

PPC ESTABLISHES RACIAL EQUITY TASK FORCE

From Rosalyn Coates, Chair, Racial Equity Task Force

Mere acknowledgment of the historic injustices that have been perpetrated against African Americans and other people of color in the United States is happening slowly. There are still many in national leadership who are reluctant to take even that small step. On March 25, 2021, Republican Governor Bryan Kemp signed into law a bill that makes it more difficult for Black and Brown Georgians to vote. In fact, 43 states are considering over 250 laws that will restrict access to the ballot. Yet, the minority leader of the US Senate recently remarked, “States are not engaging in trying to suppress voters whatsoever.” The need to address racial equity in suffrage is acute.

The ongoing police killings of unarmed Black men, the horrible treatment of a Black/Latino soldier at a “traffic stop,” and the recent release of several African Americans who have served decades in prison for crimes they did not commit highlight the need to address racial equity in America’s criminal justice system.

Employment discrimination, disparities in access to education and health care, housing discrimination, and environmental injustice—these issues and more are the reasons that WNDC and its Public Policy Committee have decided to establish the Racial Equity Task Force.

The Task Force is led by Rosalyn L. Coates. Rosalyn practiced civil rights law for over 15 years before recently retiring as legislative counsel for a federal agency. The task force seeks additional members to plan and implement programs that will provide venues for discussing these important issues and developing opportunities for WNDC to partner with other organizations to find solutions. If you would like to work with Rosalyn Coates on the new Racial Equity Task Force, please contact her at rcoates730@gmail.com.

WHO LIVES, WHO DIES, WHO DECIDES, WHO PAYS

*From Karen Pataky, Chair, Public Policy & Political Action Committee, and
Chair, Health Policy Task Force*

Today’s far-right Republican Party has been terrified of “replacement” since Democratic gains in the 2018 national and state midterms, and the election of President Joe Biden in 2020. The increasing numbers of non-white voters has resulted in new voter-restriction laws in 43 states: fewer voting stations, decreased hours for voting, more difficulty in obtaining mail-in ballots, harsher photo ID laws, and lack of sanitary facilities plus banning water availability during long voter lines.

And far-right commentators and religious leaders are obsessed specifically with the decreased fertility of white women, whose birth rate has been dropping for the past decade. So, we are seeing white male politicians, who have no medical training, writing and passing legislation that not only interferes with safe abortions, and safe contraception, but may place the woman’s life at risk. Sadly, both religious and political leaders, again, ignorantly or deceptively label all contraception other than “natural family planning” (AKA “rhythm/calendar method) as abortion inducing. More lies to prevent use of safe and effective birth control.

Far-right zealots seek to “save” every pregnancy by enacting laws—again written by men with no medical knowledge—that dictate that women who choose medical abortions must be told by their physicians, FALSELY, that the abortion can be effectively and safely reversed between taking the initial pill (Mifepristone) and the follow-up pills (Misoprostol) taken 2 days later. An injection of progesterone is touted as a way to reverse the medical abortion. This is totally false. It’s fairy-tale medicine, and the woman risks death via sepsis from a retained dead fetus.

More non-physician–derived laws in Ohio and Indiana demand that every pregnancy be salvaged, even ectopic pregnancies. The laws mandate ectopic pregnancies (when the embryo is not implanted in the uterus) MUST be surgically transplanted into the woman’s uterus. This is another fictional procedure, not done anywhere on the planet. Untreated ectopic pregnancies are 100% fatal to the embryo and (if left untreated) to the woman who will die by hemorrhage when the pregnancy ruptures.

Several states plan to follow Tennessee’s lead in giving the presumed biologic father total veto power over the woman’s choice to abort her pregnancy, even in cases of rape or incest. And there is no concomitant mandate that the biologic father contribute financial support to the pregnant woman for prenatal care or to the prospective child after his/her birth.

Other states withhold Title X funding for women’s health care when provided by Planned Parenthood, or other medical offices that also provide abortions. The primary goal of the religious right remains to make all abortions illegal. Alabama, Arizona, Michigan, New Mexico, and Oklahoma have “trigger laws” that would immediately make all state abortions illegal if SCOTUS strikes down *Roe v Wade*. Before *Roe v Wade* there were “underground railroads” to concerned physicians or ethnic midwives who could provide safe abortions. And, as always, the affluent always find what they need because they can pay “reputable” gynecologists with secure, private offices. Other women with adequate resources have related stories of travel to other countries for safe abortions.

Some commentators wonder if the Republican obsession with prohibiting care for citizens who identify as transgender is rooted in fear of diminished fertility in the white population. One might wonder if the recent spate of police shootings of Black and brown men is also related to the myth of super-virility in nonwhite men.



WHAT IS THE 5G DEBATE ABOUT?

From Emily L. Benson, Member, Foreign Policy & National Security Task Force

Understanding the 5G debate can seem like an uphill battle. It combines technical data transfers with foreign policy and is compounded by a seemingly insurmountable geopolitical puzzle. However, at its core, 5G is a familiar infrastructure debate. When the National Interstate and Defense Highways Act was signed into law in 1956, President Eisenhower saw a demand for infrastructure that would lay the proverbial groundwork for a strong American economy.

Today, 5G is the “fifth generation” infrastructure that underpins cellular network technology. For most consumers, the most immediate changes 5G brings are faster web surfing on personal devices like cell phones or faster downloads on laptops. While a feature-length film would have taken 30 minutes to download a few years ago, 5G promises instantaneous downloads of these types of heavy files. 5G will also enable fast and reliable connection among Internet of Things (IoT) goods. For example, it will enable your smart coffee maker to tell Alexa it’s time to order more coffee pods.

The implications of 5G are in some ways more consequential for industry, in particular the automobile sector. 5G will speed up the deployment of autonomous vehicles, which require thousands of data points per second in order to slow down on icy roads, avoid pedestrians, and communicate with the world around them. Current internet infrastructure is not capable of handling that much data and processing it that quickly. In other words, if the United States wants to lead the world in renewably powered autonomous vehicles, it must have a robust and reliable 5G network.

Why Is 5G a Geopolitical Issue?

The consumer and industry demand for faster and more reliable internet is already here. The geopolitical debate over 5G centers on who we should trust to build this infrastructure, versus who we ought to regard as a strategic adversary. Fears persist that if Chinese companies, such as ZTE and Huawei, who have close ties to the Chinese government, build American 5G networks, they will be able to access large swaths of both civilian and government data.

It does matter which companies and countries build the next generation of 5G infrastructure—but only to a degree. For example, if the United States builds poor-quality 5G infrastructure that can be easily hacked, then the country is left in a similarly vulnerable position as if an adversary had built it. Furthermore, like China, the United States already engages in widespread surveillance of its citizens. In other words, it might not matter to an American citizen whether their 5G network is Chinese or American if that citizen is likely to be surveilled no matter what.

The European Union (which does not engage in wholesale surveillance of its citizens), and in particular Germany, has taken a mixed approach to 5G, allowing Chinese companies to build certain parts of its 5G infrastructure. The Trump Administration, on the other hand, led by then-Secretary of State Pompeo, embarked on a plan to “clean” such networks from “untrustworthy” vendors. The Trump Administration’s policy was a dangerous, unilateralist scheme replete with racist, anti-Asian dog-whistling that would have geo-strategically undermined the US.

Where Biden Will Go with 5G?

The Biden Administration has a historic opportunity when it comes to 5G. More than engaging in a technical arms race against a geopolitical adversary like China, President Biden can demonstrate to American citizens and the world that the United States is still a capable standard-setter when it comes to innovative and emerging technologies. Taking a more measured approach to companies like Huawei, and removing them from the [Entity List](#) (an issue that almost cost Commerce Secretary Raimondo her confirmation), the Biden Administration could signal a willingness to engage with allies on China policy.

Above all, a large-scale investment in and deployment of 5G infrastructure would prove to US citizens—and to the world—that Americans are still capable of leading an industry, setting international standards, and building the physical infrastructure. As it currently stands, China is outspending and outmaneuvering the United States. As China bounds ahead further into the 21st century, the Biden Administration has a choice. We can either be a country in which low-income children rely on McDonald’s WiFi for schoolwork, or we can be the first country to design and implement a system that facilitates the deployment of electronic autonomous vehicles. President Biden should take this 5G opportunity to work alongside allies, build a more resilient American economy, and signal to the world that the United States believes in diplomacy—not building barriers.



PLASTICS, POLLUTION, AND CLIMATE CHANGE

From Jean Stewart, Chair, Earth and Environment Task Force

We like the convenience and cleanliness of plastics. We abhor pollution. We fear the effects of climate change. Plastics’ convenience and cleanliness are offset by their addition to landfills, and to several great garbage dumps in the oceans, so much that by 2050, the oceans will have more plastic by weight than fish. Unfortunately, only about 15% of the plastic in recycling bins actually gets recycled. Plastic doesn’t decompose, it merely breaks down into smaller and smaller particles. Recent data shows that these particles are now found in the atmosphere up to the highest altitudes within human reach, in soil, in rivers and streams including our drinking water, as well as in the fish we eat. No conclusions have yet been drawn as to the effect of consumption of plastic on human health, but it’s not likely to be good.

Plastics are manufactured from oil and fracked gas. Cracking plants bring in these fossil fuels and “crack” them into fractions used to manufacture plastic containers, plastic bags, beverage bottles, medical supplies, and packaging of nearly every product on the market. Consumers are becoming more aware of problems caused by plastic straws and grocery bags, and they are taking action to reduce and even stop using these items. These are valuable actions, but the overall problem is so much greater that we need wider awareness and broader action—and quickly. We must stop the pollution and eliminate our dependence on fossil fuels in time to get to net zero carbon emissions within the next decade. This would slow climate change before Earth reaches a tipping point into unstoppable environmental catastrophe.

Fracked gas is relatively easy to obtain, plentiful, and cheaper than oil. The surge in supply of less expensive fracked gas has helped feed the growth in plastic production. Fossil fuel companies are now realizing that markets for oil, and even fracked gas for energy production, are likely to diminish as the overall economy moves toward cleaner, renewable sources of energy. Investment in plastics for oil and gas producers is a way to keep the profits flowing from what has seemed to be an ever-growing market. “As the industry faces a decline in demand for oil and gas, some companies have offered a theory of growing global demand for petrochemicals, especially plastics, as justification for continued exploration and extraction of fossil fuels.... Yet, in a world that is awash with plastic production and waste, facing a continued climate crisis, and seeking environmental justice and equity, the proposed expansion of plastic production raises red flags....”^[1]

Cracking plants are largely located near lower-income communities. For example, many petrochemical plants are sited on the Louisiana Gulf Coast and the Mississippi River between New Orleans and Baton Rouge, often referred to as “Cancer Alley.” These plants spew toxins that increase incidence of pulmonary diseases like asthma. Oil and gas extraction operations, usually found closer to low-income communities, pollute air and water, as well as cause noise pollution.

Convenience for everyone comes at a greater price for some, and misfortune for us all comes with climate change–driven storms, wildfires, droughts, and floods. For the sake of racial justice, and for the sake of the whole human race, the connections among plastic, pollution, and climate change must be severed.

¹ As You Sow. “Plastics: The Last Straw for Big Oil?” webinar, April 8, 2021.

GVP TASK FORCE UPDATE

From Ellen McGovern, Chair, Gun Violence Prevention Task Force

ALL EYES ON THE US SENATE

As #TheTimelsNow GVP Coalition letter (WNDC signed!) to the US Senate says, “We’ve waited three decades for Federal action to #EndGunViolence in America....” The House passed life-saving bills last month. The President made gun violence prevention a priority for his administration after strong public pressure. Now, we ask the US Senate to act by taking initial steps to pass the bipartisan bills—HR 8, background checks, and HR 1446, Charleston loophole. We also ask the senators to protect the \$5 billion investment in the American Jobs Act for evidence-based community violence prevention programs. WNDC National Members, we need you! Watch for personal calls from GVP Task Force members, followed up by their Action Alert emails on important Senate actions in May or early June.

REGIONAL UPDATE—VIRGINIA and MARYLAND

Both VA and MD general assemblies have ended their sessions for 2021.

VA/MD members of WNDC, reach out to your legislators and let them know that next year, we will be back; we haven’t given up! **Ghost Guns** (created through 3D printers or plastic kits at home) legislation is going to be back in committee and headed to both house and senate floors for votes. MD passed “police reforms,” limiting police officers’ use of force, restricting the use of no-knock warrants, and repealing the nation’s first Bill of Rights for law enforcement.

WNDC PROGRAMS with GVP COLLABORATION

Jane Nicholson, a WNDC National Member from Wisconsin, will share her personal story with gun violence and her experiences with “restorative justice” in communities and within families (**June 8, 6:00–7:00 pm**).

Mrs. Harllee Harper, DC’s **Gun Violence Prevention Director**, has accepted an invitation to speak to our members about her new role and new office in DC government. She will share her comprehensive plan on gun violence prevention and how to leverage resources for impacting key neighborhoods (**June 17, 6:00–7:00 pm**).

SPECIAL EXHIBIT—APRIL 9 to SEPTEMBER 25, 2022

The **Gun Violence Memorial Project** is installed at the **National Building Museum**. It was conceived by MASS Design Group and conceptual artist Hank Willis Thomas in partnership with GVP groups. The Memorial was inspired by the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt to create a permanent national memorial that honors the lives and narratives of the victims of gun violence.

GVP TASK FORCE MEETING: MAY 27, THURSDAY, at 5 pm, WNDC Garden

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.

