

What's Missing From Popular Discussions of Today's Christian Nationalism

By Katherine Stewart

IF YOU WANT TO KNOW WHERE THE REPUBLICAN Party is headed, you need to set aside your assumptions and simply listen to what its leaders and activists say—especially when they're talking amongst themselves. As a reporter and [author](#) on the religious right beat over the past dozen years, I've made a point of attending such meetings, especially those that focus on the religious right leadership and strategists who command the movement's voter turnout machine. Lately, I've been hearing things that might surprise—and alarm—those who see the movement only from a distance.

A good venue to catch up on the latest thinking inside the movement that wants to “take America back” to a place that never existed is this summer's Road to Majority [convention](#), an annual gathering of the Faith & Freedom Coalition, which was held this year at the Gaylord Palms Resort & Convention Center in Kissimmee, Florida.

ALSO INSIDE:

- 4 **Robert Alvarez** on Steve Wing
- 6 **Steven Pressman** on inflation
- 8 **Barbara Koepfel** on the death penalty
- 10 **Joseph Mangano** on radioactivity in baby teeth
- 13 Letter from **Oppenheimer** to **Fermi**

In recent years, the convention has brought together the big Republican names with the on-the-ground activists who

delivered the largest and most reliable slice of the Trump electorate. Dozens of featured speakers this year included Mike Pence, Ted Cruz, Marsha Blackburn, Ron DeSantis, Lindsey Graham, and Madison Cawthorn.

I came away from my listening experience in Kissimmee with a few surprises—or at least a few takeaways that may challenge some of the narratives that prevail in the center and on the left about America's Christian nationalist movement. The first is that any Democrats who take comfort from the thought that demography is destiny are probably deluding themselves. The received wisdom on the center-left is that America's homegrown authoritarian faction is an affair largely concentrated on an older, whiter base that is just now exiting the stage of history with loud

grievances in hand. But that's not how the leaders of the movement see things—and the broader picture may indeed be a bit more complex.

Of the many religious-right strategy gatherings I've attended over the years, this was among the most ethnically and racially diverse. “I am pleased to be able to report that we have 200 African American pastors and community organizers who are here this week and over 500 Hispanic pastors and community organizers, and

we are going to keep going until this movement embraces the full diversity of our country,” said Ralph Reed. By my count, over 30 of the roughly 70 speakers were Black or Latino.

The diversity on display at the conference reflects the fact that the religious right has been making a sizable effort to cultivate conservative-leaning Latino and Black voters of faith. Much of the action starts by attracting religious leaders from communities of color, who are often drawn into larger pastoral networks such as Watchmen on the Wall and [Ministeros Hispanos](#). An aspect of the diversity push, to be sure, is merely performative, a means of reassuring white voters that they aren't racist after all. But the strategy works with a nonnegligible number of voters of color, too. Between 2016 and 2020, Trump made [substantial](#) gains among Latino voters in particular.

In Kissimmee, the speakers, and especially the speakers of color, had a unified message about race, and it was one that



Stills selected from the Road to Majority's 2021 promotional video

The WASHINGTON SPECTATOR

Legal Affairs Correspondent

Andrew Cohen

Digital Editor

Sophia Fish

Copy Editor

Kirsten Denker

Contributing Writers

Robert Alvarez

Cyrus Cassells

Autumn Hayes

Barbara Koeppl

Anne Nelson

Steven Pressman

Dorothy Samuels

Katherine Stewart

Circulation Management

Circulation Specialists LLC

Design Point Five, NY

Illustration Edel Rodriguez

Editor and Publisher

Hamilton Fish

Subscription inquiries

The *Washington Spectator* is being published bi-monthly during Covid as a digital edition only. To add your name to our free distribution list, sign up at trypico.com/washingtonspectator/registration. We'll notify you as soon as we resume our regular publication schedule.

For questions relating to your subscription or for queries on editorial matters, please contact us at editors@washingtonspectator.org.

Letters to the editor Email to editors@washingtonspectator.org. Please include your full name and postal address and whether the letter is intended for publication. Letters, if published, may be edited for clarity and space. Hard-copy letters may be sent to: Washington Spectator—Letters, 105 Hudson Street, Suite 407, New York, NY 10013.

The *Washington Spectator* (ISSN 0887-428X) is published bi-monthly by the Public Concern Foundation Inc, 105 Hudson Street, Suite 407, New York, NY 10013. © 2021 in the U.S.

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

Sign up for our free email newsletter by visiting washingtonspectator.org.

Learn what's new at *The Spectator*, get special offers, and find out about our online exclusives and upcoming events.

SIGN UP
washingtonspectator.org

Democratic strategists might wish to note as they craft their own messaging and outreach in the run-up to the 2022 midterm elections. Speaker after speaker at the Road to Majority Policy Conference asserted that they believe in an America where race doesn't define you—where opportunity is there for all who strive for it.

Never mind the Republican Party's efforts to promote McCarthyist laws that restrict discussions of the history of racism and other supposedly "divisive concepts" in American schools; or its leadership's [denigrating characterizations](#) of political leaders of color with whom they disagree. And who here really cares that the Republican Party has championed voter suppression and gerrymandering that disproportionately [affect](#) voters of color and others in democratic-leaning districts, or that [some](#) Republican leaders tolerate or even [court](#) the support of white supremacists? The fact is, this message has presumably convinced some people—including those at the gathering in Kissimmee—that their party is the one on the side of equality and justice for all, while the other side is the one that insists on characterizing everybody by the color of their skin.

C.L. Bryant, a right-wing television and radio host, made the point with an anecdote about a long-ago confrontation with his grandfather over his "Afrocentric" style. "He said these words: 'Sonny . . . I didn't go through all that I went through so that you could be Black. I went through all that I went through so that you could be free.'"

It's a message that has a strong appeal to some immigrants, as Jennifer S. Carroll, a former Navy commander born in Trinidad who served as lieutenant governor of Florida, made clear at a panel titled "Majority Minority." "I wanted to give back to my country because my country gave myself and my family so much," said Carroll. "And that's what immigrants are all about. Recognizing that this country is a special place. The only place in the land that can give a person like me the ladders to climb if I choose to climb it."

Carroll delivered her comments with passionate sincerity. But as one speaker after another offered the same caricature of "critical race theory" as the centerpiece of their presentations, I was reminded of statements from Christopher F. Rufo, a conservative activist and [architect](#) of this new front in the culture wars: "We have successfully frozen their brand—'critical race theory'—into the public conversation and are steadily driving up negative perceptions," [he wrote on Twitter](#). "The goal is to

have the public read something crazy in the newspaper and immediately think 'critical race theory.' We have decodified the term and will recodify it to annex the entire range of cultural constructions that are unpopular with Americans."

At a Conservative Political Action Committee (CPAC) conference the following month the drumbeat continued. "What are our parents around the country doing to stop critical race theory from taking over our schools, what are we doing to stop them from taking over our corporations, taking over sports, even taking over the military?" said David M. McIntosh, president of the Club for Growth. "Martin Luther King had a dream: that we would judge or be judged by the content of our character and not the color of our skin. . . . But radical Marxists have taken over this movement they call critical race theory that shames our children, treats them differently and punishes them based on the color of their skin. And tells them America, our country, our capitalist free markets, our constitution are evil and irretrievable."

According to a June [report](#) in *Media Matters*, in the prior three and a half months, "critical race theory" was mentioned on Fox News nearly two thousand times. By comparison, in November 2020, there were just four mentions.

The second surprise on my listening tour was more of the *I can't believe this is actually happening* variety. Over the past two decades, the imminent demise of the religious right [has been predicted](#) with casual confidence [many](#) times, and the often unspoken assumption is that the movement will turn watery as it fades away. But that isn't what the people at the Road to Majority conference or CPAC think at all. This movement is getting ideologically harder, hotter, and more extreme in every way as it moves forward into the future.

Two decades ago, an ideology called "Seven Mountains Dominionism" [was considered so fringy](#) that it was never allowed near the podium with Republican political leaders. Now, that very same ideology is a heartbeat away from everything that happens in the Republican Party. This year, in fact, the Road to Majority featured a breakout session titled "The Seven Mountains of Influence."

Seven Mountains dominionism is the conviction that Christians of a certain hyperconservative variety should rightfully dominate the main peaks of modern civilization in the United States and, ultimately, the world. The ideology reportedly got its start in 1975, when Loren Cunningham, a missionary leader, and Bill Bright, the founder of Campus

This movement is getting ideologically harder, hotter, and more extreme in every way as it moves forward into the future.

Crusade for Christ (now known as “Cru”), allegedly heard messages from God urging them to invade the “seven spheres” of society, which by their reckoning included government, media, education, business, entertainment, religion, and family. According to the late C. Peter Wagner, a key proponent of the ideology, the responsibility of Christians to take over “whatever molder of culture or subdivision God has placed them in” is really a matter of “taking dominion back from Satan.”

That last bit about Satan gets to the throbbing heart of this political ideology. In Kissimmee, speakers and panelists inveighed that America is “on the precipice,” careening toward a “socialist revolution,” “anarchy,” and “chaos, and is under the thumb of the most despicable human beings imaginable—namely Democrats, who were referred to as “the enemy,” “Satanic,” and “agents of evil.” Panelist and religious activist Johnny Enlow, who has authored multiple books on the “Seven Mountains,” warned that if Christians don’t fight to “conquer darkness,” the world goes “under control of the deep state, illuminati, demonic possession for hundreds of years, that’s what we’re facing.”

Describing what she claimed to be a Democratic voter registration operation targeting Puerto Ricans coming to America after Hurricane Maria, Adianis Morales Robles, a GOP operative and religious right activist, said, “God was showing me the injustices that these organizations, these demonic organizations, are doing to our people.”

For decades, this kind of blatantly theocratic political ideology lived on the fringes of the Republican Party, where leaders might toss its adherents a gratifying wink while pretending to the outside world that they didn’t really exist. Those days are over. In Kissimmee, at the conclusion of “The Seven Mountains of Influence” breakout session, comprised entirely of panelists of color, Ralph Reed stopped by to offer praise and encouragement. “I want you to know that my commitment to building bridges in the African American community is not about politics,” he said as dozens of attendees rushed toward the stage to get selfies with the speakers. “This is about the Kingdom of God.” Other speakers and panelists at the Road to Majority convention invoked the language and goals of Seven Mountains dominionism as if it were simply shorthand for the Republican agenda.

“You got to put on the full armor of God,” said Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, alluding to a passage from Ephesians that’s

often used to invoke a “spiritual war” against the devil. “You got to take a stand, take a stand against the left’s schemes.”

The end-of-the-world vision at the heart of the new Republican orthodoxy may help explain a further observation: The people who attend these kinds of religious nationalist gatherings—the activist backbone of the Republican Party—are in no mood to back down from the January 6 attempt to subvert the presidential election through a brutal and disgraceful attack on our Capitol. Sometime around January 7, some parts of the mainstream wisdom coalesced around the idea that the Republican Party now had a chance to separate itself from the anti-democratic elements within. That moment has passed. There will be no reckoning within the Republican Party over Donald Trump’s



attempted coup, and any Republican who tries will be excluded from gatherings like these.

In conversation with conference organizer Ralph Reed, Eric Metaxas let it be known that the real victims of the January 6 event were the good people who ransacked the Capitol. He fired “an arrow across their bow” (his words) to

Republican leaders: “Any Republican that has not spoken in defense of the January 6 people to me is dead. They’re dead.”

The right-wing political commentator and activist Dinesh D’Souza, also in conversation with Ralph Reed, echoed the sentiment. “The people who are getting shafted right now are the January 6 protesters,” he said. “We won’t defend our guys even when they’re good guys.”

Reed nodded and replied, “I think Trump taught our movement a lot.”

At CPAC, January 6 was even reconceived as a possibly Democratic plot. “[The Biden] administration is about tyrannical rule. They don’t follow the Constitution,” said Allen West, former chairman of the Republican Party of Texas, before he recast events driven by far-right extremists as bizarre and possibly Democratic conspiracies. “On January 6 the sergeant at arms had turned down, on behalf of the speaker, having the National Guard there to help protect the Capitol. Why did that happen? You think they were setting things up? Well I do.”

In Kissimmee, perhaps the sole wry note of commentary on the character of the former president was provided by Senator Lindsey Graham, who quipped, “We came to find common ground. The common ground is that [former president Trump] likes [himself], and I have come to like him,” But I heard no expressions of

remorse, misgivings, or even doubt about the greatness of Donald Trump and his administration. “Bottom line is President Trump delivered, don’t you think?” Graham concluded. This party—or at least the hard rock of its base represented in this gathering—is moving toward, not away from Trumpism.

And yet, notwithstanding the apocalyptic rhetoric and visceral hatred of the liberal enemy that seemed to exude from every presentation and panel (Democratic strategists take note), this is a party and movement that is determined to telegraph confidence in the future and tell a positive story about America. I’m going to count this as something of a surprise, too—because the conventional narratives on the left hold that any movement so steeped in fear and loathing cannot possibly have a positive mindset, and that narrative turns out to be false, at least to the people here on the ground.

Speaker after speaker told hopeful stories of personal triumph and presented a vision of an America characterized by what they call “freedom,” opportunity, personal empowerment, and spiritual fulfillment. Party loyalists in Kissimmee passionately conveyed the message that this happy future is within their grasp—they just need to trample a few “demonic organizations” to get there.

A final aspect of today’s Christian nationalism that deserves more attention than it gets is the role of extreme money in shaping the movement. Too often the nature and goals of the movement are explained—and explained away—in purely social terms, as the reactions of a large mass of believers who see the world of their youth slipping away. We too easily forget that building an effective political movement of this kind takes a lot of money—and that money isn’t shy about speaking its mind.

A good place to witness the union of money and God would surely have been the [Ziklag Group](#) gathering, which took place at the Omni Shoreham Hotel in Dallas in mid-June.

Named after a Philistine town that biblical King David used as a retreat from which to mount his battle against the Amalekites, the Ziklag Group is affiliated with [United in Purpose](#), a data, networking, and messaging organization that’s played a substantial role in turning out the conservative Christian vote in past elections. You can get a sense of the Ziklag Group’s true *raison d’être* from a glance at its “membership/attendee criteria,” which appeared on the invitation. Attendance, I learned, was limited to those who are “committed to Christ,” are “humble in spirit,” and have “demonstrated success in business with significant financial means, defined as a net worth of at least \$25 million.”

Having come up, among other things, a few million dollars short on their admissions requirements, I can’t offer any take-aways from the Ziklag Group’s gathering. But the invitation I saw showed that, just like the Road to Majority gathering in Kissimmee, it prominently featured a Seven Mountains Mandate workshop along with its list of noted keynote speakers including Mike Pence.

But one difference between the gatherings in Kissimmee and Dallas has to do with the certainty of payoffs. Whether the tax cuts, budget cuts, and non-regulation of markets that are the reliable outcome of Republican politics will work to the benefit of

the diverse crowd that gathered in Kissimmee is doubtful. That they will serve the interests of the extravagantly rich attendees of the Ziklag Group gathering, on the other hand, is certain. That, presumably, is why the kind of people who attended the event in Dallas are likely footing most of the bill for events like these that unite the Republican Party around a radical vision, even as they deepen our country’s political divisions. ■

Katherine Stewart is the author of The Power Worshipers: Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism (Bloomsbury). Her work has appeared in The New York Times, The New York Review of Books, and The New Republic. This article was originally published by Religion Dispatches, a publication of Political Research Associates, on August 9, 2021.

Study Confirms Waste From Industrial Hog Farms Creates Life-Threatening Hazards for Nearby Residents

By Robert Alvarez

IN 1996, STEVE WING, AN EPIDEMIOLOGIST AT THE University of North Carolina, was among the first to provide evidence of harm to poor people of color from airborne chemical and pathogen-laden emissions. Wing’s focus was on affected populations that lived near industrial-scale hog farm lagoons, considered among the most polluting industrial operations in the world. Recently, the first comprehensive assessment of deaths in the United States from airborne agricultural pollutants was published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, providing strong vindication of the work of Wing and his colleagues.

According to the study, of a total of 17,900 deaths traced in one way or another to U.S. agriculture each year, about 80 percent are attributed to airborne contaminants from large-scale animal farms. Emissions from animal factory farms, known as confined animal feeding operations, or CAFOs, account for more annual deaths than pollution from coal power plants. One out of every four of these deaths is from pork feeding operations, which generate billions of gallons of wastes, largely dumped directly in open lagoons and then sprayed on farmland. Much as humans do, the hogs expel large amounts of bacteria-laden pathogens, hydrogen sulfide, and ammonia.

A typical CAFO holds thousands of hogs in close confinement, in cells just large enough for the animals to stand. They receive their feed by conveyor belt, along with antibiotics to stem infections and stimulate growth. In southeastern counties in North Carolina, about 10 billion gallons of fecal wastes are dumped directly from the animal cages into the lagoons each year. Fecal wastes discarded directly into the environment, from two of the

North Carolina counties with the largest number of hogs, were found to be roughly equivalent in volume to the amount of waste sent annually to sewage treatment plants by the cities of Boston and Detroit.

However, unlike sewage treatment plants in the United States, hog CAFOs and their waste disposal practices are not subject to any form of federal regulation aimed at protecting public health and the environment.

After anaerobic digestion—in which bacteria breaks down the waste matter—the wastes are sprayed over agricultural fields. Based on geospatial data, the Environmental Working Group reports that more than 250,000 homes in North Carolina are within three miles of a CAFO.

Any time there is a heavy rain, runoff from the sprayed fields tends to occur. Several dozen North Carolina hog farms are located on a 100-year flood plain, in two counties

with largely Black and low-income communities. In 2016, Hurricane Florence caused hundreds of fecal-laden waste lagoons to fail, contaminating the land and wells of nearby residential areas, in addition to several rivers and tributaries.

After attending several community meetings held by local citizen activists in the mid-1990s, Wing decided to document these problems in collaboration with the people who were affected most. Over the previous decade, the adoption of CAFOs had led to an exponential increase in the numbers of hogs in the state, along with a commensurate growth in largely uncontrolled waste disposal practices.

Soon people living near these concentrated industrial swine operations began to speak out and organize to stem the risks to their lives and homes. In the time-honored tradition of public health research, Steve began to undertake “doorstep epidemiology,” in which he attended citizen meetings and visited numerous homes near the hog CAFOs. Wing was not only seeking to document public health problems, he also wanted to help empower a movement to end environmental and racial injustice.

Eventually, in a study described as “ground-breaking in its design and scientific assessment,” Wing enlisted more than 100 people from 16 communities within 1.5 miles of a hog CAFO to help operate real-time air- and weather-monitoring equipment and to rate the noxious odor outside their homes. Respiratory symptoms, lung function, and blood pressure test results were also documented.

Over several years, Wing and his colleagues compiled a large body of data indicating that emissions from open lagoons and

field spraying were harmful to nearby residents. Increases in blood pressure, asthmatic symptoms in children, headaches, diarrhea, and upper respiratory problems were documented. Odors described as being “like the smell of rotting corpses” were so strong and pervasive that residents could not venture outside of their homes for days on end. Wing and his colleagues reported communities of color were twice as likely to be impacted by health problems associated with the toxic fecal wastes in the air.



Aerial shot of a swine facility in North Carolina by Waterkeeper Alliance Inc.

By 1999, the North Carolina Pork Council, dominated by corporations such as the Chinese-owned Smithfield Foods, which owns one of the world’s largest pork slaughterhouses in North Carolina, forced Wing to provide his research records, after threatening to sue. Steve successfully refused to comply with the demand for personal identifiers of nearby residents who cooperated in the study. Not only would this have violated

personal privacy protections, but it could also expose the people in the study to harassment and intimidation.

This heavy-handed effort by the pork industry did not prevent Steve’s research from helping residents living near the CAFOs to obtain some measure of accountability in the courtroom. By 2019, several lawsuits filed against a Smithfield subsidiary responsible for managing the factory hog farms resulted in hundreds of millions of dollars awarded to dozens of residents. Pork corporations tried to muzzle Steve, but in the end they could only convince UNC to take away his parking space.

True to form, Smithfield and its allies in the North Carolina legislature have all but thwarted further multimillion-dollar lawsuits. According to court records, Smithfield’s Chinese parent company makes about \$2 billion per year in profits.

Steve Wing passed away, at age 64, in 2016. That year, in his last published paper, Steve concluded: “By joining movements for human rights and social justice, health scientists can identify research questions that are relevant to public health, develop methods that are appropriate to answering those questions, and contribute to efforts to reduce health inequalities.”

His contributions to public health and environmental justice endure and grow in importance. ■

A senior scholar at the Institute for Policy Studies, Robert Alvarez served as senior policy adviser to the Energy Department’s secretary and deputy assistant secretary for national security and the environment from 1993 to 1999.

The Summers of Our Discontent: An Inflationary Folktale

By Steven Pressman

INFLATION IS HEADLINE NEWS FOR THE FIRST TIME in decades, and a battle is raging over whether rising prices threaten the U.S. economy. On one side are those fearing a return to 1970s double-digit inflation and advocating for slower economic growth. Combatants on the other side claim that economic growth should not be sacrificed on an altar of inflation fears.

Inflation is just a fancy name for changes in cost of the basket of goods and services purchased by an average household. A little inflation is generally welcomed. It helps middle-income families that have borrowed money. My parents repaid the mortgage they took out in 1961 with cheaper dollars thanks to inflation, allowing them to make additional purchases and fuel economic growth. This is one reason many central banks around the world set their annual inflation target at 2 percent.

High inflation, on the other hand, makes it difficult for incomes to keep up with rising prices and tends to reduce living standards. High inflation also hurts financial institutions, which get repaid with more dollars (due to interest) but dollars that are worth less than the dollars they lent out. In response to this, central banks typically raise interest rates, slowing economic growth.

Larry Summers fired the first shot in our current inflation war. A former treasury secretary and former president of Harvard, Summers is sly like a fox in economic debates. In two Washington Post columns earlier this year, he criticized President Biden's Covid-19 relief bill as inflationary because it gave too much money to people who didn't need it, and his \$2 trillion infrastructure plan as inflationary because its spending levels were too high. Inflation fears have also been raised by some central bankers and promulgated by Republicans, who disdain government and promote inflation worries both to justify cutting government spending and to embarrass the Democratic president.

Recent economic data seems to support the inflation worriers. Consumer prices increased 0.8 percent in April (10 percent if continued on an annual basis), 0.6 percent in May, and 0.9 percent in June. From June 2020 to June 2021, prices rose by 5.4 percent, the highest annual inflation figure in over a decade.

A Chicken Little reaction ensued—fears of the sky falling and a return to the double-digit inflation of the Carter years.

High inflation can stem either from surging production costs or too much spending. OPEC tripled oil prices in 1973 and then doubled them in 1979. The price of a barrel of oil soared from \$22 in 1973 to \$129 by 1980. This increased prices for many goods because oil-generated energy runs the factories that produce the goods and fuels the trucks that bring these goods to market. And the cost of waging the war in Vietnam had increased inflationary pressures from the spending side earlier that same decade.

Summers has focused on the demand side of the problem—huge government expenditures and massive consumer spending aided and abetted by government support to households in lockdown. But the supply side has become the hot political issue. Small-business owners are struggling to find employees.



CBS News

Many, Republicans in particular, blame the March 2021 American Rescue Plan, which provided \$300 per week in extra unemployment benefits, for keeping people from taking jobs. Twenty-six states have stopped providing this benefit to their citizens—even though the federal government pays the entire cost and these benefits expire in early September.

Undoubtedly, a few people prefer collecting unemployment insurance to working right now. Nonetheless, high unemployment benefits are an unlikely explanation for why firms can't find workers. Only 40 percent of the unemployed are receiving benefits. Of these, many are consultants or small-business owners, who won't accept another job offer because they have a job, and the extra unemployment benefits were meant to help them survive during the Covid pandemic. Others (especially in the entertainment industry) were laid off because of Covid-19 and are waiting to return to these jobs.

In addition, two studies have compared states that ended extra unemployment benefits in June with states that did not. One was done by Arindrajit Dube of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, and one was done by Gusto, a firm that processes company payrolls. While not peer reviewed, and while covering a period of only several weeks, both studies found little difference in job gains for these two different groups of states.

However, the labor shortage is real. We have lost more than 600,000 Americans to Covid-19, and non-Covid death rates were up substantially in 2020. At the same time, a bulge of retiring baby boomers is reducing the size of the labor force, as is

declining labor force participation rates for adults between the ages of 25 and 54 (for many different reasons, including the lack of available childcare due to Covid-19). And immigration has plummeted. Overall, the U.S. economy is down around four million potential workers.

On the other side of the labor market, as President Biden noted in response to a question by a restaurateur at his July 21 town hall meeting in Cincinnati, the Payroll Protection Program enabled many small businesses to survive. Estimates range from a 15 percent to a 30 percent increase in the survival rate of small firms. As the U.S. economy recovers, these firms are now seeking workers because of the program. So there is extra demand for labor at the same time that there is reduced labor supply.

Given such a labor shortage, just posting a job ad or help wanted sign is not enough. Firms must raise wages. Because wages comprise such a large component of the cost of providing goods and services, large wage hikes tend to push up prices. However, while wages are rising for jobs that historically have paid poorly, wage increases are not the cause of rising prices now. The Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta found that over the past year, wage increases have averaged 3.2 percent, a rate *below* the five-year average of 3.6 percent before Covid-19.

If large government spending and generous unemployment benefits are not responsible for labor shortages or wage hikes, why is inflation rising? The two main causes of rising inflation are supply-chain problems and temporary, Covid-related price changes. In the former case, price changes are trampoline-like—a quick rise, to be followed by a quick descent. In the latter case, price changes are like a yo-yo—they fall and then return to where they started. Both phenomena are operative now.

Over several decades, U.S. firms have adopted a technique pioneered by Toyota during the 1970s called “just-in-time inventory management.” Manufacturers don’t want large inventories of parts. These must be paid for, warehoused, and insured. The smaller their inventory, the better. Toyota organized production so parts arrived at their factories just as they were needed to assemble a car.

Under normal circumstances, just-in-time inventory management will reduce costs for sellers and decrease prices for consumers. In abnormal times, firms have no stock of parts to deal with unexpected demand or supply-chain changes.

Around half of April’s inflation came from rising car prices—a 0.5 percent rise in new car prices and a 10 percent rise in used car prices, the latter of which is responsible for 0.3 percentage points of the 0.8 percent April inflation rate. In June, used car prices rose at an annual rate of 10.5 percent, and car prices (used, new, rentals, and parts) were responsible for 60 percent of the monthly 0.9 percent increase in prices. Two events explain this—a drought in Taiwan (from the absence of typhoons in 2020) reduced the water supply available for plants making semiconductors, and there was a fire at an electronics plant in Japan making semiconductors. Without an inventory of chips, and without new chips being produced, cars can’t be manufactured.

The result has been a shortage, and higher car prices.

Taiwan’s water supply may return to normal during its summer typhoon season. Renesas Electronics, the Japanese chipmaker, is starting to make semiconductors again. When its plant is fully operational, new cars will once more be produced in large quantity; new and used car prices will fall back to pre-pandemic levels, reducing inflation.

At the same time, some prices are rebounding from drops in 2020. While these price increases aren’t likely to be reversed in the future, they also won’t contribute to future inflation. Here’s one example. Last year, when people were not driving much, insurance companies cut premiums. I saved \$200. My insurance rates are now back where they were two years ago, but still much higher than last year. I don’t expect another \$200 premium increase next year. Similar changes are responsible for rising prices of oil and gasoline, air travel, and hotel rooms.

Summers is right that we must be vigilant when it comes to inflation. He is wrong, however, about inflation arising from too much demand. In moments of greater forethought, Summers himself recognized this. For many years, he raised concerns about a future with slow economic growth and high unemployment, conditions that are inconsistent with raging inflation.

On the supply side, weather-related problems due to climate change or other problems at manufacturing plants any-

where in the world could increase inflation. But these will be temporary blips, soon to be reversed. The only danger is a steady stream of short-run problems or accidents—a possibility, but a highly unlikely possibility.

The more serious problem concerns wages. Since the 1970s, worker productivity has risen 2 percent per year, but wages have barely kept pace with inflation. For more than 40 years, workers received little extra spending power for being more productive employees. Instead, profits and inequality rose. Additionally, the U.S. economy is still down 6.8 million jobs (as of June 2021) from before Covid-19. The real danger we face comes not from inflation but from misguided inflation fears that keep us from using economic policies to spur job and wage growth.

Most people are familiar with the Chicken Little tale. Few remember how it ends. Actually, it has two endings. In the happy ending, Chicken Little develops courage in the face of adversity and no longer fears a cataclysmic end to the world. In the more ominous ending, Foxy Loxy cooks and eats Chicken Little after promising him protection from the disaster. In both versions, the moral is: Don’t get hysterical and believe that an extremely unlikely worst-case scenario is imminent. This is a good lesson for the summer of Summers, as the U.S. economy struggles to return to normal. For many reasons, the current inflation surge is likely to be short-lived. The sky is not falling. ■

Steven Pressman is professor emeritus of economics and finance at Monmouth University and author of Fifty Major Economists, 3rd edition (Routledge, 2013).

The real danger we face comes not from inflation but from misguided inflation fears that keep us from using economic policies to spur job and wage growth.

Racial Disparities, Cowboy D.A.s, Prosecutorial Impunity, Hanging Judges, and Above All—Texas; the Death Penalty’s Time is Up

By Barbara Koepfel

SOME 4,000-YEAR-OLD DOGMAS, LIKE THE BIBLE’S “eye for an eye,” never die. State-sponsored killings have morphed over millennia (from stonings, beheadings, burning at stakes, firing squads, gas chambers, lynchings, and electric chairs to lethal injections) but continue apace.

In the United States, the federal government and the 27 states that still impose the death penalty favor lethal injections—although a federal judge said they’re “akin to water-boarding.” According to Richard Dieter, a lawyer and co-founder of the Death Penalty Information Center, or DPIC, “executions by lethal injections appear to be nice, clean and induce sleep.” Conversely, “firing squads are bloody events that attract hundreds of reporters, while lethal injections can attract five.”

However, the Feds and death penalty states have a serious supply problem. Because all 55 European countries (except Belarus) scrapped the death penalty as of 2012, the European Commission banned firms from exporting drugs across the Atlantic. And U.S.-based companies also shut off the tap to avoid bad press that could provoke protests and threaten sales. As Pfizer announced, “our products are to enhance and save lives . . . not for capital punishment.”

Scrambling for a fix, the Feds have been creative. For example, in 2017, the Justice Department located compounding pharmacies in the United States that were willing to produce the drugs to execute 13 inmates from July 2020 to January 15, 2021. (Compounding is the process of combining, mixing, or altering ingredients to create a medication tailored to the needs of a customer or patient.)

States have been equally ingenious in their efforts to avoid detection. Arizona paid \$1.5 million to buy pentobarbital (one of the drugs used) under the table. A *Guardian* article described how “a heavily redacted invoice shows the state ordered 4–8 unlabeled jars to be sent to an Arizona location ‘to be determined.’” Missouri bought drugs illegally from an Oklahoma pharmacy—and to leave no paper trail, a Missouri corrections official drove to Oklahoma at night and paid with dollars from a petty cash account. An Ohio Department of Mental Health pharmacist personally ordered the required drugs and drove

them to the state prison. Nevada had drugs shipped to a location 200 miles from death row, and Arkansas ordered a drug through a private physician.

When these schemes failed, states found others. Arizona is renovating its 72-year-old gas chamber and bought ingredients to make hydrogen cyanide (the gas used in Nazi concentration camps). Utah revived its firing squads in 2015. And in South Carolina, where its outdated drug supply caused a 10-year execution hiatus, the Republican-controlled legislature passed a law this year to use firing squads and electric chairs (which have been known to start fires and burn those being executed). Still, honoring the principle of freedom of choice, legislators allow those to be executed to pick their method.

Although 50 bills reached Governor Henry McMaster’s desk this past May 17, he signed the death penalty law first. “The loved ones of victims are owed closure and justice” he tweeted.

However, not all loved ones agree with the Governor. Sharon Risher, whose mother and two cousins were among the nine people Dylann Roof killed at a Charleston church in 2015, says “killing Roof won’t ease my pain or bring my mother back.

“Before the massacre, I believed in the death penalty. Afterwards, I did soul searching and wondered what my Christian faith says about killing. I also learned that Black and brown people are sentenced to death more often than whites. So I no

longer believe it is right. Although I’m still grieving, I don’t think Roof should be executed.”

Former Ohio Governor Ted Strickland, who approved the executions of 17 people during his 2007 to 2011 term, also recanted. “I regret how I handled the death penalty. Now I think it should be abolished,” he told the *Ohio Statehouse News*.

Although Americans who support the death penalty claim it deters would-be murderers and keeps the public safe (recent polls show that 61 percent approve of it), the numbers are ambiguous: across the United States, there were 15,000 murders in 2000, 13,000 in 2010, and 20,000 in 2020. And a 2021 DPIC report found that while Southern states carried out 80 percent of executions over the past 30 years, they also had the highest murder rates. Conversely, the Northeast, which accounted for just 0.5 percent of the executions “consistently had the lowest murder rate.”

For those who think it is fair and just, many wardens, reporters, lawyers, and clergy who’ve witnessed executions say they should think again. Also, Popes John Paul and Francis have insisted that the death penalty violates human dignity. And President Joe Biden says he opposes it because many innocent people have been executed.



Numbers confirm Biden's concerns. Since 1973, 185 inmates on death rows in 29 states have been found to be "wrongfully convicted" and released—often after languishing in prison for decades. A DPIC report says 83 percent were victims of "official misconduct," which means that police and prosecutors pressured witnesses to lie and make false accusations, commit perjury, or withhold evidence that would have proved the defendants' innocence. The report also noted that since 1989, 20 prisoners who were executed have been "strongly suspected of being innocent" based on evidence that surfaced afterward.

The United States is one of 54 countries that approve death penalties—sixth in line behind China, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Egypt for the number it executes. However, the scene isn't static: 23 states and Washington D.C. have abolished the death penalty—with Virginia being the latest, banning it last March.

But in death penalty states, little has changed. In 1972, the Supreme Court temporarily banned executions (in *Furman v. Georgia*), ruling they were "arbitrary and capricious." It also ordered states to rewrite their laws to make the sentencing criteria more predictable. Four years later, the court decided that many states had complied, having passed new laws to correct the problem. It also ruled that the death penalty didn't violate the Eighth Amendment—which bans cruel and unusual punishment. Not surprisingly, the states resumed executions almost immediately.

However, Abe Bonowitz, founder of Death Penalty Action, insists that "death sentences are still totally arbitrary," with the laws varying from state to state. Richard Dieter says, "Some states tinkered with their laws to make them less arbitrary, but taking human life is always cruel and unusual."

As to lethal injections, the Supreme Court ruled in 2015 that they did not constitute cruel or unusual abuse—although witnesses at executions claim prisoners often die protracted, painful deaths. Justice Samuel Alito saw it differently: writing for the 5-4 majority, he claimed, "The Constitution does not require the avoidance of all risk of pain."

Dieter says the death sentence is often imposed due to factors that have nothing to do with a defendant's crime. "Instead, they depend dramatically on the state and county in which you commit a crime, the victim's race (whether you kill a White or Black person), and if you can afford a good lawyer."

Geography is indeed critical. A DPIC study found that fewer than 2 percent of all 3,142 U.S. counties carried out over half the country's 1,533 executions from 1977 to 2021. Five Texas counties and one in Oklahoma topped the list (Texas executed 571 prisoners, alone). On the other end, Dieter notes that "85 percent of U.S. counties didn't have a single execution in over 45 years."

Ngozi Ndulue, DPIC's senior director of research, says your chance of getting a death sentence also depends heavily on the biases of state or county prosecutors and judges. "Some prosecutors are so proud of their death penalty records that they publicize them when running for reelection." She cites "Cowboy" Bob Macy, an Oklahoma County district attorney who called himself "the nation's leading death penalty prosecutor." A Harvard Law School study confirmed his claim.

Dieter adds that "prosecutors systematically exclude Blacks

from juries whenever possible—and not just in the South—to win the verdicts they want." And all-white juries means a Black defendant is not tried by his peers. According to a DPIC report, a North Carolina study found that "qualified Black jurors were struck from juries at more than twice the rate of qualified White jurors." Thus, by 2010, 20 percent of North Carolina's death row prisoners "were sentenced to death by all-White juries."

In 2019, the Supreme Court ruled that Doug Evans, Mississippi's lead prosecutor in the state's case against Curtis Flowers, violated the defendant's rights by excluding Black jurors from the five previous trials (his lawyers repeatedly appealed the case). Justice Brett Kavanaugh wrote that "the numbers speak loudly," showing a pattern of racial discrimination. Kavanaugh adds that "the State asked five Black prospective jurors who were struck a total of 145 questions. By contrast, it asked the 11 seated White jurors a total of 12 questions. . . . The difference in the State's approaches to Black and White prospective jurors was stark."

Dieter says that although the Supreme Court ruled that excluding jurors because of their race is unconstitutional, "prosecutors still find other ways to exclude them—say, because someone in the family was convicted of a crime. Although this is gradually changing because more Black prosecutors have been elected in recent years, this doesn't mean the practice has stopped."

An Equal Justice Initiative report says jury discrimination persists "because those who perpetrate or tolerate racial bias—including trial and appellate courts, defense lawyers, lawmakers, and prosecutors—act with impunity. . . . Prosecutors who unlawfully strike Black people from juries don't get fined, sanctioned, or held accountable."

Judges also wield immense power. Until 2017, they could override juries that called for life sentences and instead send defendants to death row. Alabama was the last state to ban these judicial overrides, but even today, 32 prisoners on that state's death row and 20 percent of those nationwide were sent there by judicial overrides.

Of all prejudicial factors in capital cases, race is the most egregious. In a landmark study of 2,000 murder cases in Georgia by David Baldus, a University of Iowa law professor, it was the victims' race—rather than that of the defendants—that most determined the sentence: those who kill white people are far more likely to get a death sentence than those who kill black people.

Ngozi Ndulue says most murder cases don't get the death penalty. Some defendants get fixed terms or life in prison, and some cases are even thrown out. But for those who get the death penalty, biases are glaring. "For those charged with capital crimes, Blacks were nearly 16 times more likely to get a death sentence than whites."

Historically, the murder of white and Black victims in the United States has always been judged differently: from 1865 to 1950, white mobs lynched 6,500 Black men, women, and children, bombed churches and burned Black neighborhoods, but not one white perpetrator was ever charged. The sole exception involved three men who were part of a white mob that killed 150 Black people in Colfax, L.A. They were initially convicted, but the Supreme Court overturned their sentences in 1874.

Examples are not limited to the distant past. Virginia executed 58 Black men for committing rape from 1908 to 1963; but although 1,000 whites were convicted of rape, not one was ever executed. And since 1976, Florida has executed 18 Black men who were convicted for killing whites but didn't execute a single white man for killing a Black person until 2017—the first time in 41 years. Further, a DPIC report found that since 1977, 295 Black defendants were executed for killing a white victim, but only 21 white defendants were executed for the killing of a Black victim.

Race also colors exonerations—where those with death sentences are found to be innocent and all charges are dropped. Robert Dunham, DPIC's executive director, says, "Most who are wrongfully convicted and sent to death row don't get there by mistake. The data from these 185 show that far more frequently, and particularly with people of color, innocent death row prisoners were convicted because of a combination of police or prosecutorial misconduct and perjury or other false testimony."

Who gets clemency is also interesting. In general, very few ever have their death sentences reduced to say, life in prison; but the possibility of a double standard cannot be discounted. A Texas jury sentenced 23-year-old Bart Whitaker, a white man, to death for hiring hit men to kill his parents and brother. His father survived, forgave his son, and beseeched officials to reduce his sentence to life in prison. Honoring his plea, the Texas Parole Board and Governor Greg Abbott offered clemency just hours before Bart was scheduled to die (in 2018). Abbott explained that "Mr. Whitaker's father passionately opposes the execution of his son . . . and insists he would be victimized again if the state put to death his last remaining family member." At that time, not one of the Texas 240-member Parole Board, appointed by the governor, was Black.

Quinton Jones's family was not so fortunate. A Black man, Jones got a death sentence for killing his aunt in 1999, when he was 20 years old. Like Bart Whitaker's father, Quinton's family pleaded for clemency. Abbott refused, and Jones was executed this past May.

The Supreme Court has banned the death penalty for those who are mentally disabled, but it allows the states to set their own criteria: for example, Georgia says it has to be "beyond a reasonable doubt," which, critics argue, is tough to prove.

Dieter says that while systemic racism in America affects schools, housing, health care, education, jobs, life expectancy, opportunity, and income—problems with no solutions yet in sight—"we can end racial bias as it affects the death penalty by abolishing it." He adds that the Supreme Court needs to strike it down, but this won't happen with the current court, which has a law and order mentality. "You did a certain crime, and you pay with your life." ■

Barbara Koepfel is a Washington, D.C.-based investigative reporter who covers social, economic, political, and foreign policy issues.

What Caused My Cancer? Radioactive Isotope in Baby Teeth May Be a Clue

By Joseph Mangano

CAROLYN SCHULTE REMEMBERS THE EVENTS OF EARLY 1972. She was 12 years old and finishing the sixth grade in a St. Louis suburb. Her dad was a dentist, as was her grandfather and great-uncle. Her mom stayed home to manage the house and raise her and her brother, John, then age 10.

John began to develop headaches that spring. At first, nobody was especially concerned. John was a healthy, friendly boy who liked a good laugh; enjoyed drawing and watching wrestling on TV; and loved chocolate milk, cheeseburgers, and French fries.

As the year progressed, the pleasures and outward normality of childhood were taken from John in a dizzying, downward spiral of symptoms, hospital stays, missed diagnoses, overwhelming health bills . . . and finally, death from brain cancer in December, just days after his eleventh birthday.

"Everyone was devastated," remembered Carolyn. "But right away, we all thought, 'What caused this?' Nobody had the first idea of what brought the cancer on."

For Carolyn and many others living in the St. Louis area, whose family members had cancer in the 1970s and in subsequent decades, it wasn't until recently that they learned of a possible cause of those deadly illnesses. An article published last March in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* reported on the revival of a famous study that measured radioactive fallout from aboveground atom bomb tests and its absorption in humans.

Undertaken jointly in the 1950s and '60s by the Committee for Nuclear Information and Washington University in St. Louis, the study used donated baby teeth to gauge the presence of radioactive isotopes—specifically the cancer-causing isotope strontium 90, or Sr-90—in children.

The scientist on the team with the highest profile was Barry Commoner, a cellular biologist at Washington University and a member of the CNI board. Commoner was instrumental in developing the project and raising the funds to sustain it. He became familiar to national audiences in the 1970s via his prescient articles in *The New Yorker* on the fragility of the environment, and in 1980 he ran for president as the candidate of the Citizens Party.

Baby teeth are well regarded as research tools for their ease of collection and documentation. They fall out, people keep them, they are easy to collect from the general population, and they are easily dated. It's relatively simple for researchers to establish the location of the birth mother during pregnancy and during the first year of the child's life, two important data points. Baby teeth also make it easier for scientists working on controversial public health matters to conduct their research out in the open and to be less vulnerable to government censorship.

Carolyn inquired if John's or her teeth were in the study. Sure enough, long before John was sick, his parents had donated one of his teeth to be included in the project.

During the late 1950s, the most alarming feature of the growing Cold War tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union was a fierce competition to test and build as many atomic bombs as possible. The threat of nuclear war—the unthinkable—was very real, and leaders on both sides pushed hard to develop the largest stockpile of the most advanced nuclear weapons.

The United States would eventually conduct 206 above-ground bomb tests in the South Pacific and Nevada, generating fallout in the form of over 100 cancer-causing isotopes, most of which are not found otherwise in nature. Fallout drifted in the atmosphere across the continental United States, returned to earth through precipitation, and entered human bodies through the food chain.

Some of the bombs that were tested had a power equivalent to more than 1,000 times the force of the Hiroshima bomb. Along with fears of *possible* nuclear war, many were concerned with the *actual* buildup of fallout in the population—especially in children, who are most vulnerable to its toxic effects. Government officials secretly collected bones and tissues from deceased Americans and found large rises in Sr-90 that corresponded with the timing of the tests. These findings were never publicly released, and the testing continued.

Virtually all military leaders and many political leaders of the day had no intention of stopping bomb tests. Grassroots opposition represented the only chance to force a shift in government policy to protect public health. Scientists and citizens worked together in the St. Louis study, in which at least 320,000 baby teeth were collected and measured for Sr-90. The dramatic results showed children born in 1963 had 50 times more Sr-90 than those born in 1951, when large-scale testing began.

These conclusions were published in peer-reviewed medical journals and landed eventually on President John F. Kennedy's desk. Kennedy referenced fallout buildup in children in a July 1963 speech (“with cancer in their bones, with leukemia in their blood, with poison in their lungs”). After hearing expert testimony on the buildup of carcinogens from fallout detected in the population, the Senate ratified a ban on all above-ground tests. Kennedy signed the treaty, as did leaders from the Soviet Union and United Kingdom, in October 1963. Although the test ban was billed as an anti-nuclear war treaty, in truth it was as much an environmental health measure, which had been influenced, at least in part, by the baby teeth research project. (Below-ground

testing continued in the United States through 1992.)

But it was not until 1999, following the end of the Cold War and the collapse of Soviet Union, that the National Cancer Institute, a federal agency, estimated that between 11,000 and 212,000 Americans developed thyroid cancer from fallout from the tests. This disclosure was accompanied by a second NCI study, released three years later, which estimated 11,000 had died of cancer caused by exposure to the fallout.

Although both estimates are considered conservative, in light of the approximately 200 million Americans who were exposed to bomb fallout, these disclosures represented the first time the U.S. government had officially acknowledged the probable health impacts of the test program on U.S. citizens.

The studies had actually been completed five years previously and had remained under seal. Robert Alvarez (see page 4), a regular contributor to *The Washington Spectator* on [nuclear and environmental matters](#), was working in the Department of Energy during the Clinton years and persuaded Energy Secretary Hazel O'Leary to release the findings.

The St. Louis Baby Tooth Survey, which also showed a 50 percent decline in measurable Sr-90 in the four years after the test ban, ended in late 1970. In

2001, Washington University staff made a surprise discovery of tens of thousands of baby teeth held over from the study and stored in a remote ammunition bunker outside St. Louis.

The University donated the teeth to the Radiation and Public Health Project, a New Jersey-based research and education group. RPHP was engaged in its own tooth study, the measurement of Sr-90 levels in children living both close to and far from domestic nuclear reactors. With the trove of baby teeth from the St. Louis study, RPHP was determined to examine the critical question the original study hadn't pursued: What was the impact of bomb fallout on public health and cancer risk?

In 2011, RPHP published its first article on a study of in-body health hazards using baby teeth in the *International Journal of Health Services*. The study showed that a sample of teeth from St. Louis residents who died of cancer by age 50 had more than double the Sr-90 concentration of persons who were healthy at age 50.

In 2017, RPHP began a partnership with Marc Weisskopf, the Harvard University School of Public Health professor who had a long history of using teeth in research. Harvard secured a grant



from the National Institutes of Health to use a sample of teeth to study early-life exposure to neurotoxic metals (hazardous substances such as industrial solvents and heavy metals including arsenic, lead, and mercury) and disease risk later in life.

The NIH grant supported the entry of information on the baby teeth and their donors into a digitized, searchable database. The file contains just fewer than 100,000 teeth from 37,000 donors. All are “Baby Boomers,” born from 1946 to 1965, and they include persons born in all 50 states and 45 foreign countries.

Following the *Post-Dispatch* article this past March, hundreds of people from the St. Louis area contacted RPHP to inquire if their teeth were included in the collection. About 40 percent of the requests showed at least one donated tooth, and some as many as 14.

RPHP’s next step will be to expand on its 2011 study. About 6,000 of the 37,000 tooth donors are now deceased, and about 1,800 of these are estimated to have been cancer deaths. The identity and cause of death of each of the deceased will be cross-referenced with the National Death Index, a centralized database of death record information compiled from state vital statistics offices. RPHP will then be able to test for Sr-90 levels in the teeth of a cohort of known cancer victims who were children at the time of the aboveground atomic test program.

On a related front, RPHP held a press conference in March 2021 to announce a new report showing a widening gap between cancer death rates in Monroe County, Michigan, and the rest of the United States—especially in children. Monroe County is located just south of Detroit and is the site of the Fermi 2 nuclear reactor, which began operating in the mid-1980s. The press conference notably included RPHP board member and public health activist Christie Brinkley, a native of Monroe County.

RPHP contends Fermi may have played a role in these unusual trends. Government has essentially ignored the issue of the documented prevalence of cancer among populations living near nuclear reactors. Only one federal study has been performed in the 64 years since the first reactor became operational.

RPHP also announced it was asking for donations of baby teeth from Monroe County children in order to test for Sr-90. The group will compare results with Sr-90 levels from a sample of teeth in the Detroit area from the earlier BTS study—the first-ever comparison of early-life exposures to atom bomb fallout and nuclear reactor emissions.

Newport Beach, Michigan, is less than five miles from the Fermi plant. The people who live there know about the Fermi 1 reactor, which operated briefly in the 1960s and had a near-meltdown in 1966. And they know that for the last 36 years, Fermi 2 has been operating around the clock. There has been no meltdown, but there have been daily releases of radioactive waste products—including Sr-90—which entered local air and water and the local food supply.

There were childhood cancers in Newport Beach in the 1970s, but at the time no one saw Fermi as a potential explanation for the tragedies. They were simply unusual events, with no known cause.

But things changed drastically in recent years, as unusual numbers of people in the Newport Beach community have been diagnosed with cancer, frequently in their forties and fifties. Experts have offered no explanation of why so many people living near the Fermi plants have been diagnosed with cancer so early in life. This year, after hearing about the RPHP report and the program to collect baby teeth, many Newport Beach residents recognized that the Sr-90 released from reactors like Fermi is the same Sr-90 found in those ominous mushroom clouds generated by bomb tests so many years ago.

For now, like Carolyn Schulte in St. Louis, the folks in Newport Beach await results—hoping for at least one conclusive factor in the search for a cause of the cancer that has ravaged their families. ■

Joseph Mangano is executive director of the Radiation and Public Health Project.

The detection of high concentrations of the radioactive isotope strontium 90 in baby teeth collected from the general population in the 1950s and '60s persuaded President Kennedy to cancel further aboveground testing of atom bombs. But recognition of Sr-90's extreme toxicity can be found in earlier discussions contemporaneous with World War II, as evidenced in correspondence between Robert Oppenheimer and Enrico Fermi, dated May 1943.

In the letter that follows, Oppenheimer, the theoretical physicist and director of the Los Alamos Laboratory who is often referred to as “the father of the atomic bomb,” writes to Enrico Fermi, who was himself described as “the architect of the nuclear age,” about the challenges of pursuing a secret plan to use enough Sr-90 to poison and kill at least half a million Germans.

—Joseph Mangano

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

LOS ALAMOS
SANTA FE, NEW MEXICO
P. O. BOX 1663

143063

This document contains information affecting the National
Defense of the United States within the meaning of the
Espionage Act, U. S. C. 18, 793, and the transmission
or the revelation of its contents in any manner to an
unauthorized person is prohibited by law.

May 25, 1943

Dr. Enrico Fermi
Metallurgical Laboratory
University of Chicago
Chicago, Illinois

0257

Dear Fermi:

I wanted to report to you on the question of the radioactively poisoned foods, both because there are some steps that I have taken, and because Edward Teller has told me of the difficulties into which you have run.

When I was in Washington I learned that the Chief of Staff had requested from Conant a summary report on the military uses of radioactive materials and that Conant was in the process of collecting the material for that report. I therefore, with Groves' knowledge and approval, discussed with him the application which seemed to us so promising, gave him a few points of detail and some orders of magnitude. I raised the question of what steps, offensive and defensive, should be taken in this connection. It is my opinion, and it was also Conant's, that the defensive measures would probably preclude our carrying out the method ourselves effectively, and therefore I asked that in his report the question of policy be raised as to which of these lines we should primarily follow. This report, and you will undoubtedly have heard of it in other connections, is to go directly to General Marshall so that it will have authoritative if not expert consideration. I hope to discuss the question further when Conant visits here in ten days.

I also plan to go into the matter a little more deeply with Hamilton, although of course only on the physiological side. As you know, he has already made studies of the strontium which appears to offer the highest promise, and he expressed his willingness to look into these questions more fully. I think that I can do this without in any way indicating the nature of our interest, but it will be some time, perhaps three weeks, before I get to see him.

I understand the difficulties that you have had in getting this subject developed without telling anyone about it,

~~CANCELLED~~
~~SECRETED~~

CLASSIFICATION CANCELLED

DATE

1-29-53

For The Atomic Energy Control

[Signature]

Dr. E. Fermi
Page 2
May 25, 1943

~~SECRETED~~

(257)

and it is hard for me to give very sound advice on what to do. I think that there is at least one quite well defined radio-chemical problem, which is the separation of the beta-strontium from other activities. It is my impression after talking it over with Teller, that this is not a very major problem except in so far as provision would have to be made for carrying it out by remote control at the actual site of operations. I do not see how this can be done without letting a number of people into the secret of why we want the strontium. I should therefore like to ask you what you think the latest safe date is for the solution of this and other problems. It seems to me that we have a much better chance of keeping your plan quiet if we do not start work on it until it is essential to do so. If, in your opinion, the time for such work is now, I believe that you should discuss it with Allison and Franck and on their advice, if absolutely necessary, with Compton, and that perhaps this group of people will be enough to get the work done without more wide-spread discussion. In a general way I think we have better facilities here for keeping things of that kind within a well defined group, namely, the scientific personnel of the laboratory, than exists in other places. On the other hand, I do not think that we are equipped to tackle the problem with anything like the expedition that you can in Chicago.

To summarize then, I should recommend delay if that is possible. (In this connection I think that we should not attempt a plan unless we can poison food sufficient to kill a half a million men, since there is no doubt that the actual number affected will, because of non-uniform distribution, be much smaller than this.) If you believe that such delay will be serious, I should recommend discussion with a few well-chosen people. Finally, I should postpone this action until I have had an opportunity to reopen the question with Conant and if possible to obtain information on the decision of the General Staff.

Things here are going quite well and we are still remembering with pleasure and profit your fine visit. I hope that you can come again late in June, and that we shall have at that time some less programatic problems to discuss with you.

With all warm greetings,

Robert Oppenheimer

Robert Oppenheimer

~~CANCELLED~~

RO:pg