

WNDC



Political Dispatch

April 2021

CELEBRATE, BUT KEEP FIGHTING

From Jean Stewart, Chair, Earth and Environment Task Force

The good news is the Biden Administration has committed to fight the climate crisis and to undo the environmental damage wrought by the wrecking crew led by the previous president. As we observe the 51st Earth Day on April 22, we can celebrate: America rejoining the Paris Climate Accords; the restoration of laws and regulations for clean water and clean air; a return to limitations on the pollution from extracting, transporting, and using fossil fuels; and a new awareness of the disproportionate damage of pollution and climate-driven disasters on communities of color. But the dangers of the current changes in the Earth's climate systems are here and increasing, and our continuing addiction to ecosystem destroyers like fossil fuels and toxic chemicals are bringing us ever closer to a planet-wide ecosystem collapse. It is absolutely appropriate to celebrate a return to a commitment to heal Mother Earth, but celebration doesn't mean relaxation.

There are many more good signs: market forces reducing the costs of renewable sources of energy; making coal and oil more expensive and less desirable; the sudden popularity of electric powered vehicles; creating a new White House environmental justice interagency council promoting accountability; installing environmental justice officers at all federal agencies; and revitalizing EPA now headed by an African American.

But as "Star Wars" fans know, the Empire does strike back. The fossil fuel industry has found new ways to promote their products, especially fracked gas. So-called "natural" gas is advertised as "clean," even though it is composed primarily of methane, a potent greenhouse gas, and pipelines are leaky. Burning gas also contributes to indoor air pollution, since burning gas produces nitrogen dioxide and particulates to a degree often greater than standards that limit outdoor air pollution. Like so many other sources of pollution, this affects lower income communities more seriously, where homes are less well ventilated and the incidence of respiratory illnesses such as asthma are greater.

New factories are springing up that use gas and oil to produce an ever-increasing deluge of plastic products. More than 99% of plastic is made from fossil fuels, and fracked gas is fueling an unprecedented boom in plastic production. Plastics and other chemical factories are disproportionately located near minority communities, thus exposing the residents to high levels of health-damaging pollution. A stretch of the Louisiana coastline, primarily inhabited by lower-income residents, is called "cancer alley" because it is packed with chemical plants and refineries. Gas utilities are vigorously opposing efforts in some localities to require new buildings to be all-electric. Battles over construction of new gas and oil pipelines continue, including those intended to carry Canada's very dirty tar sands oil across Indian water sources. Fracking provides substantial economic benefits to several states, making it politically difficult to transition to clean energy sources. Individually owned farms continue to be gobbled up by agribusiness, which uses unsustainable farming methods, such as pesticides toxic to essential pollinators like honeybees and butterflies.

These are just a few of the challenges facing America as it reassumes its role as a world leader, and all of us as stewards of Mother Earth. Climate instability is a crisis, an emergency that if not seriously addressed on the 51st anniversary of Earth Day and in the next 10 years will bring increasing natural disasters, massive movements of climate refugees, increasing extinctions of keystone species, famines, and loss of arable land and water resources. If that's not enough to scare even those who downplay the severity of this emergency, the economic costs will make the cost of the COVID relief program just enacted look like small change. For Earth Day 2021, our slogan should be "good planets are hard to find," so let's work hard to save this one.

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WHAT GOVERNMENT CAN DO FOR YOU: THE TEXAS LESSON

From Elizabeth Clark, Chair, Human Rights & Democracy Task Force

In Texas, during a snow and cold freeze-up catastrophe for its citizens, the organization that had power over direly needed electricity was the Electricity Reform Council of Texas, or ERCOT. This state oversight commission has three commissioners appointed by Republican governors and functions under laissez faire governance with no restraint on electricity companies, which are motivated solely by profit. This means, as US Representative Julian Castro said of ERCOT in a television interview, there were “no requirements to winterize.”

Lack of winterizing means lack of food and water and heat, but former governor Rick Perry told US House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, “Texans would be without electricity for longer than three days to keep the federal government out of their business.”

One area of the state, El Paso, that is not part of ERCOT and is instead part of a federally regulated grid, implemented winterizing solutions and the results were striking—only a few thousand people lost power for mere minutes.

How Did this Happen?

Under George W. Bush, major deregulation was undertaken under a market-based patchwork of private generators, transmission companies, and energy retailers. With so many cost-cutting companies competing for budget-shopping consumers, there was no incentive for weather protection or maintenance. Remember: CEOs are autocrats, not accountable to the public, but to the stock market. That is what Texans like—no restraints and the illusion that they are getting money in their pockets—an illusion that may have shattered for them when the electricity companies started raising their bills astronomically.

The insane stupidity of Texas’ lack of preparedness, proudly unlinked to the rest of our national grid, proud that it has no public service requirements, and in fact has an ideology of hating government. This ideology serves no one’s interest, including the general interest. Starving the general interest, always ends up starving you, the individual. It must be stopped.

We need government—elections, accountability, citizens with power. Turn our life over to corporations, and the profit motive takes power from citizens. So does dictatorship take power from the people—the dictatorship Trump was trying to create for himself January 6 through a coup. And forget about good, efficient dictators. We just had a report from China on what dictatorship can do to destroy good governance, democracy, and a civil service that functions for the common good. Apparently the Chinese CDC was not given information on experiments run by the military on the coronavirus. They didn’t know, so they couldn’t tell their international counterparts and they couldn’t be part of plans to protect their own Chinese population. Dictatorships—corporate or government/military—don’t produce for us, for our general health and wealth. They aren’t efficient.

It is better for you if you, or at least your better-off neighbors, were paying more in taxes. Your grandmother doesn’t die of COVID, and your house isn’t destroyed by flooding from broken pipes. So, make your priority free and fair elections.

STOP US ARMS TO MEXICO

From Beth Merricks, Member, Gun Violence Prevention Task Force

According to Mexican journalist León Krauze’s recent opinion piece in the *Washington Post*, “Biden must stop the ‘iron river’ of US weapons devastating Mexico.... drugs continue to flow north...” from Mexico while guns flow south “to arm and empower Mexican criminal organizations.” These guns flow both through illegal channels and legal exports. Studies have indicated a relationship between US gun laws and the prevalence of guns and gun violence in Mexico.

While common-sense laws such as HR 8 and HR 1446, which were passed in the House this week to close loopholes in the background check system are helpful, it is a ban on assault weapons that could potentially have a more positive impact on the flow of guns to Mexico. These are the types of weapons the Mexican drug cartels favor. According to Krauze, the Mexican Foreign Minister, Marcelo Ebrard, told him that “...what could truly be decisive would be to reinstate the restrictions on high-powered guns that were in place from 1994 to 2004.” He was referencing the Public Safety and Recreational Firearms Use Protection Act that was passed in 1994 under the Clinton administration and allowed to expire 10 years later under the Bush administration. That Act prohibited “...the manufacture, transfer, or possession of...” certain

types of assault weapons. Krause referred to a 2010 study conducted at the University of Notre Dame by Luke Chicoine (<https://www.econ-jobs.com/research/32941-Exporting-the-Second-Amendment-US-Assault-Weapons-and-the-Homicide-Rate-in-Mexico.pdf>). This study stated that “in the four years following the expiration of the US Federal Assault Weapons Ban (AWB), the homicide rate in Mexico increased 45%. Over the same period, over 60,000 firearms recovered in Mexico have been traced back to the US.... The baseline estimates suggest the expiration of the AWB is responsible for at least 16.4% of the increase in the homicide rate in Mexico between 2004 and 2008.”

In addition to this recent *Washington Post* piece on the relationship between gun violence in Mexico and the US assault weapons ban, the LA Times ran a piece by John Lindsay-Poland and William D. Hartung (“Trump made it easier to export US guns. Biden must reverse these dangerous policies.”) on regulations implemented by the Trump administration in 2020 that made it easier for US companies to export firearms by transferring the responsibility from the Department of State to the Department of Commerce. This transfer resulted in Congress losing its ability to provide oversight on major sales of these weapons to other countries, including Mexico, which was the number 2 (after Thailand) US handgun importer in 2020.

Lifting the assault weapons ban in 2004 and losing scrutiny of gun exports in 2020 have neither served the best interests of the Mexican people nor the American people. They have mainly served US gun manufacturers and the National Rifle Association. The Biden administration and Congress must work expeditiously to reverse these actions.



GETTING IRAN NUCLEAR DEAL GOING AGAIN IS A CLIFFHANGER

From Elizabeth Clark and Cynthia Efird, Members, Foreign Policy Task Force

Trita Parsi, noted author, head of the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft at the Georgetown School of Foreign Service, and former head of the National Iranian American Council, spoke to the WNDU on March 9. His topic was the prospects for the resumption of the Iran Nuclear Deal or Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which was signed in 2015 and from which the Trump Administration unilaterally withdrew in May 2018, to the consternation of US allies.

Since the US left the JCPOA, Iran has increased its nuclear enrichment program, moving closer to producing nuclear bomb material and increasing tensions between the US and Iran, leading to a fear of war in the region. The Biden administration is working toward direct diplomatic negotiations to exchange “compliance for compliance,” recognizing that Iran must be prevented from having nuclear weapons.

Many factors look to be encouraging hardliners on both sides to oppose reentering the Accord. President Hassan Rouhani faces an election in June, with grassroots pressure for a hardliner successor. In the US, both chair of Senate Foreign Relations Committee Bob Menendez and Senate Majority leader Chuck Schumer oppose making concessions and say Iran must take the first steps. American Secretary of State Blinken said the the US “is not going to make concessions just to get a deal.”

Despite the impasse, American and European diplomats said informal talks could begin in coming weeks. If they do, the United States and Iran may agree to take simultaneous steps toward coming back into compliance with the 2015 accord. March 11, the New York Times carried a report on the status of the nuclear negotiations, which referenced Trita Parsi’s views and concluded that “it is widely believed, by diplomats and experts alike, that Mr. Rouhani and Iran’s foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, want to secure sanctions relief by getting nuclear negotiations well on their way before Iran’s change of power that is expected to install a more hard-line government by late summer.”

According to Parsi, “Iran needs to go first” would be a childish policy. Both sides will have to find concessions that save face and are political acceptable to policy-makers in both countries.

GVP TASK FORCE UPDATE

From Ellen McGovern, Chair, Gun Violence Prevention Task Force

US HOUSE ON THE MOVE

The House moved quickly to pass the bipartisan bills—HR 8, Background Checks and HR 1446, Charleston Loophole, in mid-March 2021. We expected these votes! Bravo. However, the Senate will be the real challenge. The two GA Senate wins were important, but we need more Dems in the Senate. 2022, here we come! Thus, the outmoded filibuster position will have to be examined for specific pieces of legislation, if we want to solve problems like “gun violence” in the next 2 years.

House leadership is planning to reintroduce the Assault Weapons Ban within the next few weeks—maybe before April 1. (Read the April Political Dispatch on Guns and Mexico for important information.) Watch for an eBlast and all WNDC social media platforms. Then amplify!

BREONNA TAYLOR—JUSTICE NOW

The first anniversary of **Breonna Taylor’s death** by the police in Louisville, KY, was March 13, 2021. For women, inequities prevail even in “criminal justice” matters. Thankfully, the George Floyd case is going forward in MN, but so far, not for Breonna! There is still no justice for Breonna’s family or community. A settlement for the family, yes, but no Justice. We must pay attention to her case!

SOCIAL JUSTICE and ART

Shepard Fairey, the renowned graphic designer, illustrator, and activist in Los Angeles, CA, who created the Obama artwork in 2008, and more recently the 2020 Time magazine cover, VOTE (first time ever, Time permitted a cover without their Masthead), donated two prints showcasing the AK-47 with a gorgeous, bold-colored flower in the gun barrel. Brady United and March for Our Lives also have worked with Fairey. The prints should be at Whittemore House before the April newsletter is distributed. The GVP Task Force is very excited! And, so pleased to be working with Nuzhat Sultan and her Visual Arts and Museum Affairs Committee on this remarkable project. We hope to have an exhibit when all can visit the Club. Thank you, Shepard Fairey!

VIRGINIA from VA Liaison, Emma Rowland

Lots of good GVP bills passed in Virginia this session thanks to the hard work of legislators in Richmond and the GVP grassroots groups who advocated for these bills! The bills that VA WNDC members and others helped pass were: **HB 1992**—prohibits the purchase, possession, or transportation of firearms following a conviction for assault and battery of a family or household member, **HB 2258**—provides for a Substantial Risk Order Registry, **HB 2081**—prohibits the carrying of a firearm or stun weapon within the Capitol square and the surrounding area and into buildings owned or leased by the Commonwealth, and **HB 2128**—would extend the number of days for Virginia’s state police to complete background checks on gun purchasers from 3 to 5 days before the sale or transfer of firearms, thereby closing the Charleston loophole.

VA members of WNDC: reach out to your legislators House Member listing and Senate Member listing to thank them for passing these bills! We should also send a big thanks to Senator Justin Fairfax (Senate President), Speaker Eileen Filler-Corn, and Senate Majority Leader Dick Saslaw and House Majority Leader Charniele Herring and VA Liaison, Emma Rowland.

MARYLAND

Ghost Guns legislation is still waiting to be voted out of both the House Judiciary committee and the Senate Judicial Proceedings committee. We will keep MD WNDC members updated for important votes. (HB 638/SB 624). The Police Reform bill (police reform and GVP go hand-in-hand) is being reviewed in committee so when details are worked out, the bill will go back to the floor of each chamber for a vote. Watch for upcoming Alerts in April.

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA from DC Liaison, Marcie Cohen

Data from the DC government and police shows almost 200 people have died from gun violence in the nation’s Capital in 2020. The last time DC experienced a higher murder rate was 16 years ago, according to the Metropolitan Police Department.

Harllee Harper, the new Gun Violence Prevention Director, is in the process of setting up the infrastructure of this new DC cabinet department. She indicated she would attend a future Task Force meeting—possibly a WNDC program to discuss DC’s plans for gun violence prevention.

GVP Task Force meeting: April 29, Thursday, 5:00 pm. We welcome New task force members anytime!

Note: The preceding Commentary may not represent the precise positions of every member of WNDC. We welcome feedback.

