

WNDC



Political Dispatch

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From the Committee on Public Policy and Political Action

The articles below are commentary on current events, intended to encourage further reflection and debate. Except for official Board statements, the viewpoints expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official positions of the Woman's National Democratic Club.



Las Vegas and Puerto Rico Where the Moral Center of the Republican Party Has Gone

The NRA and gun advocates almost universally claim that controlling the number and types of guns or ammunition owned by Americans will not stop massacres like the one that ravaged Las Vegas on October 1. They also claim gun homicide can't be controlled by curbing the number of munitions in American hands which is, in any event, in their view, against the Constitution. Although they acknowledge mental health issues as a factor in gun homicide, they don't want to step up clearance requirements to screen out potential killers. Their answer to Las Vegas and every massacre event is more people owning guns to protect themselves.

Except how was that theory of individuals protecting themselves supposed to work with an assault rifle "bumped up" to be fully automatic? The security forces were at the scene in 4 minutes and 59 people were dead. Faster reaction times is going to save lives?

Saving lives only seems to be the game AFTER the gunner is down and brave bystanders can be lauded for their undoubtedly brave and heroic deeds rescuing people. We can now feel good about ourselves as Americans for their brave and heroic actions.

The last thing we should be doing is feeling good about ourselves. If we think of ourselves as a community, as we should, then we should be acting together to ban assault rifles (as an example of life saving action). We should not feel good about those who were killed because we can't seem to do what every other country does. Those who were killed should still be alive.

The World is Watching and Acting: Trump's reaction to the Puerto Rican devastation

The whole world knows that America can afford to rebuild Puerto Rico. It is hard to think of any duty more central to the President of a great and wealthy country than coming to the aid of its citizens in the wake of a natural disaster. That is what the federal government does. Trump, however, complains that Puerto Rico is adding to the deficit, making it harder for him to justify extravagant tax breaks for the very rich. Beyond misunderstanding what government does is his inexcusable moral tone deafness. He said the mayor of San Juan was conspiring with Democrats to be "nasty" to his administration and that the people of Puerto Rico were lazy and should be "working harder" to help themselves recover. Essentially, Trump is blaming the Puerto Ricans for what he sees as being weak. Dismissing weak people as obstacles "the strong man" should legitimately brush aside is central to the philosophy of Ayn Rand. Rand says the super hero or great men (or CEOs) are quite justified in sweeping aside any claims made on them by the "weak." They must be free. It turns out that her novel *Atlas Shrugged* is the favorite book of Secretary of State Rex Tillerson.

I have always thought that Trump does have some basic values and beliefs. They are the values of Norman Vincent Peale, whose church he attended, and who preached that if you believe good things to be so then they are so. I watched Trump's face after the inauguration at his CIA appearance. I concluded he really believed that the sun came out when he started to speak at the Inauguration and that the size of his crowds actually was larger than Obama's. If Tillerson is a devotee of Ayn Rand, then he might well believe that the poor citizens of Puerto Rico are inferior and that throwing rolls of paper towels out to crowds of them is a befitting gesture.

This lack of a moral center is evident not only in reactions to situations such as the Las Vegas massacre or the Puerto Rican hurricane devastation. It also is evident in Trump's response to a grieving widow. Before the John Kelly story, it would have been just speculation to suggest that Tillerson was Trump's source on what to say in Puerto Rico. However, the likelihood of Tillerson as Trump's coach on that disaster shot way up after we were told by Kelly, his chief of staff, that he, Kelly, had suggested what Trump should say in a condolence call to the widow of the fallen soldier, Sergeant Johnson. Kelly's words were even more tone deaf than telling the Puerto Ricans the hurricane damage was all their fault. Kelly should have known that saying the fallen soldier should have understood what he signed up for would quite possibly have been a consolation to his widow, if it had come from her son's military superior. Coming from the civilian Trump, however, the words would just sound cruel and lacking in empathy, which they were.

-- Elizabeth Clark, Vice President for Public Policy and Political Action, and Chair, Foreign Policy Task Force

Trump, Obama, and the Middle East

By refusing to find that the international nuclear deal with Iran continues to be in US interests, President Trump moved recently to overturn yet another significant Obama policy achievement, in addition to healthcare and the dreamers, in order to satisfy his most conservative political base. Trump's approach in each case has been to say he opposes the policy, but then to let Congress try to resolve the issue while he provides no clear counter proposal. This allows him to talk and look tough to his political base, while giving no guidance and leaving possible political compromises (for example, no further sanctions? A patch for Obamacare? Let dreamers stay?) up to the dysfunctional Republican Congress. Senate Leader Mitch McConnell seems to have figured out Trump's game. He said recently he would move to a vote on the Senate floor any compromise on Obamacare that the White House says in advance it will support, thereby shifting any blame by conservatives for a compromise onto the President.

Middle East Polarity

In foreign policy, Obama sought to manage regional conflicts, reduce tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and help overcome decades of distrust between the US and Iran. Trump's policy is the reverse, seeking US advantage through drama and confrontation. As in the case of healthcare and dreamers, the president denounced Obama's policy towards Iran and then handed the issue over to Congress without recommendations to decide whether to re-impose sanctions. Trump's confrontational stance toward Iran tends to reinforce the fault lines in the Middle East between the Iranian-led Shiite Muslim groups in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, supported by Syria's long-term ally Russia, on the one hand, and the Sunni Muslim nations to the south led by Saudi Arabia on the other. Reinforcing fault lines is not a path to peace.

-- Warren Clark, Foreign Policy Task Force

Trump Governs in Darkness

CBS on "60 Minutes" October 15 exposed a very dark corner on government failure to do its job, in this case the extreme epidemic of opioid addiction in America. In 2016, 6,400 deaths in America were caused by opioid addiction. The Justice Department claims to be making every effort to stem the crisis. In fact, as the "60 Minutes" report details, because of the "revolving door" culture in Washington, 46 former Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) officials now work for the pharmaceutical industry. They are not stemming the crisis, they are profiting from it. Because of the "60 Minutes" expose, Tom Marino just withdrew from consideration as Trump's nominee to lead the Office of National Drug Control Policy. What Marino had done was make it easier for the pharmaceutical industry to earn large amounts of money from knowingly distributing drugs that had no legitimate medical use. The mechanism he used was to bury in the deepest darkness a new phrase in a new bill he wrote and pushed in Congress. The bill, Ensuring Patient Access and Effective Drug Enforcement Act, changed the standard for identifying dangers to communities from "imminent" threat to "immediate" threat. Who but Marino and his clients knew that communities could lawyer their way out of challenges if the standard was "immediate" and not "imminent." Hard to see a darker moment of failure to govern in the public interest.

In another sneak attack, Education Secretary DeVos has rescinded the Obama-era guidelines on how colleges and universities respond to sexual assault allegations. During the Obama administration, guidelines were established whereby schools could use the "preponderance of evidence" standard when judging allegations of sexual assault. This particular standard means there is "enough evidence to determine that something is more likely than not to be true." That standard is lower than the more rigorous "clear and convincing" standard that requires a "higher burden of proof." The Office of Civil Rights (OCR) is now saying that until the government develops new rules, schools are free to use either standard. They also may resolve cases informally through mediation, a process strongly discouraged by the previous administration. Advocates for sexual assault victims view this as a backward step.

-- Elizabeth Clark, Vice President for Public Policy and Political Action, and Chair, Foreign Policy Task Force

Good News on the Home Front Counters Administration Anti-Environmentalism

In spite of the catastrophic effects of climate change in the news every day, the Administration's environmental wrecking crew continues with its disastrous policies of promoting greenhouse gas emissions. But many regions, states, and localities are fighting back with a variety of plans to reduce CO2 emissions. Here in the District of Columbia, a coalition of environmental groups, faith groups, and labor organizations are pushing forward with a campaign for a carbon tax and rebate plan. The campaign, Put A Price On It DC, is gaining support in the DC City Council, including from Chairman Phil Mendelson and Council Member Mary Cheh, Chair of the Environment and Transportation Committee. Several other Council members are leaning in the direction of support.

In brief, the plan is to place a gradually increasing tax on companies that supply natural gas, oil, and fossil fuel generated electricity to residents of the District of Columbia, and on emissions linked to transportation (mass transit would be excluded). Seventy-five percent of the moneys generated from the tax would be rebated to every DC household, with larger rebates going to low-income citizens. The remaining amount would be allocated as follows: 20 percent toward investments in green projects, and five percent in tax credits to small businesses. The plan is to start with a tax of \$20 per ton of CO2 in 2019, rising by \$10 per ton every year until 2032, when the rate would be capped at \$150 per ton. This plan reduces the city's carbon footprint and is simpler to administer than a cap and trade system. It incentivizes energy suppliers and the transportation industry to gradually reduce their CO2 emissions, while providing increasing benefits to every resident of the city. This is a ground-breaking plan, truly a win-win strategy, which also promotes economic growth and social justice. With more money in their pockets, DC residents would spend more, spurring the economy, especially in restaurants, bars, cafes, and retail. Green energy projects also will help grow the number of jobs for DC residents, especially in construction and related industries.

Tentatively titled the Climate and Community Reinvestment Act of DC, the draft legislation to enact the carbon tax and rebate plan is expected to be submitted to the Council this fall. Analysis shows that it will slow emissions into the atmosphere by 23 percent by 2032. Further, it will be a positive example for Maryland and Virginia and, hopefully, other states and cities across the country to emulate.

For details on the plan, go to www.carbonpricedc.org.

-- Jean Stewart, Chair, Earth and Environment Task Force

“Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Decides, Who Pays”

Repealing the Affordable Care Act (ACA) Has Always Been about Tax Cuts

The real reason to destroy the ACA is to free up trillions of federal dollars as a financial cushion for the real goal of the Republicans, which has always been tax cuts for corporations and the super-rich. “Supply side” economics and “trickle down” monetary policy have been resurrected.

Total repeal of the Affordable Care Act was stymied by two brave Republican women senators, Susan Collins of Maine and Lisa Murkowski of Alaska, and the elder Republican warrior, John McCain of Arizona. So now, #45 is using executive orders to destroy much of the basic structure that has enabled millions of our fellow Americans to receive health care comparable to that lavished on the super-rich.

The top 2 cruel executive orders involve:

- 1) Ending Cost Sharing Reductions (CSRs)
- 2) Allowing the sale of “junk” insurance

The CSRs were created to assist the customers of insurance companies who reported that they could not provide low cost/affordable health insurance to many of their insureds who might be disabled by birth, accident, serious medical complications, or other catastrophes. Without the CSRs, millions of Americans will go without care due to inability to pay the high costs of available health insurance premiums.

Additionally, communities without affordable health care suffer job losses when hospitals close and physicians and other health care providers move away. Citizens suffer needlessly and die too young and their towns wither. Junk insurance, AKA “insurance across state lines” and “only the insurance you need,” are basically all lies because the policies provide very sparse coverage. The ACA mandates that basic insurance covers “Essential Health Benefits” (EHBs) such as: preventive care, office visits, prescription drugs, emergency room care, prenatal checkups, early childhood evaluations, and all preexisting/chronic conditions. But the junk insurance can “confabulate” virtually any health problem into a preexisting condition and generally offers a very limited selection of physicians that may not even be nearby. Additionally, prior to the ACA Rules and Standards for insurance coverage, women paid higher prices for their insurance based on the premise that every woman would need pregnancy care.

A rescue effort emerged on the evening of October 17, 2017. It has been crafted by Senator Patty Murray (D) and Senator Lamar Alexander (R). The “Band-Aid” would have only kept the CSRs intact through the 2018 election for the tradeoff of maintaining most of the “junk” insurance elements. Initially, #45 seemed amenable, but waffled when far right Republicans indicated that no measure that enables any part of the Affordable Care Act to continue is acceptable. Too many Republicans remain adamant about REPEAL of the ACA, but will not consider REPLACE.

Democrats face a dreadful choice. To save millions of Americans from losing the ability to pay for standardized health insurance containing the EHBs, Republicans demand that millions more Americans be tricked into purchasing sham insurance that will be close to worthless. This deconstruction of the ACA brings to mind the concept of “Death Panels.”

So what must good Democrats do? We must pressure Congress to work out solutions that maintain the structure of the ACA. Without “rules,” insurance companies make enormous profits, but do not “pay up” when a person actually becomes ill.

Health Care SHOULD BE a Right, not a Privilege in America!

-- Karen Pataky, Chair, Health Policy Task Force

Gun Violence IS a Public Health Issue

What are some of the things that can damage our health and even cause death? Well, among other hazards there are poisons, malnutrition, hepatitis C, AIDS, opioid addiction, suicidal depression, automobile collisions, defective organs, and being shot with a gun.

Yet although on average 315 Americans are shot each day, and 93 die as a result -- far surpassing other causes of death and injury -- federal research into gun violence as a public health crisis has been stymied by a combination of deliberate financial sabotage and political intimidation directed at many research institutions.

In 1996, the Republican-controlled Congress succeeded in amending the appropriations bill to prohibit any of the CDC's federally funded research into firearms injuries to be used to “advocate or promote gun control.” Then Congress redirected the amount of funding that had previously been used for gun violence research into another program. Though it wasn't clear exactly what research was prohibited, funding shortages and toxic discourse tend to have a chilling effect; the restriction was interpreted as prohibiting any CDC research into gun violence and was subsequently applied to gun violence research using any federal funds, not just by the CDC. The result is that in relation to mortality rates, firearms violence is the least studied cause of death in the United States, a situation decried by Congressional Democrats: “We dedicate \$240 million a year on traffic safety research, more than \$233 million a year on food safety and \$331 million a year on the effects of tobacco, but almost nothing on firearms that kill 33,000 Americans annually.”

Gun violence indeed bears many of the hallmarks of other behavioral threats to the public health. For instance, gun violence can spread through social contagion, the same route taken by HIV and hepatitis C, with outbreaks occurring among networks of people who know each other. This provides opportunities for intensive intervention to staunch its spread. Research into the connection between gun violence and mental health is warranted, too, as Americans of all political stripes seek to understand the motivation behind the mass shooting in Las Vegas on October 1, our nation's greatest single gun atrocity -- so far. But reflexively labeling perpetrators of mass shootings as mentally ill not only can stigmatize the mentally ill -- most of whom are not violent -- but also can hamper our efforts to look at all aspects of gun violence as a public health threat, and for this, more research is badly needed.

In fact, before his death this year, even Republican Congressman Jay Dickey of Arkansas, for whom the 1996 appropriation restriction is named, came to recognize the need for researching firearms violence as a public health threat. “I wish we had started the proper research and kept it going all this time,” Dickey said in 2015. “I have regrets.”

-- Karen Pataky, Chair, Health Policy Task Force, and Gail Gottlieb, Chair, Gun Policy Task Force



US Resignation from UNESCO: What Can We Expect from “US Alone” Policy

Donald Trump has added the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to the list of international organizations he is quitting. In the case of UNESCO he is making sure the US does not pay the dues we owe, some \$550 million. A spokeswoman for the State Department said in commenting on the back dues issue, “so the question is, do we want to pay that money?” Money does get Trump’s attention. Remember Trump’s perspective on Puerto Rico is that disaster relief is costing him (US) too much money.

Looking ahead, maybe we can imagine the world hitting back. A small item in the *Washington Post* (10/13/17) was headed “GM to close Detroit factory for 5 weeks.”

“General Motors plans to shutter a Detroit car factory for five weeks, laying off 1,500 workers as it tries to keep inventory under control.

The Detroit-Hamtramck plant makes the Chevrolet Impala, Cadillac CT6, Buick Lacrosse and Chevrolet Volt hybrid. It will be shut down through the end of the year starting Nov. 20.

Impala sales are off 32 percent through September. Volt sales are down 6 percent, and LaCrosse sales are off 21 percent. CT6 sales, up 51 percent for the year, fell 27 percent last month.”

Whatever is behind this particular story, it is certainly imaginable that foreigners will not want to buy American products to protest against this Administration.

-- Elizabeth Clark, Vice President for Public Policy and Political Action, and Chair, Foreign Policy Task Force

How Can We End Violence Against Women and Girls??

Violence against women is the most common form of violence in the world: one in three women around the world will experience violence in her lifetime. It occurs worldwide, cutting across all generations, nationalities, communities, and spheres of all societies, irrespective of age, ethnicity, disability, or other background.

- Worldwide, more than 700 million women alive today were married as children, one-third of them before age 15.
- About 70 percent of all human trafficking victims are women and girls.
- At least 200 million women and girls alive today have undergone female genital mutilation/cutting in 30 countries.
- Around 120 million girls worldwide (more than 1 in 10) have experienced intercourse or other forced sexual acts, mostly from current or former husbands, partners, or boyfriends.

There has been little analysis and discussion of this type of violence, which impairs women’s health, violates their human rights, and undermines countries’ economic, political, and social development. Until now.

The European Union and the United Nations have recently launched the Spotlight Initiative to fight violence against women and girls (VAWG), with an initial allocation of 500 million Euros. It is so named to draw attention to the fact that “violence often takes place in the dark, is denied, or is rendered invisible” and that “violence cannot survive in the light.” It fits in with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, for which gender equality and women’s and girls’ empowerment are critical for its achievement.

The Spotlight Initiative was the focus of a panel of policy makers and actors on October 12, 2017, at The Center for Global Development in Washington, DC. The discussion centered on how the initiative can be most effective in eliminating violence against women and girls.

Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, Executive Director of UN Women, said that VAWG, the most tolerated crime in the world, has not reached the attention of heads of state. The Spotlight Initiative will now do this. It will build on the UN Women’s 20-year-old Trust Fund to End Violence against Women, which has provided grants to 426 initiatives in 136 countries, valued at \$116 million, and its Orange Campaign, where the 25th of each month is Orange Day to draw attention to gender-based violence. ... Joyce Banda closed the session with a Challenge to Action: Village Women are ready! Spotlight should create a partnership with them.

-- Gretchen Bloom, Roving Reporter, WNDC

(Note: The entire report, from which this portion is excerpted, can be found on our website.)

DeVos Dismantling Obama Administration Student Protections

As one of the more controversial Cabinet members in the Trump Administration, Secretary DeVos and her “Department of Miseducation” has been busy rolling back several of the guidelines established by the Obama administration to protect students:

Campus sexual assault

Title IX of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (part of the Education Amendments of 1972) prohibits schools and educational programs that receive federal funds from discriminating against students on the basis of sex. The Obama administration established guidelines whereby schools could use the “preponderance of evidence” standard when judging allegations of sexual assault. That standard is lower than the more rigorous “clear and convincing” standard that requires a “higher burden of proof.” Secretary DeVos has rescinded the Obama-era guidelines. The Office of Civil Rights is now saying that until the government develops new rules, schools are free to use either standard and resolve cases informally through mediation, a process strongly discouraged by the previous administration. Advocates for sexual assault victims are concerned that, once again, there will be reluctance to report sexual assault and schools will be inclined to ignore sexual violence. Advocates for the accused, however, believe these new guidelines promote more fairness and fight bias toward the accused. Twenty-nine Senators have sent a letter to Secretary DeVos urging her to maintain the current Title IX guidelines.

For-profit schools

Secretary DeVos is being sued by 18 states and DC for instructing her staff not to enforce rules protecting students from predatory for-profit schools. She is undoing policies that would forgive federal loans for students who were taken advantage of by some schools. A regulation known as the “gainful employment rule” evaluated vocational and for-profit colleges on whether their students could earn enough money to repay their loans. Schools that failed to meet the government’s benchmark standard would be cut off from receiving student loans. Under DeVos, several of these benchmarks are being dismantled. It is interesting that President Trump paid out \$25 million to settle charges against Trump University.

-- Dianna E. Washington, Ph.D., Chair, Education and Children’s Issues Task Force