Most of the shops and businesses have been destroyed. Many homes are demolished.

The trauma endured by the refugees is overwhelming. Yet, numerous individuals and groups have swiftly extended hospitality and emergency aid. We visited a Sikh community in Hassan Abdul, which has taken in hundreds of Sikhs, housing them inside a large and very famous shrine. Nearby, we stayed for several days in Tarbela where families in very simple dwellings have welcomed their relatives. The townspeople quietly took up a collection to support the refugee families. Some of the townspeople accompanied us to Ghari, just up the road from Tarbela, where 155 people are staying in an abandoned hospital, relying entirely on the generosity of their new neighbors. Doctors from Lahore invited two of us to go with them to villages near Mardan where people from the Swat Valley are still arriving. The doctors were part of a project organized jointly through Rotary Lahore, Pakistan Medical Aid and Jahandan, which has worked with area councils to convert schools into refugee centers. The doctors take turns, several times a week, delivering relief shipments and helping supervise distribution.

Generosity in the face of such massive displacement and suffering is evident everywhere we go. But Pakistan needs help on a much larger scale. The US has pledged 100 million dollars toward relief efforts. Two other disclosures about money budgeted for Pakistan should be considered in light of the unbearable burdens borne by close to two million new refugees. First, is the decision to spend 800 million dollars to renovate and expand the US Embassy in Islamabad and to upgrade security at US consular offices elsewhere in the country. Secondly, the US will spend 400 million dollars in 2009 to teach countersurgency tactics to Pakistan’s military. The 2010 defense spending budget requests an additional 700 million for countersurgency training in Pakistan.

A policy of peace

What would happen if US officials put plans to expand the US embassy on hold? Suppose the US were to declare that helping alleviate the misery of people forcibly displaced by Talibani violence and the recent military offensive is a top priority, one that trump spending money on renovating and expanding the US Embassy.

Suppose that the US were to redirect funds designated to train counterinsurgents and instead make these funds available to help alleviate impoverishment in Pakistan. No one seems to know how the Talibani are funded, but they clearly use large sums of money to build their ranks, giving each new recruit 25,000 rupees, a sum that exceeds what a teacher earns in one year. In villages where people don’t have enough resources to feed their children, the Talibani would initially move in with plans to build schools and offer two meals a day, plus clean clothes, to the children. Later, they would exercise increasingly fierce control over villages. But their initial forays into villages were marked by offers to reduce the gaps between “haves” and “have-nots.” It means weaving new relationships that don’t rely on guns and bombs for security.

Suppose the US were to declare that helping alleviate the misery of people is a top priority, one that trumps spending money on renovating and expanding the US Embassy.

It means weaving new relationships that don’t rely on guns and bombs for security.
MSM = truth? Check out the alternatives & decide for yourself

If you tap in to some of the alternative media, you will get a very different perspective on events. Especially now, when the mainstream media often acts as a cheerleader for whatever the administration does, it’s necessary to go a little further to get your news. An internet connection is helpful.

KPFKA (94.1 FM) provides excellent coverage on many issues. You can listen on the internet at http://www.kpfk.org
Democracy Now! on KPFKA, 94.1 FM and KVMR, 89.5 FM or on the web at: http://www.democracynow.org
Emptywheel http://emptywheel.firedoglake.com/
Firedoglake http://firedoglake.com
Daily Kos http://www.dailykos.com
Congress Matters http://www.congressmatters.com
Think Progress http://thinkprogress.com
Huffington Post http://www.huffingtonpost.com
Eschaton http://www.eschatonblog.com/
Hullabaloo http://digitbydigit.blogspot.com
Talking Points Memo http://www.talkingpointsmemo.com
TPM Muckraker http://www.tpm.muckraker.com/
Froomkin’s White House Briefing http://washingtonpost.com
FiveThirtyEight.com http://www.fivethirtyeight.com/
Down With Tyranny http://downwithtyranny.blogspot.com/
Crooks and Liars http://www.crooksandliars.com
Media Matters http://mediamatters.org/
Common Dreams: http://www.commondreams.org/
Truth Out: http://www.truthout.org/
Raw Story http://www.rawstory.com
Open Left http://www.openleft.com/
Independent Media Center http://www.indymedia.org
The Nation http://www.thenation.com/
Hightower News http://www.webactive.com/hightower/
Mother Jones http://www.motherjones.com/
In These Times http://inthetimestripes.com/
Tom Paine common sense http://www.tompaine.com/
The Guardian http://www.guardian.co.uk/worldlatest/
Corporate Watch http://www.corpwatch.org/home/PHH.jsp

On Friday, May 22, 2009, I had genital reassignment surgery, better known by the acronym GRS, in Trinidad, Colorado. Trinidad is a small town of about 10,000 people situated at the foot of the Rocky Mountains at the Colorado and New Mexico border. They are represented in the Colorado State Legislature by a Republican Senator and a Democratic Representative. Their average commute time is less than ten minutes, and the average worker earns just over $10,000 per year. They voted 96% for Bush-Cheney in 2004. As a transsexual woman, I would typically steer clear of such places, fearing those who see gay bashing as their God-given right and responsibility.

But Trinidad is one of the most welcoming cities in the world to transgender people. In my ten day stay there I went into nearly every business at least once, some of them practically every day, and I was never put in fear at all, never heard snickers and snide remarks. I was treated with respect and dignity by everyone, young and old alike.

I was told about a transwoman named Michelle who was born in Trinidad and has lived her entire life there. She transitioned from Michael to Michelle well over 10 years ago, but she could never afford the surgery that would make her fully whole as the woman she knew herself to be. She is deeply troubled and has trouble keeping a job. Everyone in town looks after her. They buy her coffee, lunch, and work to help her overcome her addictions. No one, not even the children, have a cross thing to say about her.

I have heard similar stories from San Francisco and Berkeley, but never here in Stockton. Since coming out one year ago, I have heard from many transgender people. All of them are terrified to live their truth. They are afraid of losing family and friends, of losing employment, of being harassed by the police, of losing their healthcare and of being left alone with nowhere to turn for support and help. Some of these fears will never happen. For example, California has a non-discrimination in employment law that prohibits employers from firing employees who transition at work.

Living for nearly twenty years in Stockton, and being an out transsexual woman for the last year has taught me something. The people of Stockton are mostly kind and generous people who truly want to make a difference in the world. Most are not prejudiced or bigoted even against those they may not fully understand. Most could not stand by while a transgender person is being attacked without intervening to stop the violence. But the transgender people of Stockton do not know that. There is a disconnect that I need to address.

I have founded a new non-profit organization based in Stockton, but serving all of San Joaquin County, called the Stockton Transgender Alliance. The mission of this group is to bring together citizens and professionals from all walks of life to provide a safe place for transgender and gender questioning youth and adults to meet and be able to talk about their feelings and fears openly. I envision a hotline where crisis calls can be handled 24/7, as well as regular support and social meetings facilitated by people who support authentic gender expression.

Would you help make Stockton a welcoming place for all people regardless of gender identity and expression? Almost twenty years ago I volunteered to help keep the Cuddler program at County Hospital going. We were able to grow it from three volunteers when I started to over 25 volunteers in two years. I volunteered to work with four others to start a chapter of PFLAG in Stockton, and it continues to serve the families of gay and lesbian people to this day. You never know what results your active participation in such a group can lead to. But I can assure you the rewards in lives changed, and in the case of transgender people, the lives saved, are beyond priceless.

To volunteer to help get the Stockton Transgender Alliance off the ground and running, please email me, Elena Kelly, at stockton.transgender.alliance@comcast.net. I need media people, counselors, ministers, marketing, healthcare, legal, board members, and regular citizens who consider themselves allies of the transgender community. I promise to make your volunteer time very meaningful and productive. No meetings for meetings sake here. Bless you as you reach out to lend a hand to this neglected and fearful community.

Elena Kelly is a Chapter Leader for Marriage Equality USA, San Joaquin Chapter and the founder of the non-profit Stockton Transgender Alliance. She can be reached at elena.kelly@comcast.net.

We’re on the web too!
The Peace & Justice Network of San Joaquin County (pjnsjc) website has information, calendar, media links, and more. Under construction and growing. Share your ideas on how the website should evolve.
http://www.pjnsjc.org

The T is Not Silent
Stockton's transgender alliance has begun

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Inflating the bubble:
it was the banks

Dean Baker

Congress may establish a commission to investigate the causes of the economic crisis. This may be a useful exercise in publicly shaming those who are responsible for an enormous amount of unnecessary suffering. That would be a good thing. These people should be held accountable. Those in the financial sector who broke the law should go to jail, or at the least, lose their ill-gotten fortunes. The public officials whose incompetence and/or corruption allowed for this disaster should lose their jobs and never again be given a position of public trust.

These could be positive outcomes from an investigative commission. However, such a commission could have a negative role. It could be part of an ongoing effort to rewrite history and cover up for those who were responsible for this disaster.

The basic point is straightforward. This crisis was simple and easy to see for any competent economist. We had an $8 trillion housing bubble. This bubble was driving the economy ever since the recession in 2001.

The bubble led to an enormous boom in construction, as builders made enormous profits selling new homes at bubble-inflated prices. It also led to a huge surge in consumption as homeowners spent a large portion of their bubble-generated housing equity.

Bubbles inevitably burst. That’s why they are called “bubbles.” When this bubble burst, it was inevitable that housing construction would collapse and consumption would plummet, throwing the economy into a steep recession.

There were no ands, ifs or buts in this story. It was an absolute inevitability. There were no ands, ifs or buts in this story. It was an absolute inevitability.

In the mid-90s, coinciding with the stock bubble, house prices began to substantially outpace the rate of inflation. By their peak in 2006, nationwide house prices had outpaced inflation by more than 70 percent.

There was nothing on either the demand or supply side that could explain this huge run-up in house prices. Incomes had grown well in the late 90s, but were actually stagnant in the current decade. Population growth and new household formation had slowed markedly from the pace decades earlier when the baby boomers were forming their own households for the first time.

On the supply side, we were building homes at a near record rate. Obviously, there were no serious supply constraints.

Finally, as a check, we could examine rents, since any major change in fundamentals should have a substantial impact on both the rental and ownership side of the market. Rents slightly outpaced inflation in the late 90s and just tracked inflation in this decade.

All of this should have led any serious economist to be yelling at the top of their lungs about the dangers of a housing bubble.

Yet, almost none did. This was inexcusable; people lose their jobs for this failure.

What about the bad loans, the overleveraged and the unregulated derivatives? Yes, these all fed the bubble, and allowed it to grow much larger than otherwise would have been possible. These evils were also the basis for the enormous paychecks for people like Robert Rubin, Henry Paulson, Angelo Mozilo, and the rest.

The political influence of the Wall Street crew was undoubtedly a major factor in the failure to clamp down on the bubble.

In other words, it was not just that the economists were incredibly incompetent, although many were. It is also that many were quite willing to look away from a looming disaster that was further enriching the rich and powerful. Welcome to modern economics.

But it is important to keep the bubble front and center and the finance second. This bubble was driving the economy ever since the recession in 2001.

The second reason for keeping finance secondary is that, unlike the bubble, the specifics of finance are complicated. Most people cannot follow the details of collateralized debt obligations or credit default swaps. Focusing on this aspect of the crisis will lead the public to believe that the collapse really was hard to see coming and that people therefore cannot be held accountable. In short, shifting the focus to finance is a victory for the “who could have known?” gang.

So, it would be great if Congress puts the boys and girls at the Fed, the Treasury, the SEC, and the other regulatory institutions which allowed this bubble to grow on their watch as well as the Wall Streeters who profit off the nation’s pain. But if this is an effort to cover up responsibility, then let’s just save the money and wait until we get honest representatives in Congress to establish such a commission.
Goodbye, GM

Michael Moore

I write this on the morning of the end of the once-mighty General Motors. By high noon, the President of the United States will have made it official: General Motors, as we know it, has been totaled.

As I sit here in GM’s birthplace, Flint, Michigan, I am surrounded by friends and family who are filled with anxiety about what will happen to them and to the town. Forty percent of the homes and businesses in the city have been abandoned. Imagine what it would be like if you lived in a city where almost every other house is empty. What would be your state of mind?

It is with sad irony that the company which invented “planned obsolescence”—the decision to build cars that would fall apart after a few years so that the customer would then have to buy a new one—has now made itself obsolete. It refused to build automobiles that the public wanted, cars that got great gas mileage, were as safe as they could be, and were exceedingly comfortable to drive. Oh—and that wouldn’t start falling apart after two years. GM stubbornly fought environmental and safety regulations. Its executives arrogantly dismissed the “inferior” Japanese and German cars, cars which would become the gold standard for automobile buyers. And it was hell-bent on punishing its unionized workforce, lopping off thousands of workers for no good reason other than to “improve” the short-term bottom line of the corporation. Beginning in the 1980s, when GM was posting record profits, it moved countless jobs to Mexico and elsewhere, thus destroying the lives of tens of thousands of hard-working Americans. The glaring stupidity of this policy was that, when they eliminated the income of so many middle class families, who did they think was going to be able to afford to buy their cars? History will record this blunder in the same way it now writes about the French building the Maginot Line or how the Romans cluelessly poisoned their own water system with lethal lead in its pipes.

So here we are at the deathbed of General Motors. The company’s body not yet cold, and I find myself filled with—dare I say it—joy. It is not the joy of revenge against a corporation that ruined my hometown and brought misery, divorce, alcoholism, homelessness, physical and mental debilitation, and drug addiction to the people I grew up with. Nor do I, obviously, claim any joy in knowing that 21,000 more GM workers will be told that they, too, are without a job.

But you and I and the rest of America now own a car company. I know, I know—who on earth wants to run a car company? Who among us wants $50 billion of our tax dollars thrown down the rat hole of still trying to save GM? Let’s be clear about this: The only way to save GM is to kill GM. Saving our precious industrial infrastructure, though, is another matter and must be a top priority. If we allow the shutting down and tearing down of our auto plants, we will sorely wish we still had them when we realize that those factories could have built the alternative energy systems we now desperately need. And when we realize that the best way to transport ourselves is on light rail and bullet trains and cleaner buses, how will we do this if we’ve allowed our industrial capacity and its skilled workforce to disappear?

Thus, as GM is “reorganized” by the federal government and the bankruptcy court, here is the plan I am asking President Obama to implement for the good of the workers, the GM communities, and the nation as a whole. Twenty years ago when I made “Roger & Me,” I tried to warn people about what was ahead for General Motors. Had the power structure and the punditocracy listened, maybe much of this could have been avoided. Based on my track record, I request an honest and sincere consideration of the following suggestions:

1. Just as President Roosevelt did after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the President must tell the nation that we are at war and we must immediately convert our auto factories to factories that build mass transit vehicles and alternative energy devices. Within months in Flint in 1942, GM halted all car production and immediately used the assembly lines to build planes, tanks and machine guns. The conversion took no time at all. Everyone pitched in. The fascists were defeated.

2. We are now in a different kind of war—a war that we have conducted against the ecosystem and that has been conducted by our very own corporate leaders. This current war has two fronts. One is headquartered in Detroit. The products built in the factories of GM, Ford and Chrysler are some of the greatest weapons of mass destruction responsible for global warming and the melting of our polar icecaps. The things we call “cars” may have been fun to drive, but they are like a million daggers into the heart of Mother Nature. To continue to build them would only lead to the ruin of our species and much of the planet.

The other front in this war is being waged by the oil companies against you and me. They are committed to fleecing us whenever they can, and they have been reckless stewards of the finite amount of oil that is located under the surface of the earth. They know they are sucking it bone dry. And like the lumber tycoons of the early 20th century who didn’t give a damn about future generations as they tore down every forest they could get their hands on, these oil barons are not telling the public what they know to be true—that there are only a few more decades of useable oil on this planet. And as the end days of oil approach us, we will have to get ready for some very desperate measures. We need tens of millions of solar panels right now. And there is an easier and skilled workforce who can build them.

3. President Obama, now that he has taken control of GM, needs to convert the factories to new and needed uses immediately.

4. Don’t put another $30 billion into the coffers of GM to build cars. Instead, use that money to keep the current workforce—and most of those laid off—employed so that they can build the new modes of 21st century transportation. Let them start the conversion work now.

5. Announce that we will have bullet trains criss-crossing this country in the next five years. Japan is celebrating the 45th anniversary of its first bullet train this year. Now they have dozens of them. Average speed: 165 mph. Average time a train is late: under 30 seconds. They have had these high speed trains for nearly five decades—and we don’t even have one. The fact that the technology already exists for us to go from New York to L.A. in 17 hours by train, and that we haven’t used it, is criminal. Let’s hire the unemployed to build the new high speed lines all over the country. Chicago to Detroit in less than two hours. Miami to DC in under 7 hours. Denver to Dallas in five and a half. This can be done and done now.

6. Initiate a program to put light rail mass transit lines in all our large and medium-sized cities. Build those trains in the GM factories. And hire local people everywhere to install and run this system.

7. Transform some of the empty GM factories to facilities that build windmills, solar panels and other means of alternate forms of energy.

8. Provide tax incentives for those who travel by hybrid car or bus or train. Also, credits for those who convert their home to alternative energy.

9. To help pay for this, impose a two-dollar tax on every gallon of gasoline. This will get people to switch to more energy saving cars or to use the new rail lines and rail cars the former autoworkers have built for them.

Well, that’s a start. Please, please, please don’t save GM so that a smaller version of it will simply do nothing more than build Chevys or Cadillacs. This is not a long-term solution. Don’t throw bad money into a company whose tailpipe is malfunctioning, causing a strange odor to fill the car. 60% of GM is ours. I think we can do a better job.


If we shut down our auto plants, we will sorely wish we still had them...those factories could have built the alternative energy systems we now desperately need.
Grand theft auto: on bankrupting GM

Greg Palast

Screw the autoworkers. They may be crying about General Motors’ bankruptcy but dumping 40,000 of the last 60,000 union jobs into a mass grave won’t spoil Jamie Dimon’s day.

Dimon is the CEO of JP Morgan Chase bank. While GM workers are losing their retirement health benefits, their jobs, their life savings; while shareholders are getting zilch and many creditors getting hosed, a few privileged GM lenders—led by Morgan and Citibank—expect to get back 100% of their loans to GM, a stunning $6 billion. The way these banks are getting their $6 billion bonanza is stone cold illegal.

I smell a rat. Stevie the Rat, to be precise. Steven Rattner, Barack Obama’s “Car Czar”—the man who essentially ordered GM into bankruptcy this morning. When a company goes bankrupt, everyone takes a hit: fair or not, workers lose some contract wages, stockholders get wiped out and creditors get fragments of what’s left. That’s the law. What workers don’t lose are their pensions (including old-age health funds) already taken from their wages and held in their name.

But not this time. Stevie the Rat has a different plan for GM: grab the pension funds to pay off Morgan and Citi. Here’s theочка: Rattner is demanding the bankruptcy court simply wipe away the money GM owes workers for their retirement health insurance. Cash in the insurance fund would be replaced by GM stock. The percentage may be 17% of GM’s stock—or 25%. Whatever, 17% or 25% is worth, well ... just try paying for your dialysis with 50 shares of bankrupt auto stock. Yet Citibank and Morgan, says Rattner, should get their whole $6 billion in the insurance fund would be replaced by GM stock. The percentage may be 17% of GM’s stock—or 25%. Whatever, 17% or 25% is worth, well ... just try paying for your dialysis with 50 shares of bankrupt auto stock. Yet Citibank and Morgan, says Rattner, should get their whole $6 billion in the insurance fund.

Preventive detention for pensions

So what’s wrong with seizing workers’ pension fund money in a bankruptcy? The answer, Mr. Obama, Mr. Law Professor, is that it's illegal. In 1974, after a series of scandalous take-downs of pension and retirement funds during the Nixon era, Congress passed the Employee Retirement Income Security Act. ERISA says you can’t seize workers’ pension funds (whether monthly payments or health insurance) any more than you can seize their private bank accounts. And that’s because they are the same thing: workers give up wages in return for retirement benefits.

The law is darn explicit that grabbing pension money is a no-no. Company executives must hold these retirement funds as "fiduciaries." Here’s the law, Professor Obama, as described on the government’s own web site under the heading, "Health Plans and Benefits."

"The primary responsibility of fiduciaries is to run the plan solely in the interest of participants and beneficiaries for the exclusive purpose of providing benefits."

Every business in America that runs short of cash would love to dip into retirement kitties, but it’s not their money any more than a banker can seize your account when the bank’s a little short. A plan’s assets are for the plan’s members only, not for Mr. Dimon nor Mr. Rubin. Yet, in effect, the Obama Administration is demanding that money for an elderly auto worker’s spleen should be siphoned off to feed the TARP babies. Workers go without lung transplants so Dimon and Rubin can pimply out their ride. This is another "Guantanamo" moment for the Obama Administration—channeling Nixon to endorse the preventive detention of retiree health insurance.

Fitching GM’s pension assets doesn’t become legal because the cash due the fund is replaced with GM stock. Congress saw through that switch-a-roo by requiring that companies, as fiduciaries, must "act prudently and must diversify the plan’s investments in order to minimize the risk of large losses."

By "diversify" for safety, the law does not mean put 100% of worker funds into a single busted company’s stock. This is dangerous business. The Rattner plan opens the flaps to every politically connected or down-on-their-luck company seeking to drain health care retirement funds.

House of Rubin

Pensions are wiped away and two connected banks don’t even get a haircut? How come Citi and Morgan aren’t asked, like workers and other creditors, to take stock in GM? As Butch said to Sundance, who ARE these guys? You remember Morgan and Citi. These are the corporate Welfare Queens who’ve already sucked up over a third of a trillion dollars in aid from the US Treasury and Federal Reserve. Not coincidentally, Citi, the big winner, has paid over $100 million to Robert Rubin, the former US Treasury Secretary. Rubin was Obama’s point-man in winning banks’ endorsement and campaign donations (by far, his largest source of his corporate funding). With GM’s last dying dimes about to fall into one pocket, and the Obama Treasury in his other pocket, Morgan’s Jamie Dimon is correct in saying that the last twelve months will prove to be the bank’s "finest year ever."

Which leaves us to ask the question: is the forced bankruptcy of GM, the elimination of tens of thousands of jobs, just a collection action for favored financiers? And it’s been a good year for Senor Rattner. While the Obama Administration made a big deal out of Rattner’s youth spent working for the Steelworkers Union, they tried to sweep under the chassiss that Rattner was one of the privileged, select group of investors in Cerberus Capital, the owners of Chrysler. "Owning" is a loose term. Cerberus "owned" Chrysler the way a cannibal "hosts" you for dinner. Cerberus paid nothing for Chrysler—indeed, they were paid billions by Germany’s Daimler Corporation to haul it away. Cerberus kept the cash, then dumped Chrysler’s bankrupt corpus on the US taxpayer.

While Stevie the Rat sold his interest in Cerberus when he became Car Czar, he never relinquished his post at the shop of vultures called Quadrangle Hedge Fund. Rattner’s personal net worth stands at roughly half a billion dollars. This is Obama’s working class hero. If you run a business and played fast and loose with your workers’ funds, you could land in prison. Stevie the Rat’s plan is nothing less than Grand Theft Auto Pension. It doesn’t make it any less of a crime if the President drives the getaway car.

Economist and journalist Greg Palast, a former trade union contract negotiator, is author of the New York Times bestsellers "The Best Democracy Money Can Buy" and "Armed Madhouse." He is a GM bondholder and card-carrying member of United Automobile Workers Local 1981.

Source: GregPalast.com 6/10/09 http://www.gregpalast.com

GM bailout makes most of bad situation

Dean Baker

In the current economic climate, sitting back and allowing GM to be liquidated was not a serious option. This would have wiped out a whole network of suppliers and ancillary businesses.

The federal government would have been forced to step in with large-scale aid, in this case, just to prevent mass destitution. The state and local governments would have lacked the resources just to maintain basic services like schools, hospitals and sanitation facilities. Of course, the plan is not perfect, and it can be argued that one or another of the parties gains too much or too little.

The oft-told story that the United Auto Workers made out like bandits is nonsense. Workers are making substantial concessions, and many will be losing retiree health care benefits for which they already worked decades. The bondholders are great whiners, but none of them have said that they wanted the company liquidated. They know they would get less if the federal government had not intervened. They whine because they know the media are always sympathetic to investors, so their whines will be presented to the public as serious arguments.

It is remarkable how much anger has been generated over the government lending money to GM. This is an effort to save jobs and save the economy of the Midwest. In exchange, the government is getting a substantial ownership stake in GM.

The GM investment is an important contrast to the $12.9 billion that the government handed to Goldman Sachs through American International Group. That money was paid out to honor derivative contracts that Goldman had with AIG. The government had no legal or moral obligation to honor these contracts. Goldman had used bad business judgment in signing contracts with a counterparty that was not able to make good on its commitments. In a market economy, companies are supposed to suffer the consequences of their bad judgment.

Instead, the government simply handed over the money that AIG was unable to pay. It got nothing in return for this—no stocks, no bonds; there is no pretense that this money will ever be paid back. And the only jobs we saved were probably the jobs of Goldman’s lobbyists, who want to make sure that we don’t regulate the derivatives that helped bring on this disaster.

Somehow, this gift to Goldman aroused nowhere near as much anger as the bailout of General Motors. This is especially ironic, since the proximate cause of the crisis at GM and Chrysler is the crisis brought on by the irresponsible behavior of the Wall Street banks.

The Big Three have made many mistakes over the years, and they have suffered as a result. However, the reason that GM and Chrysler were suddenly pushed into bankruptcy was the economic collapse that followed the crash of the housing bubble. All the major auto manufacturers have seen a huge fallow in demand. Even Toyota and Honda, the superstars of the world auto industry, have seen sales decline by more than 30 percent. The difference is that they were in a strong enough position to withstand this fallow, unlike GM and Chrysler.

Under the circumstances, it hardly seems unreasonable to offer a lifeline to keep GM and Chrysler afloat. Given recent events, Detroit offers us a much better future than Wall Street—or at least a more honest one.

Source: POLITICO 6/2/09 http://www.politico.com
In the waning months of the Bush Administration, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) released a proposal to completely overhaul its regulation of genetically engineered crops, significantly weakening its oversight. The proposed rules would virtually ensure that contamination of organic and conventional crops will become even more frequent, and even excuses the Agency from taking any action to remedy such contamination. The rules would continue to allow the dangerous practice of producing drugs and industrial chemicals in food crops grown in the open environment, and in many cases even allow the biotechnology industry to decide whether their GE crops are regulated at all.

Over four years ago, USDA promised stricter oversight of genetically engineered crops; unfortunately, improvements considered early on have vanished and the regulations have instead become weaker. The proposed rule now has even more gaping holes than the regulations it is replacing, and creates a few new ones as well, resulting in more public exposure to untested and unlabeled genetically engineered foods. Instead of tightening controls to protect the public and the environment from contamination and harm, what USDA has offered further endangers your right to choose the foods you and your family eat and farmers’ right to their chosen livelihoods.

To make matters worse, USDA published the rules before publishing the full Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), as required by law, and in the absence of public review of the data needed to make regulatory recommendations. Clearly, there is something wrong with this picture.

**ACTION:** We are calling on the Obama Administration to reject the irresponsible Bush “anything goes” biotech policy, and to put in place rules that will create real change in the regulation and oversight of GE crops. And we are requesting a moratorium on commercial planting of any new GE crops until such comprehensive regulations are in place. The comment period has been extended to June 29, 2009. Please send your comment to USDA today—the Agency is listening. Let’s demand better oversight of GE crops to protect citizens, farmers, wildlife, and the environment. Take action now at: http://ga3.org/campaign/Aphis3


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**Tell Obama to ratify the Law of the Sea**

The Senate could soon decide whether the United States should sign on to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, also known simply as the Law of the Sea treaty. The treaty will help expand protections for our planet’s oceans, and becoming a party to the treaty would help the United States influence major upcoming international debates concerning ocean activities.

The treaty’s environmental provisions cover all aspects of the marine environment, including fishing, pollution, offshore mining and oil and gas exploration; such activities can have major impacts and often require international management. For example, with rapidly accelerating summer melting of Arctic sea ice, new proposals for shipping, oil and gas exploration and other harmful activities are multiplying.

Ratifying the Law of the Sea treaty would give the United States a seat at the table in discussions surrounding the future of the Arctic and protection of its marine and coastal wildlife.

One hundred fifty-seven nations have already ratified the Law of the Sea, including every major industrialized nation other than the United States. These countries are making decisions that affect ocean health and key economic and national security interests; the United States should be a full participant in these decisions.

A few vocal groups who are fundamentally opposed to U.S. involvement in international collaborations have used false arguments to pressure senators to reject the Law of the Sea, and have turned what should be an easy decision into a contentious one. President Obama can help counter arguments to pressure senators to reject the Law of the Sea treaty and overcome this opposition by reiterating that the treaty is crucial to maintaining healthy oceans and protecting economic and security interests, and by advocating for swift Senate approval.

**ACTION:** Send a message urging President Obama to declare his support for swift Senate action to ratify the Law of the Sea treaty.

**Source:** NRDC Activist Alert 6/8/09, Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), 40 West 20th St, NY, NY 10011 
http://www.nrdc.org
Obama's Guantánamo appeasement plan

Marjorie Cohn

Two days after his inauguration, President Obama pledged to close Guantánamo within one year. The Republicans, led by Senators John McCain, Mitch McConnell and Pat Roberts, immediately launched a concerted campaign to assail the new president. They claimed his plan would release dangerous terrorists into US communities and allow released terrorists to resume fighting against our troops. Fox News anchor Sean Hannity and Bush team players like torturé-memo lawyer John Yoo filled the airwaves and print media with paranoia.

The Republican attacks were bogus. A 2008 McClatchy investigation revealed that the overwhelming majority of Guantánamo detainees taken into custody in 2001 and 2002 in Afghanistan and Pakistan were innocent of wrongdoing or bit players with little intelligence value. A substantial number of those prisoners were literally sold to US officials in exchange for bounty payments offered by the US military. A Seton Hall Law Center report has debunked Pentagon claims that many released detainees have "returned to the fight." And one has never escaped from one of the US super-max prisons, which house hundreds of people convicted of terrorist offenses.

The Republicans have continued to oppose the effort to close Guantánamo. In an attempt to burnish his image and forestall war crimes charges, Dick Cheney now leads the charge, making ubiquitous attacks on Mr. Obama. Keeping Guantánamo open is "important," Cheney declares. He claims that closing Guantánamo would endanger Americans, and warns that if detainees are brought to the United States, they would "acquire all kinds of legal rights." Mr. Obama is also taking heat from the intelligence community. Those officials, like Cheney, seek to justify what they did under the Bush regime.

And now even the Democrats are piling on the bandwagon. Reacting defensively to the Republican attack campaign, the Senate voted 90 to 6 to deny Mr. Obama funds to close Guantánamo until he comes up with a "plan" for relocating the detainees there. "We spent hundreds of millions of dollars building an appropriate facility with all security precautions on Guantánamo to try these cases," said Democratic Sen. Jim Webb on ABC News. "I do not believe they should be tried in the United States," he added.

The pressure has caused Mr. Obama to buckle. Timed to coincide with a Cheney speech to the right-wing American Enterprise Institute, Mr. Obama announced an appeasement plan to deal with the 240 remaining Guantánamo detainees. Parts of his plan would threaten the very foundation of our legal system—that no one should be held in custody if he has committed no crime. These are Mr. Obama's five categories for disposition of detainees once Guantánamo is closed:

1) Those who violated the laws of war will be tried in military commissions.

Mr. Obama's plan would backtrack on an early promise to shut down the military commissions. Mr. Obama now claims that such commissions can be fair because they will no longer permit the use of evidence obtained by cruel, inhuman or degrading interrogation methods. He fails to mention, however, that the Pentagon is using "clean teams" to re-interrogate people who were previously interrogated using the prohibited methods. When they once again give the same information, it miraculously becomes untainted. Mr. Obama also fails to acknowledge that those tried in the military commissions are forbidden from seeing all the evidence against them, a violation of the bedrock principle that the accused must have an opportunity to confront his accusers. Even the US Supreme Court has disagreed with this part of Mr. Obama's proposed plan of action. In Ex parte Milligan, the Supreme Court declared military trials of civilians to be unconstitutional if civil courts are available. Prisoners falling in this category should be tried in the courts of the United States, because the laws of war are actually part of US law. The Supremacy Clause of the Constitution says that treaties shall be the supreme law of the land. The Geneva Conventions and the Hague Convention, which the United States has ratified, contain the laws of war.

2) Those who have been ordered released from Guantánamo will remain in custody.

Seventeen Uighurs from China were ordered released after they were found not to be enemy combatants. But they continue to languish in custody because they would be imperiled if returned to China, which considers them enemies of the state. Suggestions that they be brought to the United States have been met with paranoid NIMBY (not in my backyard!) protestations. So, under Mr. Obama's plan, they will remain incarcerated in a state of legal limbo. (Since this writing, Uighurs have been offered relocation to Palau; others with no place to go remain).

3) Those who cannot be prosecuted yet "pose a clear danger to the American people" will remain in custody with no right to legal process of any kind.

These are people who have never been charged with a crime. Mr. Obama did not say why they cannot be prosecuted. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates claims as many as 100 people may fall into this category. Included in this group are those who have "expressed their allegiance to Osama bin Laden." They will suffer "prolonged detention." Mr. Obama's plan for "prolonged detention" is nothing more than a newly-coined phrase for "preventive detention," a policy that harks back to the bad old days of the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798 and the internment of people of Japanese extraction in the 1940s. If Mr. Obama succeeds in convincing Congress to legalize "prolonged detention," the United States will continue to be a pariah state among justice-loving nations.

4) Those who can be safely transferred to other countries will be transferred.

Mr. Obama noted that 50 men fall into this category. It is unclear what will happen to them when they reach their destinations.

5) Those who violated US criminal laws will be tried in federal courts.

Mr. Obama cited the examples of Ramzi Yousef, who tried to blow up the World Trade Center, and Zacarias Moussaoui, who was identified as the twentieth 9/11 hijacker. Both were tried and convicted in US courts and both are serving life sentences. This is the only clearly acceptable part of Mr. Obama's plan. All detainees slated to remain in custody should be placed into this category. The federal courts provide due process as required by the Fifth Amendment to the Constitution, which does not limit due process rights to US citizens: "No person ... shall be deprived of life, liberty, or property without due process of law." The federal courts are well suited to deal with accused terrorists. Indeed, federal judges who have presided over such cases say that the Classified Information Procedures Act can effectively protect classified intelligence in federal court trials.

If Mr. Obama proceeds with the plan he announced this week he will empower those who point to US hypocrisy on human rights as a justification to do us harm. Mr. Obama's capitulation to the intelligence gurus and the right-wing attack dogs will not only imperil the rule of law; it will actually make us more vulnerable to future acts of terrorism.

Marjorie Cohn is a professor at Thomas Jefferson School of Law and president of the National Lawyers Guild.

Source: truthout.org Perspective 5/27/09 www.truthout.org
When I was invited to give this speech, I was asked if I could give a simple short talk that was “direct, naked, taut, honest, passionate, lean, shivering, startling, and graceful.” Boy, no pressure there.

But let’s begin with the startling part. Hey, Class of 2009: you are going to have to figure out what it means to be a human being on earth at a time when every living system is declining, and the rate of decline is accelerating. Kind of a mind-boggling situation—but not one peer-reviewed paper published in the last thirty years can refute that statement.

Basically, the earth needs a new operating system, you are the programmers, and we need it within a few decades.

This planet came with a set of operating instructions, but we seem to have misplaced them. Important rules like don’t poison the water, soil, or air, and don’t let the earth get overcrowded, and don’t touch the thermostat have been broken. Buckminster Fuller said that spaceship earth was so ingeniously designed that no one has a clue that we are on one, flying through the universe at a million miles per hour, with no need for seatbelts, lots of room in coach, and really good food—but all we do is eat it.

There is invisible writing on the back of the diploma you will receive, and in case you didn’t bring lemon juice to decode it, I can tell you what it says: YOU ARE BRILLIANT, AND THE EARTH IS HIRING. The earth couldn’t afford to send any recruiters or limos to your school. It sent you rain, sunsets, ripe cherries, night blooming jasmine, and that unbelievably cute person you are dating. Take the hint. And here’s the deal: Forget that this task of planet-saving is not possible in the time required. Don’t be put off by people who know what is not possible. Do what needs to be done, and check to see if it was impossible only after you are done.

When asked if I am pessimistic or optimistic about the future, my answer is always the same: If you look at the science about what is happening on earth and aren’t pessimistic, you don’t understand data. But if you meet the people who are working to restore this earth and the lives of the poor, and you aren’t optimistic, you haven’t got a pulse. What I see everywhere in the world are ordinary people willing to confront despair, power, and inescapable odds in order to restore some semblance of grace, justice, and beauty to this world. The poet Adrienne Rich wrote, “So much has been destroyed I have cast my lot with those who, age after age, perversely, with no extraordinary power, reconstitute the world.” There could be no better description. Humanity is reconstituting the world, and the action is taking place in schoolrooms, farms, jungles, villages, campuses, companies, refugee camps, deserts, fisheries, and slums.

You join a multitude of caring people. No one knows how many groups and organizations are working on the most salient issues of our day: climate change, toxic pollution, peace, water, hunger, conservation, human rights, and more. This is the largest movement the world has ever seen.

Rather than control, it seeks connection. Rather than dominance, it strives to disperse concentrations of power. Like Mercy Corps, it works behind the scenes and gets the job done. Large as it is, no one knows the true size of this movement. It provides hope, support, and meaning to billions of people in the world. Its clout resides in the fact that life is a miracle, and theAbolitionist movement was a “little universe, formed the true size of this movement. It provides hope, support, and meaning to billions of people in the world. Its clout resides in the fact that life is a miracle, and theAbolitionist movement was a “little universe, formed the true size of this movement. It provides hope, support, and meaning to billions of people in the world. Its clout resides in the fact that life is a miracle, and theAbolitionist movement was a “little universe, formed the true size of this movement. It provides hope, support, and meaning to billions of people in the world. 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An open letter to Congressman McNerney

The U.S. has a dysfunctional health care system that is by far the worst of all the First-world nations—by every measure. Financial costs to society have been escalating out-of-control for decades. The system causes premature deaths by the tens of thousands annually and is responsible for personal bankruptcies of nearly a million a year and the bankruptcies of several dozen emergency rooms in California alone in the last dozen years. The richest nation on Earth has an infant mortality rate that ranks with Cuba’s. These are the symptoms of our broken system. The data documenting these assertions is voluminous.

The causes are two-fold: (1) Uncle Sam (that’s our elected officials) has turned his back on the American people and has saddled American business and the American people with an employer-based system. That’s irrational. (2) It funds the system through a poorly-regulated, for-profit health insurance industry, fueled by a discredited “free-market” mentality. Health care is viewed as a commodity (like buying a house or a new car) rather than a public good.

The cure is public financing (single-payer)—and private delivery—for the nation’s health care system. Examples abound for spending the Common Wealth (taxes) for the Common Good: America’s national defense, our interstate commerce, our national infrastructure (roads, bridges, dams, levees); public schools at the state level; police and fire protection in our cities. The proposed legislation in Congress is H.R. 676 (Conyers, D-MI) and S 703 (Sanders, I-VT). In California, it’s SB 840.

The health insurance industry, with cartloads of cash in its coffers, has corrupted Congress and hijacked America’s health care system. The nation desperately needs Congressmen and Senators with integrity and spine and armed with the Truth to solve the problem. It is scandalous when an intelligent Democrat legislator takes the position of a right-wing Republican ideologue.

Several studies have persuasively shown the massive savings that public financing would bring, including the Lewin report that provided the rationale for California Senator Sheila Kuehl’s SB 840, a study by the California Nurses Association, and a study conducted by Harvard.

By contrast, the health insurance industry has a black box like Bernie Madoff’s. Bernie’s “secret recipe,” as it turns out, was a Ponzi scheme. He ripped off investors to the tune of $56 billion. The health insurance industry, with its own “black box,” is primarily responsible for the level of the outrageous health insurance premiums. In 1992 health care soaked up 13% of a $6 trillion GDP. In 2008 it was 16% of a $14 trillion GDP—a gross rate of increase of 20% per annum. Listen to the people. Vote to bring quality health care at an affordable cost for all.

Stanley G. Thomas

A letter home

Dear Stockton,

I would like to take this opportunity offered by Connections and the E.S.P.I.N.O. Coalition to reintroduce myself to you. You, Stockton, may or may not remember me, but I am one of your sons. I left you at 18 to attend the university, and now I am writing to you finally, after an 8 year absence.... Before I begin I would like to tell you about me... I grew up in the Southeast where I attended Monroe Elementary, Hamilton Middle School, and Franklin High School. I attended church services at St. Linus Catholic Church on "B" Street and I played baseball at Montezuma Little League....

The other day I came across an old photo of me as a boy. The photo triggered fond memories of a time spent in Stockton, California. The memories are very sweet. I knew too well to discover anything new. It took me back to my childhood.... You did a good job in raising me. When people meet me they say that I remind them so much of you. I guess I just wear my Stockton colors very proudly. You will be very proud to know of what I have done since I left. Recently, I joined the E.S.P.I.N.O. Coalition with two goals in mind, the first is to become part of the community once again and second, to help with the coalition’s efforts in supporting the youth of Stockton. So, I will end this letter with a high hope of re-engaging in the dialog that began in the winter of 1982, the year you and I first met at the county hospital.

Jesús Andrade

Jesús Andrade is currently working for the National Council of La Raza (NCLR) in Los Angeles on immigration, healthcare, and education reform. Jesús graduated from Franklin High School in 2001 and received his B.A. in Philosophy from the CSU at Sacramento. Recently, he worked as a field organizer for the Obama Campaign, and now has joined the E.S.P.I.N.O Coalition as a writer. Contact him at jandrade@nclr.org or (213) 422-6694.

Welcome from ESPINO

Escuelas Si! Pintas No! Youth Organizing for Equal Justice and Education (ESPINO) was founded in 2003 with the principal aim of addressing the schools to jails pipeline that many underrepresented youth face and to promote access to education as well as alternatives to incarceration. ESPINO is currently in the planning stages of creating student-led groups that will mobilize and organize students at Franklin, Edison, Stagg, and Cesar Chavez High Schools.

ESPINO’s mission is to enhance and support a Central Valley-wide youth organizing movement, which promotes community health, while strengthening and mobilizing the human and collective potential of under-represented communities of the Central Valley. Jesús Andrade is National Field Organizer, National Council of La Raza (NCLR).
Notes from seventh grade

Alyssa Palomares

I feel like an adult trapped in a 12 year old's body. Or maybe it's because I'm in my own little bubble, compared to the other kids.

Firstly, my taste in music is different. I like stuff like Rolling Stones, AC/DC, KISS, Sex Pistols, The Clash, Aerosmith, David Bowie, Queen, New York Dolls, Alice Cooper... I even follow the tradition of music fans way before me and visit (and support) the record stores, which have a catalogue of music deeper than what's at Best Buy, Target and even iTunes. I've also named my two guitars Ziggy (full name: Ziggy Stardust Starlynn) and CC (full name: CC Deville Jr.), which are music references that not many kids would pick up on (CC being named after a musician, Ziggy being mostly named after a David Bowie song).

Secondly, I love reading. Well, the other kids do too, but it seems like mostly the Twilight series for them. I prefer classics like 1984, which I recently read for a book report and was a totally new concept for me. I was really enjoying it at first, especially the rebelliousness of the two main characters, Winston and Julia. Suddenly, the book took a left turn and went down a dark, terrifying, depressing road, unlike anything I've ever read before. After finishing the book, I still didn't get it. I thought about it for a while. Then, it hit me: 1984 is what happens when you allow governments to get drunk on power. That scared me to the point where I was too afraid to do my book report. So, I talked about my experience with my English teacher, who said I didn't need to go in depth if it scared me too much. However, I was still afraid and it took me a while to gain the strength to do that book report (which, in the end, got posted on the "Exemplary Work" board for everyone to see and read).

Another thing about 1984 is that it reminds me of the world. Firstly, these days, the government can wiretap into many things, including phone calls and private chats. In other words, they're invading our privacy, just like Big Brother and those telescreens. Secondly, in 1984, they mass-produce music, like Disney's Hannah Montana and Jonas Brothers (which you see everywhere). Lastly, the Thought Police in 1984 would come out of nowhere, arrest if you committed thoughtcrime, or thought something against the government. After arresting you, they'd whisk you off to who-knows-where and evidence that you ever existed was erased. That reminds me of how people like JFK, Martin Luther King Jr. and John Lennon were assassinated out of nowhere. The resemblances between the modern world and 1984's world are pretty eerie.

Lastly, I don't really have that much of an interest in TV. Some teens like to watch TV and can spend hours on end in front of the tube, whereas I don't really pay attention unless VH1 Classic or Food Network is on, or if I'm tuning into a satellite radio station. One thing I don't like about TV is all the commercials. They get annoying and some of them are just plain dumb and creepy, like the ones promoting male enhancement pills. Then there's those dumb reality shows, like Rock of Love (I can't believe I used to love that show.). I think the concept of finding love by pairing a guy with a bunch of girls (or vice versa), sticking them in a mansion and eliminating them one-by-one each episode is stupid. It's such an unnatural way to find love.

I feel like an adult trapped in a 12 year old's body, but my mom thinks I'm 50.

Alyssa Palomares is turning 13 on July 18. She will be entering 8th grade this year at a Christian school in Stockton, and plans to attend Middle College High School afterwards. She's also thought about a career as a doctor, but she's unsure due to her fear of worms. Her stage name is Lisa Starlynn (usually written as "Lisa*Lynn" with a star instead of an asterisk), and she aspires to become a rockstar. She's also addicted to Twitter, where she supports Eric De La Cruz, who is in dire need of a heart transplant. You can find her at http://twitter.com/lisastarlynn.
Congresswoman Barbara Lee—a rebel inside the House

Emily Wilson

Now in her sixth full term in the House of Representatives, the congresswoman holds to her radical roots, explaining in her new book just how mainstream those revolutionary programs have become. Currently chair of the Congressional Black Caucus, she spoke to author Emily Wilson of her need to define herself.

Barbara Lee, the Democratic congresswoman who represents California's 9th district, which includes Oakland and Berkeley, gained national attention when she cast the only opposing vote to a resolution authorizing then-President Bush to use "all necessary and appropriate force" against anyone associated with the terrorist attacks of September 11. This vote won her both praise and death threats.

In her new book, "Renegade for Peace and Justice: Congresswoman Barbara Lee Speaks For Me," Lee writes about that vote and how many of her friends, including current Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, tried to talk her out of it. But the book doesn't just focus on her political life. She tells the story of growing up in segregated El Paso, moving to California, fighting to be the first African American cheerleader at San Fernando High School, her secret marriage after getting pregnant as a teenager, her miscarriage, an abortion in Mexico, and an abusive husband.

Many of these, particularly the abortion, were not easy to write about, Lee says. But she says she wanted to inspire others who are going through hard times, as well as to present her side after that controversial vote. "One of the reasons to write this book is to define myself because I didn't know who the Rush Limbaughs of the world were talking about—they called me a traitor, unpatriotic, all kinds of horrible things." Lee writes in her book that she knew nothing about sex growing up. She says she never became a member. She became friends with both founders of the party, Bobby Seale and Huey Newton, and she writes about playing cards all night with Seale and talking about classical music with Newton. Both of them also worked on Chisholm's presidential campaign. The Panthers' commitment to social justice was what drew her to them, she says.

"That's where free breakfast programs started and now it's a national law," she says. "There was nothing in our country with regards to sickle cell anemia and testing for African Americans. The Black Panther party with the George Jackson Clinic began that."

Lee studied to be a social worker at Mills College, a women's college in Oakland where she met her mentor Shirley Chisholm and worked on Chisholm's 1972 presidential campaign. Lee attended Mills after leaving her abusive husband, when she was on public assistance and taking care of her two little boys from her first marriage. Lee thinks Mills gave her much more than an excellent academic education.

"They provided the support I needed to be able to raise my kids," Lee says. "Sometimes I had to bring them to class with me. They should know statistics better than myself because they took the whole statistics course with me. A women's college understood that. They knew I was struggling." While she was at Mills, Lee became very involved with the Black Panther Party, though she never became a member. She became friends with both founders of the party, Bobby Seale and Huey Newton, and she writes about playing cards all night with Seale and talking about classical music with Newton. Both of them also worked on Chisholm's presidential campaign. The Panthers' commitment to social justice was what drew her to them, she says.

Lee has also pushed for legislation to help women who have been abused by their husbands and boyfriends. In her book she writes about the cycle of abuse in her own family, where her mother and grandmother were battered wives. Children who grow up seeing women beaten grow uncomfortable with it, Lee says. Her second husband was a violent man whose abuse took bizarre forms such as forcing her to take LSD. Lee fondly about Mills College, a women's college in Oakland where she met her mentor Shirley Chisholm and worked on Chisholm's 1972 presidential campaign. Lee attended Mills after leaving her abusive husband, when she was on public assistance and taking care of her two little boys from her first marriage. Lee thinks Mills gave her much more than an excellent academic education.

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Lee studied to be a social worker at Mills and accomplished a goal of opening a mental health clinic in Oakland called CHANGE. Working with people at the clinic is part of what led her to a political life.

"I saw many patients who were depressed, schizophrenic, paranoid, there were serious mental issues," she says. "A lot of those issues had to do with economics. They had to do with policies. A lot of the women didn't have day care. A lot of people didn't have jobs."

Now the chair of the Congressional Black Caucus, Lee says she is still focusing on economic issues among poor people.

"We're looking at how the black community has the highest percentage of poverty rates, and we're trying to close some of these what I call moral gaps," she says. "It's unethical and horrible that we have so many young African American males dropping out of school. It's immoral that we have a prison system that incarcerates more African American men than [served by] an education system that lifts them up and provides the best education so they can stay out of jail and move forward with their lives."

Livermore Lab caught conducting illegal restricted bio-experiments

Tri-Valley CAREs recently received documents that the group had long been seeking under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) regarding Livermore Lab’s biological agent programs.

The records we received show that Livermore Lab violated federal regulations by conducting “restricted experiments” without the proper approval. These illegal experiments were discovered during an inspection by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in August 2005. However, the information was not made public until now.

“The Department of Energy and Livermore Lab withheld these documents until Tri-Valley CAREs filed federal litigation under FOIA to obtain them,” explained Marylia Kelley, the group’s Executive Director. “This is a stunning example of the government covering up unclassified information because it is embarrassing. As a result, the public is denied knowledge to which it is entitled, and community health and safety are degraded.”

Restricted experiments are experiments utilizing recombinant DNA that involve the deliberate transfer of a drug resistance trait to select agents that are not known to acquire the trait naturally. Select agents, which include anthrax and plague, are biological agents and toxins having the potential to pose a severe threat to public health and safety.

Because of the dangers involved in transferring drug resistance to select agents, restricted experiments require approval from the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services. Livermore Lab did not have that approval, but ran the experiments anyway.

After discovering the illegal restricted experiments, the CDC required Livermore Lab to destroy the research samples. Otherwise, the Lab may have lost CDC’s authorization for its select agent program.

These experiments were conducted around the time of an anthrax release caused by Livermore Lab in August-September 2005. The anthrax incident led to the exposure of five individuals and resulted in a $450,000 fine against the Lab. The anthrax release also laid bare a variety of errors and deficiencies within the Livermore Lab’s select agent program, including in the Lab’s response to the mishap.

It is notable that the relevant details of the 2005 anthrax accident were kept from the public at the time, just as happened with the illegal experiments that are coming to light today. In both instances, Tri-Valley CAREs used FOIA to uncover information that the public had a right to know all along.

“Taken together, the illegal restricted experiments and the anthrax release demonstrate that there are serious problems with Livermore Lab’s select agent program,” Kelley stated.

At the time of the violations, the Lab was only operating a Biosafety Level 2 research laboratory. Since then, the Lab has opened a Biosafety Level 3 facility, which allows researchers to work with additional types of select agents that may cause serious or potentially lethal diseases, and in greater quantities (up to 50 liters).

The Lab’s planned BSL-3 activities include aerosolizing (spraying) pathogens such as plague, tularemia and Q fever, in addition to anthrax. Moreover, government documents disclose that planned experiments in the BSL-3 include genetic modification and potentially novel manipulation of viruses, prions and other agents.

According to Kelley, Livermore Lab’s expanding biological warfare research program is a legitimate community concern. She asks, “If the Lab broke the law in the past and did not tell the public the truth, what is protecting the public today?”

Source: Marylia Kelley, Tri-Valley CAREs, (925) 443-7148 http://trivalleycares.org, Tri-Valley CAREs, 2582 Old First St, Livermore, CA 94551
(925) 443-7148

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☑ Automatic Bank Transfer

☑ I’ve enclosed a check for my first contribution. Arrangements will be made by me with my bank for future pledges.

Mail checks to: Peace and Justice Network, P.O. Box 4123, Stockton CA 95204

The Peace and Justice Network is a 501(c)3 non-profit educational corporation. Contributions are tax-deductible to the full extent allowed by law.

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18 Connections July 2009
Julie Calendar

Editor’s note: if your event isn’t listed, let us know. Send all copy to: bigadi@caltel.com by the 7th of every month.

Apr 15—Aug 16
Randy Sparks in the Park concert and dinner, fundraiser for San Joaquin County Historical Society and the Micks Grove Zoological Society 6pm. San Joaquin County Historical Museum, Micks Grove Regional Park, 11793 N. Micks Grove Rd, Wed-Sun. 870-935-3460.

Apr 26—July 19
Art of Africa exhibition, Haggin Museum, 1201 N Pershing Ave, Stockton. Wed-Sun 1:30—5pm, 1st & 3rd Thurs until 9 pm. $5 adult, $2.50 over 65, 10-17; students, free under 10. 1st Sat free. 940-6312.

June 2—July 3

Thu, Jun 18

Sat, June 20

Sun, June 21
Music at the Museum featuring the Caldwell Park, Pacific & Alpine St, Stockton. Free admission. 444-5511.

Caldwell Park, Pacific & Alpine St, 444-5511.

Mon, June 22
Delta Sierran Club meeting, 7 pm. Central United Methodist Church Fireside Room, 3700 Pacific Ave, Stockton. 7 pm program with social time following. All welcome.

Julie 24—Jul 19
Amie Get Your Gun, Thu 7:30 pm, Fri-Sat 8 pm, Sun 2:30 pm. Stockton Civic Theatre, 2312 Rose Marie Lane, Stockton. $12—$23, 473-2424.

Sat, June 27
Stargazing Party at Oak Grove Regional Park, 8:00—11:00, hosted by the Stocktons Astronomical Club. Free admission, parking $5 per vehicle. 953-8814.

Thu, July 2
Peace & Justice Network board meeting, Peace & Justice Center, 231 Bedford Rd, Stockton. 6 pm. All welcome. 467-4455

Fri, July 3
All-African Downtown Stockton Pub Crawl, $30 wristband buys trolley transport, drinks, appetizers, free cover to 10 bars, discounted room at Lexington Plaza and ticket to Ports game, 5 pm, 464-5246.

Sat-Sun, July 4—5

July 7—31

Wed, July 8
Adult Summer Reading series, “The Essence of Creativity” presented by Dr. Jane Dominik. 6 pm, Chavez Central Library, 605 N El Dorado St, Stockton. 937-8221.

Thu, July 9

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Dear Reader, San Joaquin County, Pacific Complementary Medicine Center

Talking It Through
Talking It Through is now two half-hour shows.

The Real Show hosted by Margie Ensign is on Monday at 6pm
Talking It Through is hosted by Adrian Nichols and Sammy Nunez every Monday evening at 6:30 pm
SJTVC Stockton, Lodi and Manteca cable channel 26

EDUCATION • ENVIRONMENT • POLITICS • CULTURE
Sponsored by the Peace & Justice Network, InterFaith Council of San Joaquin County, Pacific Complementary Medicine Center
Check the TV page of Wednesday’s Record for latest info.

Studio volunteers wanted! All ages...we’ll train. Call 467-4455.

Come to FatherFEST 2009

Fathers & Families FatherFEST 2009 is an event honoring dads and those special men who fulfill the father role for children, food and activities that include educational games, bounce house, “Dunk-Your-Dad” tank, relay races, arts and crafts, resource fair, music and community building dialogue. You will hear dynamic speakers on the importance of fatherhood, and the role of fathers in rearing healthy kids and healthier communities.

The event will be held in Stockton, California at Caldwell Park located by S-Mart Shopping center on the Miracle Mile/Pacific Ave., on Saturday, June 20, 2009 from 11 am—4 PM. The day is planned as a non-alcoholic, fun day in the sun for the entire family.

The Celebration serves to:

1. Increase awareness of a healthy lifestyle and encourage early detection & treatment of various diseases among men & boys.
2. Educate men and their families about the importance of positive health attitudes and preventative health practices.
3. Strengthen overall family wellness by promoting healthy behaviors among fathers.
4. Create awareness of the importance of father involvement in supporting children’s growth and development.
5. Celebrate and provide a tribute to Responsible Fatherhood and showcase the existing and developing programs, initiatives and services for men and their families in our community.

Join us as we forge a new future around community building, creative solutions to neighborhood problems and focusing attention on the importance of fatherhood and positive youth development. Admission is free. Call Sammy Nunez at (209) 444-5511 to express interest and get more information.

Raft the Mokelumne River to benefit the Foothill Conservancy

On Sunday, June 28, you’ll have the rare opportunity to raft the Mokelumne River with OARS of Angels Camp. OARS will run three special raft trips on the Mokelumne’s six-mile Electra-Middle Bar run to benefit the Foothill Conservancy and support its work to protect and restore the Mokelumne River.

This is a rare opportunity to float the Mokelumne and experience its beauty from river level with knowledgeable guides and professional equipment. Commercial rafting is not allowed on the Mokelumne, so these trips are being allowed under a special permit.

The trips will be guided and equipped by OARS of Angels Camp, one of the finest whitewater rafting companies in the country. They have fun, knowledgeable guides and well-equipped and maintained rafts.

To reserve your spot, call Randy at Foothill Conservancy, 209-295-4900 or e-mail him at randy@foothillconservancy.org For more on OARS, see its website, www.oars.com For more on Foothill Conservancy’s efforts to protect and restore the Mokelumne, and photos of the river, see its website, www.foothillconservancy.org

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July 2009 Connections 19
Thank you!

Christie Kelley, Board Chair

You have done it again. Thank you, Thank you! The response to our Spring/Summer fundraising letter has been overwhelmingly generous—$6,310 as of June 13th. And there may be more coming in. Along with the checks and $5.00 bills, we received notes of encouragement and advice:

“Spend it wisely”

We will…and you can help by becoming a member of our Board and take part in making the decisions each 1st Thursday of the month, 6:00 p.m.–8:00 p.m. at 231 Bedford Rd, Stockton.

“Keep up the good work”

Connections newspaper, Talking It Through and The Reality Show, the Peaceful Holiday Faire, Earth Day, speakers, movies, tabling at events, marches and demonstrations—together with our community we will keep it up.

“It is clear to me from my reading of Connections that the issues you promote and the arguments you offer to back them up are absolutely on the right track.”

We believe this and will continue to provide the valley community with thoughtful, educational and informative information; locally and internationally. We are happy to accept your articles regarding work you are doing related to peace, justice and/or the environment.

“Please send me a tax form.”

Don’t forget your donations ARE tax deductible. If we seem to take quite a bit of time to follow up on your requests it is because we operate solely with volunteers. We always need more volunteers—to respond to our community, deliver papers, write for the paper, help with the office work…

Leave your name and number and what you would like to do on our office phone (209) 467-4455. We will get back to you as soon as we can! And…thank you for being a part of the progressive growth in this area…$ 6,310!

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California voters set the Democrats free: will they act?

George Lakoff

The outrageous propositions 1 A-E have been crushed by voters who just can’t take any more. California voters have rejected the nonfunctional minority-rule government that has bankrupted the state, along with the governor who led the state into bankruptcy. The voters want a functional democracy, and that means majority rule. No more blackmail by a 1/3 plus 1 Republican minority. In short, the voters have given the Democrats a new freedom—if they will only take it.

The Democratic leadership should listen to its grassroots. They should immediately stop negotiating with the governor and other Republicans on how to destroy even more of what makes our state human. The Democrats, as a whole body, not just the leadership, should assert their majority, decide for themselves how they want to deal with the shortfall, and then invite the defeated Republicans publicly to join them and take their proposals to the public, first organizing serious grassroots support. What is the point of doing this if the Democrats still don’t have the 2/3 votes to pass a budget bill? The point is drama. Most Californians are not aware of the minority rule situation. This could dramatize it and place the blame where it belongs. Drama matters. There might still be a later compromise. But the drama would set the stage for a 2010 ballot initiative.

The Democratic leadership should immediately take the initiative on a 2010 ballot measure, a supremely simple one-sentence measure. It would go something like this:

All budgetary and revenue issues shall be decided by a majority vote in both houses of the legislature.

One sentence. Simple. Straightforward. Understandable. And democratic. It should be called the California Democracy Act. From grade school on, we associate democracy with majority rule. It will make sense to voters—at last. The term “revenue” would cover taxes without waving a red flag. Up to now, Democrats have been acting like sheep being herded by the Republican minority. They need to show courage and stand up for what they believe. That’s what the voters are waiting for.

On the 2010 ballot initiative: Get rid of the 55% propositions. People understand that majority rule means democracy. 55% means nothing. Even if you don’t address taxes and just address the budget process, the Republicans will still say you’re going to raise taxes. You may as well go for real democracy.

And finally, get a unified message that can be supported by the grassroots. Do grassroots organizing for 2010, starting now. Organize spokespersons to get that message out. Organize bookers to book your spokespeople in the media. You Democrats are a majority. Act like it. The public will respect you for it. For example, if the Republicans claim that this vote showed a tax rebellion, point out that only Prop 1A was about taxes. The other propositions failed. And the voters rejected a spending cap. What are you waiting for, you Democrats. You have been set free.

If it is claimed that the vote was meaningless because so few people went to the polls, reply that the refusal to vote on these propositions was itself a vote against having such an election and such a lame way of running the state. The voters have spoken. You Democratic office-holders have chance to come out on the side of the voters. Take it.

George Lakoff is the author of The Political Mind, just out in paperback. He is Goldman Distinguished Professor of Cognitive Science and Linguistics at the University of California at Berkeley.

Source: Daily Kos 5/20/09 http://george-lakoff.dailykos.com>