

## Anatomy of Deceit: Team Trump Deploys Doctors With Dubious Qualifications to Push Fake Cure for Covid-19

By Anne Nelson

ON JULY 27, A DOZEN PHYSICIANS POSED IN FRONT of the Supreme Court in Washington, D.C., dressed in white lab coats with “America’s Frontline Doctors” stitched over the pocket. The group’s chief spokesperson was Dr. Simone Gold, an emergency physician from Los Angeles. They were introduced by Jenny Beth Martin, the founding CEO of Tea Party Patriots, as participants in the “White Coat Summit.” The doctors made spirited arguments for the use of hydroxychloroquine as a “cure” for Covid-19 and against wearing masks and imposing lockdowns—all running counter to the recommendations of Dr. Anthony Fauci and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.<sup>1</sup>

Although the event was billed as a “press conference,” few journalists attended. A video posted by a bystander showed only a handful of attendees, most of them dressed in tourists’ shorts and T-shirts. But the event was livestreamed by Breitbart News and quickly went (so to speak) viral.

There was a rapid backlash. Much of the media attention focused on Dr. Stella Immanuel, one of Gold’s cohort. Following the press conference, the Daily Beast posted a video of Immanuel, who is also a Pentecostal preacher, delivering a sermon claiming that

various female ailments were caused by sexual visitations from “demons.”

Immanuel has since disappeared from the America’s Frontline Doctors online roster, but the group has

continued to get traction. On August 10, Pat Robertson’s show on the Christian Broadcasting Network carried an interview with Simone Gold and an endorsement of her hydroxychloroquine cure. On August 21, Alex Jones’s NewsWars carried an interview with another member of America’s Frontline Doctors, Mark McDonald. McDonald—a child psychiatrist—[maintained](#), “If all Americans had access to hydroxychloroquine, the pandemic would essentially end in about 30 days.”

Science has shown otherwise. Despite early hopes last spring, there is mounting evidence that hydroxychloroquine is a problematic—and even dangerous—treatment for Covid-19. One expert with firsthand knowledge is Nick Sawyer, an academic emergency physician in Sacramento, Calif. In July he [wrote](#) an article for *Lifeline*, the publication of the California chapter of the American College of Emergency Physicians, describing his harrowing two weeks of service in the Covid wards of Elmhurst

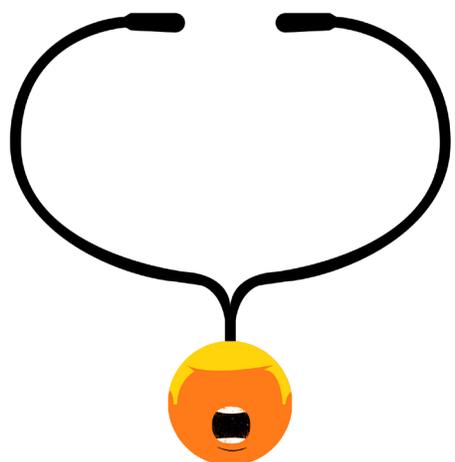
Hospital in Queens. Sawyer was part of a team of California doctors dispatched by Governor Gavin Newsom to offer emergency assistance at the epicenter of the epidemic, at the height of the New York City outbreak.

Sawyer is now dealing with the spike in cases in California, this time with the benefit of four months of additional Covid research. “The science on the effectiveness of hydroxychloroquine in treating Covid-19 is settled—multiple high-quality studies have shown that it shows no benefit,” he notes. Far more concerning, Sawyer says, is its potential harm: “Hydroxychloroquine can cause unstable

cardiac arrhythmias, cardiac arrest, and sudden cardiac death.” Over recent months, the Food and Drug Administration, the American Medical Association, and other organizations have issued [warnings](#) that the drug should be withdrawn as a Covid-19 treatment. “It’s irresponsible for America’s Frontline Doctors to continue to push this medication on the unwitting American population,” Sawyer states.

Why, then, would Gold’s band of physicians continue its campaign to pitch the treatment to the public? Simone Gold has repeatedly described her group as a “grassroots organization” acting in the service of its patients.<sup>2</sup> In fact, it has been a highly orchestrated effort, months in the making, assembled by conservative Washington insiders in direct consultation with the White House, with the goal of reopening the economy in time to benefit Trump’s reelection prospects—regardless of the toll in human lives.

The first public mention of the initiative may have been a *Washington Post* story on April 13, as the virus raged across



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## A Political Ecosphere Built on Lies

**B**ACK IN THE MID-1980S, *THE NATION* MAGAZINE, of which I was then publisher, was sued for copyright infringement by the book publishing company Harper and Row. We had received a manuscript of Gerald Ford's unremarkable autobiography in a brown paper bag at the reception desk, or so I was told by our editor, Victor Navasky. I'm hedging slightly on this aspect of the story because courtesy of Calvin Trillin, Victor was also known as "Sticky Fingers Navasky"—and not for his inclination to pick up the lunch tab.

We went ahead and ran excerpts from the Ford manuscript, mainly because the former president had whitewashed the only item from his short term in office that anyone really wanted to know about—the pardon of Richard Nixon and whether there had been a deal.

In U.S. District Court the case turned on the question of what constituted news. We argued that we were addressing a compelling public need in offering our assessment of this important piece of presidential history and that our claim of fair use and copyright exemption was therefore justified.

Judge Richard Owen, a Nixon appointee, suggested our piece traded in old information (he might have said "tired") and did not rise to the level of importance we were attributing to it. To bolster our side, we enlisted the author and journalist David Halberstam as an expert witness, who helpfully testified that "it doesn't have to be new to be news."

I thought about that exchange this week when I read the blockbuster headlines over revelations in Bob Woodward's new book, *Rage*, that back in early February Trump confided in an interview that he knew the coronavirus was "deadly" and worse than the flu.

Of course he knew. He lied about not being briefed on the severity of the virus. He lied about the danger. He lied about what he was doing to curb the mushrooming spread of the virus. He lied about possible cures. At the *Spectator*, we agonized over this slow-motion train wreck and reported how, several years earlier, Trump had actually dismantled the government's capacity to monitor and prevent the growth of infectious diseases.

In "Anatomy of Deceit," her cover story for our September issue, the journalist Anne Nelson tells the harrowing story of how the Trump reelection team linked up with activists from the Religious Right, conservative donors, and right-wing media to enlist doctors with dubious credentials to downplay the impact of the virus.

Even as millions were infected and tens of thousands were dying, the Trump campaign sought to disparage concerns about the virus; discredit the use of masks, social distancing, and other measures widely employed to contain the virus; advance dishonest claims on behalf of fake cures; and deflect responsibility from the president.

The doctors had supposedly been "vetted" by the campaign, but a closer examination of their backgrounds revealed exaggerated claims of involvement in emergency medicine, unsubstantiated claims of direct involvement in the treatment of Covid-19 patients, and, in at least one instance, a history of censure by medical authorities for false claims and irresponsible public statements.

Concern for truthfulness and accountability around the government's response to the virus will rightly shape the outcome of the coming election. Nelson has opened a window onto the Trump campaign's attempts to shift blame for the crisis and manipulate the public's understanding of critical medical facts.

Covid-19 mythologies aren't the only Trump-era fables placed under a microscope in this issue of the *Spectator*. Steve Pressman reminds us of the transparently false promises Trump made while promoting the 2017 tax bill. "The standard trickle-down Republican hokum, peddled since the 1980s, had the same effect as in the past—the rich gained bigly."

With polls showing Ohio clearly in play, Dudley Althaus revisits his home state, ground he covered for the *Spectator* last fall. Even then, Althaus sensed a stirring. Republican suburban voters, displaced factory workers, even farmers and rural voters all seemed to him to be harboring at least some level of openness to what the Democrats might offer.

Scott Ritter, who famously debunked Bush and Cheney's false claims of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, here refutes the conspiracy theorists on the warehouse explosion last month in Beirut.

Last, as the global economy hurtles toward an all-out embrace of 5G, the next generation of cellular technology that employs higher frequency radio waves, Joel Moskowitz of the School of Public Health at Berkeley warns of inadequate testing and possible public health concerns. Though the industry dismisses these claims as "conspiratorial," countries including Great Britain, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Switzerland have slowed down the pace of implementation, and communities from California to Vermont and New Hampshire have called for a closer examination of the health risks. ■

—H.F.

New York City and Covid-19 deaths passed the 20,000 mark.<sup>3</sup> The *Post* reported the creation of a new conservative coalition “pushing for the White House and GOP lawmakers to push back against health professionals who have urged more caution.” The leadership was listed as Stephen Moore of the Heritage Foundation, Adam Brandon of FreedomWorks, and Lisa Nelson of the American Legislative Exchange Council. A fourth individual, Jenny Beth Martin, is the founding director of the Tea Party Patriots. She would play a key role in organizing the events to come, including the doctors’ Washington “summit” in July.

Brandon, Nelson, and Martin are all prominent members of a secretive organization called the Council for National Policy, a shadowy coalition that coordinates initiatives among conservative megadonors, political operatives, and media owners, many of them Christian fundamentalists (see “[Holding Democracy Hostage](#)”).

The *Post* story quoted an interview with Richard Viguerie, a co-founder of the CNP, on the mission of the initiative: “The sooner we get the economy going and back up, the better it’s going to be for conservatives and Republicans in this election year. . . . Conservatives feel the government has overreacted, and it’s got to end.”<sup>4</sup>

The new coalition, called Save Our Country, officially debuted on April 27, as U.S. Covid deaths approached 55,000.<sup>5</sup> Headed by economist Art Laffer, its maiden press release featured quotes from Brandon, Nelson, and Martin. “The long-term consequences of a prolonged societal shutdown outweigh the damage done by the virus itself,” Martin stated. “We must immediately reopen the economy.”<sup>6</sup> Earlier that week, *The New York Times* reported that the Save Our Country coalition’s members were mobilizing their networks for state-level rallies, filing lawsuits, and commissioning polls, all to counter the lockdowns: “Non-profit groups including FreedomWorks and Tea Party Patriots have used their social media accounts and text and email lists to spread the word about protests across the country.”<sup>7</sup>

But the state-level protests turned out to be of limited utility, and the group began to look for new avenues. In April, CNP Action, the lobbying arm of the CNP, began a series of weekly conference calls to discuss Covid strategy. On May 11—as U.S. Covid deaths reached 74,270—one of the calls was intercepted and [published](#) by the Center for Media and Democracy and the Associated Press.

Among the participants were CNP President William Walton, CNP member Nancy Schulze,<sup>9</sup> and Mercedes Schlapp, a senior adviser to the Trump campaign. Schulze, the wife of former nine-term Pennsylvania Republican Congressman Dick Schulze, opened the call with a warning that two-thirds of the American people were wary of reopening the economy. But, she added, “Doctors are seen by the American people—they have a 92 percent trust rate with the American people according to polling. . . . There is a coalition of doctors, doctors’ coalition, who are extremely pro-Trump, that have been preparing and coming together for the war ahead in the campaign on health care, and these doctors could be activated for this conversation

now for reopening.

“The one thing the left does give credence to, in that they tend to be motivated by a secular worldview, the one thing that they do appreciate and listen to is science, and we have doctors that have the facts, that lived this themselves, that are in the trenches, that are saying it’s time to reopen,” Schulze continued. “I’ve been working with them for three years. There’s a coalition of doctors . . . including the most respected doctors in this country, that are ready to speak if somebody will just call on them.”

Walton told her, “We need to not just make the economic argument, we need to make the health argument, and we need doctors to make that argument, not us. And so that would be great if you, if we could tee that up.”

Schulze said she’d be happy to put him in touch “with any and all of these doctors, and I have submitted 27 of these doctors’ names to the campaign for the doctors’ coalition that they’re in the process of building.”

Mercedes Schlapp asked Schulze if she had spoken with Hannah Castillo, director of coalitions for the Trump campaign. “I know they’ve been working on building that coalition. I know they’re going

through the vetting process right now. As long as you have the names, that would be helpful. . . . Those are the type of guys we want to get out on TV and radio to help push out the message.”

Schulze replied, “I’ve been working with Hannah for over six weeks now, so they already have been vetted. But they need to be put on the screen.”<sup>10</sup>

Dr. Simone Gold, a 54-year-old emergency physician from Los Angeles, was ready for her close-up. On April 22, Gold had tweeted a stand-up of herself wearing a white “Emergency Dept.” coat, in front of Los Angeles’ Cedars-Sinai hospital emergency room, suggesting that concerns over the virus were inflated. She pointed out that the hospital “parking lots are empty, the emergency department volume is down, the patient census is down, and that’s really in most of the areas I’ve been to.”

On May 7, she brought a more explicit anti-lockdown message to a program on the *Whiskey Politics* show on Salem Radio, part of the massive Salem Media conglomerate owned by two leading members of the Council for National Policy.<sup>12</sup> It was headlined “DR. SIMONE GOLD GOES PUBLIC! WHAT THE GOVERNMENT WON’T TELL US ABOUT COVID-19.”

“It’s not at all clear that overall, that social distancing is going to make a huge impact,” Gold said.<sup>13</sup> “We’re all acting like as though there’s a huge medical crisis. There’s a medical issue, we should handle it responsibly, but what’s going on in our country now is a terrible legal crisis. Our constitutional rights are being trampled on right and left.”<sup>14</sup> Gold later added, “There’s always viruses . . . but I’m not sure that it’s front-page news.”<sup>15</sup>

*The Guardian* reported that over the same period, the Save Our Country coalition spent \$50,000 on videos on social media platforms “targeting independents and Republicans with the message that Covid-19 mostly hits the elderly to minimize risks for others.”<sup>16</sup>

**“The sooner we get the economy going and back up, the better it’s going to be for conservatives and Republicans in this election year. . . . Conservatives feel the government has overreacted, and it’s got to end.”**

On May 19—as U.S. Covid deaths reached 84,640<sup>17</sup>—the CNP’s doctors coalition (billed as “A Doctor a Day”) made its debut with an open letter to Donald Trump signed by “500+ doctors” (a number that was later revised to over 800). “In medical terms, the shutdown was a mass casualty incident,” it stated. “It is impossible to overstate the short, medium, and long-term harm to people’s health with a continued shutdown.” The lead signatory was Dr. Simone Gold.

On June 16—with U.S. Covid deaths approaching 110,000<sup>18</sup> and the U.S. economy in freefall—the Save Our Country coalition published an open letter to President Trump and Leader McConnell, urging “that the multi-trillions of dollars of federal government debt spending in the wake of the Coronavirus come to a stop.”<sup>19</sup> Twelve of the 20 signatories (among them Brandon, Nelson, and Martin) were members of the CNP, including CNP President William Walton and Executive Director Bob McEwen.

The push to reopen the schools became a full-court press. On July 7, Trump assembled a White House meeting on the subject. Jenny Beth Martin spoke both as the CEO of Tea Party Patriots and “as a mom.”

“Mr. President, you were right, and I hope you will trust your instincts,” she told Trump. “America is not meant to be shut down. And we have to reopen schools this fall. I’ve been in touch with almost a thousand doctors from around the country. I helped Dr. Simone Gold spearhead a letter to you signed by 800 physicians and surgeons who talked about the side effects of the lockdowns. I’ve done a second letter with over 150 doctors, 240 nurses, 330 educators, 70 national groups, and thousands of parents and concerned Americans who want to see schools reopened.”

A video of Martin’s statement appeared, billed as “Mom Gives Unexpected Speech Directly to Trump” without naming her or her affiliation. It was posted on various social media platforms, including Glenn Beck’s YouTube channel, The Blaze (where it clocked over 400,000 views as of August 4).<sup>20</sup>

Dr. Simone Gold was now preparing to join Jenny Beth Martin on center stage. On July 22, Gold warmed up for her appearance on *The Charlie Kirk Show*, with over 157,000 YouTube subscribers. Kirk, a member of the Council for National Policy, heads a group called Turning Point USA, which recruits right-wing campus activists. (Donald Trump addressed its Youth Action Summit last December, and Donald Trump Jr. is quoted on its website stating, “I’m convinced that the work by Turning Point USA and Charlie Kirk will win back the future of America.”)<sup>21</sup>

The introduction for Kirk’s show summed up the case Gold and her colleagues would make over the coming weeks: “Charlie is joined in studio by board-certified emergency physician Dr. Simon [sic] Gold, who says nearly everything we’ve been told about the Chinese Coronavirus is a lie. She and Charlie take a deep dive into the efficacy of hydroxychloroquine and why the U.S. government is barring physicians from prescribing the drug—endangering potentially 100,000 lives, at least. Charlie also takes on Dr. Fauci and Dr. Birx, asking if Dr. Gold challenges the effectiveness of wearing masks. Dr. Gold makes a stunning and factual assertion about the death rates and who exactly is to blame for what she believes is one of the biggest lies ever

perpetrated against the American people.”<sup>22</sup>

Gold’s “stunning assertion” was the often-repeated claim that doctors were falsifying death certificates, speculating without foundation that they were inflating Covid-19 cases by “20 to 30 percent.”<sup>23</sup> Gold also asserted, “Masks are really foolish, they don’t do anything. . . . There’s zero scientific justification for the mask.”<sup>24</sup>

Jenny Beth Martin emphasized a social media campaign from the start. Her Tea Party Patriots website posted the program of the White Coat Summit, offering the participating doctors a two-hour session devoted to expanding their social media reach: “YouTube and other social media vastly exceed television news as the information source for most Americans. Interviews and Q/A with social media personalities with large followers is the best way to talk to Americans. Doctors who want to answer questions from these modern journalists will have the opportunity.”

By the time Jenny Beth Martin hosted Gold’s White Coat Summit on July 27, U.S. Covid-19 deaths had skyrocketed to over 136,000.<sup>25</sup> The physicians’ presentation carried a lethal stew of misinformation. Dr. Bob Hamilton, a pediatrician from Santa Monica, assured viewers, “Children are not passing [the virus] on to their parents or their teachers.” (A few days later, the CDC released a report on a massive transmission event in June at a Georgia summer camp, with a median age of 12.)<sup>26</sup>

Dr. Richard Urso—an ophthalmologist—praised hydroxychloroquine as a “cure” for the virus, but it was not clear that Urso had ever had any significant experience treating Covid-19 patients. Another speaker was Dr. Daniel Erickson, a Bakersfield physician who co-owns an urgent care facility. In April he had been censured by the American College of Emergency Physicians and the American Academy of Emergency Medicine for his “reckless and untested musings” opposing stay-at-home orders and promoting the conspiracy theory about doctors misattributing deaths to Covid-19.<sup>27</sup>

The social media strategy paid off. Gold and her colleagues’ video, livestreamed on Breitbart News, reportedly reached 185,000 concurrent users.<sup>28</sup> *The New York Times*’ Kevin Roose reported that over its six hours on Facebook, it was the second-most-engaged post on the platform, with 14 million views.<sup>29</sup> (The audiences for network news broadcasts, by comparison, range from nine to 12 million.) A few hours after the presentation, President Trump tweeted the video to his 84.5 million followers. Donald Trump Jr. told his 5.3 million Twitter followers, “This video is a much [sic] watch!!! So different from the narrative everyone is running with.”<sup>30</sup> Trump redoubled his support at his press conference the following day, stating “I think they’re very respected doctors.”<sup>31</sup>

But major social media platforms reacted with relative speed. Facebook took the group’s video down a few hours after it was posted, and Twitter and YouTube followed suit, all three on the grounds that the video violated their Covid-19 misinformation policies.<sup>32</sup> Twitter took the unusual step of suspending Trump Jr.’s account for 12 hours.

Gold had built the original America’s Frontline Doctors website on a SquareSpace platform, but SquareSpace took it down.

Gold rebuilt the website (omitting Stella Immanuel of “demon sperm” renown) and started raising money through PayPal and fundly.com. The doctors’ program also remained on the Tea Party Patriots site.

There was an additional reaction to the doctors’ “frontline” Covid credentials. MedPageToday, a peer-reviewed medical news site, was unable to find evidence that any of America’s Frontline Doctors in Washington had served in “frontline” emergency rooms during the Covid epidemic.<sup>33</sup> Simone Gold came under additional scrutiny. Her initial *Whiskey Politics* introduction described her as a “frontline doctor” in an “inner-city emergency room” that treated “150 patients a day,” but neither her LinkedIn profile nor other available sources listed the emergency room in question. Her personal website (taken down amid the controversy but archived) described her as a “Concierge Immediate Needs Physician” working in “C-Suite Medicine.”<sup>34</sup>

On July 29, Cedars-Sinai, the backdrop for Gold’s Twitter video, issued a disavowal stating, “Simone Gold, MD, has not worked with Cedars-Sinai Medical Center or any of its offices or affiliates since 2015. For three weeks in late 2015, Dr. Gold was employed on a per diem basis by Cedars-Sinai Medical Network, a component of Cedars-Sinai. She worked during this brief time in a network urgent care clinic. Dr. Gold is not authorized to represent or speak about any information on behalf of Cedars-Sinai.”

The sharecare.com “Find a Doctor” site stated that “Dr. Simone Gold, MD, is a[n] emergency medicine specialist in Los Angeles, CA. and is affiliated with Centinela Hospital Medical Center.” But on July 31, Centinela Hospital posted a statement reading: “Simone Gold, MD, is not credentialed as part of the Centinela Medical Staff, as she resigned her position here a number of years ago. Dr. Gold was never employed here as we don’t employ our physicians.”<sup>35</sup>

Also troubling was American Frontline Doctors’ repeated suggestion that patients should demand hydroxychloroquine from their doctors for Covid-19. The medication has been an important treatment for lupus and other autoimmune diseases, but the publicity around its application to Covid has created an ongoing shortage with devastating consequences.

Much of the mainstream coverage of America’s Frontline Doctors was devoted to Stella Immanuel’s “demon sperm” sermon, but alternative platforms were another story.

Simone Gold was reaching a vast new public and was now celebrated as a victim. On July 30, Fox News’s Tucker Carlson interviewed her on his nightly program. The crawl stated, “Doctor Censored by Big Tech Has Now Lost Her Job” (though that job was never specified)—echoing Trump’s executive order on Big Tech censorship released the previous day.<sup>36</sup> (Carlson’s show is currently the highest-rated program on cable television, with an audience of over 4.3 million.<sup>37</sup>)

Glenn Beck’s multi-platform media operation, The Blaze, covered the story on his radio program and posted the Tucker Carlson video on its website on July 31, with a companion piece

repeating her case for hydroxychloroquine.<sup>38</sup> A similar report was posted the same day on CNS News, founded by Council for National Policy Executive Committee member L. Brent Bozell III.<sup>39</sup> (MediaPost recently named CNS News as the country’s fastest-growing conservative website, with more than 8.3 million unique visitors in June and over 1,000 percent gain in year-over-year unique visitors.<sup>40</sup>) Pat Robertson’s CBN.com averages over four million unique visitors each month. Add these to Alex Jones’s August 21 coverage—as well as legions of subsidiary platforms—and you have a deadly misinformation campaign that’s reaching tens of millions of voters, most of them off the radar of the national news media.

Emergency physician Nick Sawyer is disturbed by the implications for medical practitioners. The America’s Frontline Doctors campaign, he says, “violates two of the primary principles of medical ethics. Medical ethics has four major principles: beneficence, non-maleficence, autonomy, and justice. As hydroxychloroquine offers no clinical benefit and may be harmful, it violates the first two tenets. Further, their statements place

actual frontline physicians treating patients with Covid-19 in conflict with patients’ right to autonomy.

“Patients have the right to make decisions regarding their medical care, but as more and more patients are asking—if not outright demanding—that physicians prescribe hydroxychloroquine to them, it places these physicians in a position where they are faced with an ethical dilemma. We respect patients’ right to autonomy, but we are not willing to allow them to demand a treatment that is not helpful and may be harmful. In sum, America’s Frontline Doctors are introducing additional havoc into the already complex Covid-19 pandemic.”

As of the publication deadline for this article, neither Jenny Beth Martin nor Simone Gold had responded to requests for comment.

The day after Gold’s Washington presentation, U.S. Covid-19 deaths stood at 140,309; they swelled to 147,653 only a week later.<sup>41</sup> Less than a month later, on August 21, Donald Trump addressed the Council for National Policy at the Ritz-Carlton in Pentagon City, his last major address before the Republican convention. In his opening remarks, he thanked several figures from the CNP, including Jenny Beth Martin, “for your tremendous leadership of the CNP. You’ve done a fantastic job.”

As of that Friday, over 174,000 Americans had died of Covid-19. That number continues to climb.<sup>42</sup> ■

*A frequent contributor to the Spectator, Anne Nelson is the author of Shadow Network: Media, Money, and the Secret Hub of the Radical Right. Her work has appeared in The New York Times, Los Angeles Times, Harper’s, the BBC, CBC, NPR, and PBS. She teaches at the Columbia School of International and Public Affairs in New York City.*

*Endnotes on page 13.*

# Regulators Steamroll Health Concerns as the Global Economy Embraces 5G

By Joel Moskowitz

**I**N A WASHINGTON POST OP-ED (JUNE 4), “5G CONSPIRACY theories threaten the U.S. recovery,” Thomas Johnson Jr., the Federal Communications Commission’s general counsel, declared: “Conjectures about 5G’s effect on human health are long on panic and short on science.”

The FCC, however, has been “short on science” for more than two decades. Along with the World Health Organization, the FCC abdicated its responsibility to protect the public’s health from hazards associated with exposure to radio frequency, or RF, radiation. As a result, almost [400 international scientists and doctors](#) have called for a moratorium on deployment of 5G, and [150 community groups](#) have tried to block its rollout in the United States. Recently, the Environmental Health Trust and Children’s Health Defense, along with multiple plaintiffs, [sued the FCC](#) over its inadequate RF exposure limits and cell phone testing procedures.

The FCC relies on other agencies, such as the Food and Drug Administration, for health expertise. However, without a comprehensive review of all peer-reviewed science and a formal risk assessment, the FDA [in a letter](#) advised the FCC that “the available scientific evidence to date does not support adverse health effects in humans due to exposures at or under the current limits.” The letter “concluded that no changes to the current standards are warranted at this time.”

In a Senate Commerce Committee hearing, [Senator Blumenthal](#) “blasted” the FCC and FDA for “failing to conduct any research into the safety of 5G technology . . . and deferring to industry. . . . We’re kind of flying blind here, as far as health and safety is concerned.”

Last December, the FCC reaffirmed its obsolete RF exposure limits, ignoring critical [input](#) from more than 50 scientists, hundreds of scientific studies, and hundreds of people who have suffered illness from RF radiation.

Originally adopted in 1996, these limits were based upon a [behavioral change in rats and monkeys](#) exposed to microwave radiation and were designed to protect humans only from [short-term heating risks due to RF radiation exposure](#).

Since 1996, the preponderance of peer-reviewed research—[more than 500 studies](#)—has found harmful biologic or health effects from RF radiation exposure at intensities too low to cause significant heating. Thus stringent exposure limits [based on biological effects](#) are needed to protect human health.

Citing this body of research, over 240 scientists who have published peer-reviewed research on the biologic and health effects of nonionizing electromagnetic fields, or EMF, signed the [International EMF Scientist Appeal](#), which calls for stronger RF exposure limits. The signatories have published over [2,000](#)

[papers and letters](#) on nonionizing EMF in professional journals and arguably constitute the majority of experts in this field.

The appeal [proclaims](#):

Numerous recent scientific publications have shown that EMF affects living organisms at levels well below most international and national guidelines. Effects include increased cancer risk, cellular stress, increase in harmful free radicals, genetic damages, structural and functional changes of the reproductive system, learning and memory deficits, neurological disorders, and negative impacts on general well-being in humans. Damage goes well beyond the human race, as there is growing evidence of harmful effects to both plant and animal life.

In 2018, a \$30 million study conducted by the U.S. National Toxicology Program reported “clear evidence” that two years of exposure to cell phone radiation [increased cancer in male rats and damaged DNA in rats and mice](#) of both sexes. The Ramazzini Institute [replicated the NTP’s key finding](#) using much weaker cell phone radiation exposure over the rats’ lifespan.

The WHO’s International Agency for Research on Cancer [classified RF radiation as “possibly carcinogenic to humans”](#) in 2011. We are seeing increases in head and neck tumors in cancer registries from [multiple countries](#), which may be attributable to the proliferation of wireless device use. These increases are consistent with [case-control studies](#) that found increased tumor risk in long-term cell phone users.

Moreover, cancer is not even the most common hazard, because there is substantial scientific evidence that RF radiation causes [neurological disorders](#) and [reproductive harm](#).

The volume of [peer-reviewed scientific evidence](#) on earlier technologies suggests that exposure to microwaves and [millimeter waves](#) used in 5G is likely harmful.

According to Johnson, “if we delay 5G deployment based on irrational fears and unproven theories, it will only hurt the American people.” But can we trust the FDA or FCC’s evaluation of the science? Should we gamble on our health and invest hundreds of billions of dollars deploying 5G, a technology that requires [800,000](#) new cell antenna sites installed next to our homes and workplaces? Or should we develop RF exposure standards that fully protect humans and the environment and institute a risk management system based upon a formal risk assessment? ■

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# Contrary to Frothing Conspiracists, Beirut Warehouse Explosion Was the Result of Bureaucratic Failure

By Scott Ritter

**S**HORTLY AFTER THE HORRIFIC EXPLOSION AT A WAREHOUSE in the port of Beirut that killed some 200 persons and wounded many thousands more, Gordon Duff, the editor of *Veterans Today*, [posted a YouTube video](#) in which he stated that he had been in a conversation with a retired Lebanese general who claimed that the blast was the result of an Israeli attack.

According to Duff's source, the Israeli attack involved two separate munitions. The first, a sea-based missile fired from off the coast of Beirut, struck the warehouse, starting a fire. Shortly thereafter, an Israeli F-16 dropped what Duff called a "tactical nuclear weapon," causing a massive explosion that destroyed the warehouse, the port facilities, and many surrounding buildings. President Trump's [offhand claim](#) that the Beirut explosion was "an attack" helped breathe life into Duff's story (Trump later walked his remark back).

Duff and *Veterans Today* have a history of generating anti-Israeli content that, according to [the Southern Poverty Law Center](#), consists of "an endless stream of Israel-bashing mixed in with some bona fide anti-Semitism," and as such should be treated with a healthy bit of skepticism. So, too, should the fact that Duff cites as a principal source a man named Jeff Smith, who Duff claims is a former International Atomic Energy Agency inspector and nuclear weapons expert. Duff's relationship with Smith began in 2014. Smith claimed that he was the "lead investigator" for the IAEA in both Iran and Syria and [a member of a joint agency unit known as Able Danger](#), which, according to Smith, investigated missing nuclear material affiliated with the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, or START.

Jeff Smith's claims do not survive even the most cursory of investigations: his name appears nowhere in any IAEA reporting regarding Iran or Syria, and his "U.N. diplomatic passport" (in Duff's words) containing visas "signed by the Secretary General" is almost certainly a crude forgery. (As a former weapons inspector for the United Nations, I possessed a U.N. "laissez-passer" travel document; the secretary-general does not, as a matter of course, "sign visas," and so none bearing his signature would ever appear in that document.)

Smith's claims regarding his involvement in covert operations with the U.S. government are equally unbelievable: [Able Danger](#) was a data-mining activity managed by the Defense Intelligence Organization that had nothing to do whatsoever with the START

treaty or nuclear material. Its focus was exclusively on Al Qaeda, and an IAEA inspector most certainly would not have been attached to this unit.

Jeff Smith [began advising Duff](#) "on issues of nuclear proliferation," including "the use of newly designed tactical nuclear weapons on a number of occasions including Oklahoma City, Khobar Towers, Bali, Syria, Ukraine, Iraq, Afghanistan and Yemen." There is no evidence, or even credible suggestion, of tactical nuclear weapons—or any nuclear device—being employed at any of these locations. Simply put, Jeff Smith is a fraud, and any reporting that incorporates his so-called "expertise" should be dismissed out of hand. This holds true for Gordon Duff's allegations regarding Beirut.

The reality is that the massive size of the Beirut warehouse explosion, combined with the ongoing chaos that is the Lebanese government, makes this horrific event an ideal candidate for exploitation by conspiracy theorists seeking to further their agendas at the expense of others. That the warehouse explosion occurred in an atmosphere of heightened tension between Israel and Hezbollah only exacerbated this trend.

The killing of a Hezbollah fighter by an Israeli air strike inside Syria on July 20 sent the Israeli military on high alert in anticipation of a retaliatory attack. A week later, Israel claimed to have repelled an attempt by Hezbollah to infiltrate a small team of fighters into Israel, something the Lebanese Shiite militant group strongly denies. But whether Israel manufactured the claim of attempted infiltration or Hezbollah

was less than forthcoming regarding the activities of its personnel is of little importance. What is clear is that both Israel and Hezbollah have since gone out of their way to de-escalate the situation along the Israeli-Lebanese border, with neither side wishing to trigger a larger conflict. Reactions to the Beirut port explosion underline this reticence toward confrontation, with both Hezbollah and Israel quickly deeming the incident to be a tragic accident.

Moreover, the physical evidence points to this hard truth: that the Beirut warehouse explosion was the product of human error and not a covert attack by Israel or any other party. Photographs taken of the Beirut warehouse clearly show large bags (estimated to weigh one metric ton each) of a substance labeled "Nitroprill HD" (the HD likely standing for "high density"). [The Nitroprill HD was produced by a Georgian fertilizer maker, Rustavi Azot LLC](#). Rustavi Azot auctioned off its assets to liquidate debts in 2016, and the plant was taken over by a new owner, JSC Rustavi Azot, which [in an official statement](#) distanced itself from the material stored in Beirut, other than to note that "ammonium nitrate loses its useful properties in a six month period," and that



to store it as it had been in Beirut “is a gross violation of safe storage measures.”

The Georgian material is more than likely a knock-off of a product known as “Nitropril,” [produced by Orica, an Australian chemical company](#), to provide “predictable, reproducible performance for optimum blast results” in support of mining and quarrying operations. Unlike ammonium nitrate-based bombs, which have historically been used in terrorist attacks, Nitropril does not require that it be soaked in diesel fuel or some other petroleum-derived product to become volatile. Instead, Nitropril is [produced through a unique process](#) that involves the reaction of a mixture of nitric acid and vaporized ammonia in a neutralizer to produce an 83 percent ammonium nitrate solution, which is increased to 99 percent concentration through evaporation. The concentrated solution is then turned into one- to three-millimeter solid balls of ammonium nitrate called prill. In short, Nitropril is designed to function as an explosive. The ammonium nitrate stored in the Beirut warehouse was not fertilizer, nor the raw ingredient for an improvised bomb: it was a bomb in its own right, waiting for the right set of circumstances to occur to set it off.

One video, [taken from the perspective of Beirut firefighters](#) who arrived at the scene following the first explosion, shows a spreading fire largely contained by the warehouse structure. The audio from this video suggests that the fire has a set of fireworks, which can be heard exploding in the background. The detonation of the fireworks appears to track with the rapid spread of the fire in the warehouse, which can be tracked by the increase in the volume of the smoke and the pressure that is expelling the smoke from the structure. The change in the smoke, from wispy white to churning darkening grey, is indicative of a buildup of heat and the simultaneous reduction of oxygen inside the warehouse, a phenomenon which occurs in compartmentalized fires.

A wood fire, in its early stages, [burns at around 300 degrees Celsius](#). A developed wood-based fire, such as that which appears to have taken hold inside the Beirut warehouse, could burn at a temperature of around 600 degrees Celsius. Ammonium nitrate will begin to [decompose into its component chemicals](#) at around 230 degrees Celsius [through an exothermic reaction](#) that produces three parts of gaseous products for each part of solid reactant. If the ammonium nitrate is stored in a confined space, such as was the case in the Beirut warehouse, it will rapidly decompose (i.e., explode) when it reaches temperatures between 260–300 degrees Celsius. This process would be accelerated in the case of a fire that also involved fireworks, the black powder components of which will [ignite at around 330 degrees Celsius](#), in turn igniting other chemical components that burn at even higher temperatures.

The second explosion at the Beirut warehouse is a classic [large-scale ammonium nitrate event](#), with clearly visible indications of a large-scale release of water (the white vapor seen at the initiation of the event) and nitrous dioxide (the large red

cloud produced by the explosion). The explosion also produced a pressure wave (moving at a speed below the speed of sound), as opposed to a shock wave (which moves at speeds greater than the speed of sound). Videos of the Beirut warehouse explosion clearly demonstrate this concept, as the sound of the explosion can be heard prior to the blast impacting the location of the person filming.

Military munitions make use of high-order explosives, such as RDX or HMX, which would have produced a shockwave that impacted any person filming prior to the sound of the explosion being heard. This phenomenon was not present in Beirut, precluding the possibility that what exploded at the Beirut port was a covert weapons store, as has been [speculated by some observers](#) based on past [allegations by Israel that Hezbollah](#) used the port to store ballistic missiles supplied by Iran.

The Lebanese government has acknowledged that it is responsible for the port tragedy, which grew out of a [decision in 2013 to impound a ship](#) carrying the cargo when it docked in Beirut. Creditors asked the Lebanese government to take action to seize its cargo to satisfy outstanding debts

on the part of the ship’s owner. This was done, and some 2,700 tons of Nitroprill HD was off-loaded into a dockside warehouse. In 2015, a safety inspection of the seized cargo found that it posed a safety risk and should be removed from the port. Efforts to have the cargo transferred to the Lebanese Army and, when it refused to take possession, the privately owned Lebanese Explosives Company, failed.

In the ensuing years, numerous requests were made by port authorities to customs officials to have the material re-exported, but to no avail. In January, an inspection found that the warehouse containing the Nitroprill HD was unguarded and in a state of general disrepair, with a hole in the floor and a door coming off its hinges. By June, the matter had been reported up to the level of the president of Lebanon, who directed the Directorate for State Security to effect the necessary repairs and to post guards at the warehouse.

The irony of the Beirut warehouse disaster was that, after years of neglect, the actions that resulted in the explosion came about because of the Lebanese government taking action to safeguard the Nitroprill HD. But in typical Lebanese fashion, government indifference helped put in motion actions that resulted in tragedy. On August 4, the date of the explosion, a team of workmen was dispatched to the warehouse to conduct the necessary repairs. However, they were provided with no safety brief and were unaware of the presence of either the Nitroprill HD or a room full of fireworks stored in the same warehouse. While carrying out welding operations to repair the floor, the workers generated sparks that set nearby flammable materials on fire, which spread to the stored fireworks.

[A video taken of the warehouse during this time](#) shows the structure on fire. The fire expands, reaching the fireworks, which begin popping off. The smoke condition worsens, indicating the presence of high heat. Without warning, the building explodes,

**The physical evidence points to this hard truth: that the Beirut warehouse explosion was the product of human error and not a covert attack by Israel or any other party.**

most likely due to the fireworks sympathetically detonating. A plume of white smoke ushers from the warehouse, which continues to burn, along with what is left of the fireworks. At some point during this time, the Beirut firefighters arrive on scene. As they work to pry open the door leading to the Nitroprill HD stores, the ammonium nitrate detonates in a massive explosion, killing them all instantly, along with nearly 200 others.

In many ways, the political environment that produced the conditions that produced the Beirut warehouse tragedy is a mirror image of the larger condition of general disrepair of the Lebanese state. Years of neglect, indifference, and corruption have created a situation where the fabric of Lebanese society has eroded to the point that the nation as a whole is in danger of producing a geopolitical conflagration capable of destroying it and the entire Levant. The current standoff between Israel and Hezbollah is but one facet of a Byzantine dysfunction that pits Lebanon's diverse ethnic and religious groups against one another in an archaic power-sharing arrangement that dates to the time of French colonial mandate.

It is from this chaotic history that the Hezbollah movement grew and gained domestic legitimacy. The reality of Hezbollah today is that while its existence may frustrate Israel and engender the disdain of the United States, Europe, and other nations in the world, it is a legitimate, vibrant, and functioning part of Lebanese democracy, having earned a presence in the Lebanese Parliament and a seat in the inner circle of government. It is this integration with the Lebanese state that provides Hezbollah with its greatest strength. It is also the source of its greatest weakness.

Israel has long maintained that it is ready for a large-scale conflict with Hezbollah, but the reality is that any war with Hezbollah would be devastating to an Israeli economy already reeling from the coronavirus pandemic. Moreover, with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu facing widespread protests calling for his resignation over his indictment on corruption charges and for what his opponents claim is a failed response to the pandemic, the last thing he needs is a war with Hezbollah—especially one that threatens to be far worse in scope and scale than any previous Israeli-Hezbollah conflict.

Since the short war between the two in 2006, Hezbollah has decisively expanded its precision-strike capabilities with Iranian-provided ballistic missiles and guided drones. If Hezbollah were to retaliate against Israel using the totality of its precision-strike capability, Israel would find itself on the receiving end of an extremely accurate missile barrage that would target major Israeli political, economic, and military locations. These increased capabilities may partly explain why Israel was so quick to notify Hezbollah that an air strike that killed two of its commanders in Syria last year was an accident and that Israel had no desire for a larger conflict. Hezbollah had promised then that it would retaliate against any future loss of life in Syria at the hands of Israel.

To deter such behavior, Israel has made it clear that any major attack by Hezbollah on Israeli targets would be met with massive retaliation that would target all of Lebanon, thereby threatening to permanently harm Hezbollah's relationship with the Lebanese

government and people. But the reality is that any major conflict between Israel and Hezbollah would trigger responses that would harm the domestic political futures of both Netanyahu and Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah.

While the mutually assured destruction model of deterrence put in play by both Israel and Hezbollah appears to have succeeded in avoiding a conflict at the present time, the two sides are operating on a hair-trigger alert that could be inadvertently set off at any time—the geopolitical equivalent of a warehouse full of thousands of tons of Nitroprill HD collocated with the city of Beirut. All it will take to set off this bomb in waiting is an inadvertent spark, which could be produced from the most innocent of sources.

Rather than a single massive explosion, however, a broader Israeli-Hezbollah conflict would take on the characteristics of a general war, destroying everything in its path. ■

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## Once Solid Trump Country, Ohio Now Exhibiting Buyer's Remorse

By Dudley Althaus

**U**NTIL RECENTLY DEEMED IRREVOCABLY IN DONALD Trump's column, Ohio has been thrown into play as November's election hurtles near.

A series of opinion polls since the spring have put Trump neck and neck with Joe Biden. Analysts say that makes Ohio a mine-shaft canary for the president's reelection, regardless of whether he ultimately carries the state.

"A close outcome in Ohio means that Trump has lost enough support in the Midwest that he will lose the states he really needs," says Kyle Kondik, an expert on Ohio politics and elections.

That both parties wrote off the state as a battleground this year seemed logical. After all, Republicans hold the governor's mansion, the legislature, every senior elected state office, one U.S. Senate seat, and all but two of 16 U.S. congressional districts.

Trump won the state last time by eight points, more than double Barack Obama's margin of victory four years earlier. Hillary Clinton won all the state's major cities except Dayton, which she lost by a hair. But Trump carried all but eight of Ohio's 88 counties, and overwhelmingly in the more rural ones.

The results in 2016 painted Ohio's political map as a strawberry tart sprinkled with a handful of blueberries. But things may have changed. If the state really is up for grabs, it is owed to a congealing and unstable brew of defecting conservatives, disgusted suburbanites, and pacified progressives.

Last November, the *Spectator* [alerted](#) readers to the real possibility of a Democratic comeback in Ohio and nearby states,

the prospects for which would improve if the party's primaries produced a moderate like Biden.

Despite some defections, polling suggests most rural voters and working-class white voters remain with the president. But urban liberals, many of whom stayed home four years ago to spite Clinton, appear ready to turn out for Biden. Suburban voters, especially women put off by Trump as a person, may tip the balance.

"Joe Biden might not have been their first choice, but maybe he was their third choice, and that's good enough for them," says Bill Wood, a magazine editor and founding member of a progressive political group in the booming Columbus suburb of Westerville. "There couldn't be bigger difference between the two parties."

While losing the national popular vote by three million ballots, Trump gained the White House with the electoral votes of Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. He carried each state, whose demographics and voter concerns resemble Ohio's, by less than a percentage point.

An August poll of polls by FiveThirtyEight, a statistical analytics firm, showed Biden ahead in Ohio by the thinnest of margins. In comparison, the website had Biden leading in Michigan by more than seven points; in Wisconsin and Pennsylvania by more than six.

Many expect those three Midwestern states, and perhaps a few others, to decide November's contest.

"Ohio is going to vote to the right of the nation again," says Kondik, the elections expert. "If it is close either way, that suggests that Trump is losing."

Although many see this November's vote as a referendum on Trump, the state Republican Party has troubles of its own, after years of complete political control.

Governor Mike DeWine remains popular for his handling of the pandemic. But the party was rocked in July when Larry Householder, the powerful speaker of the state legislature, was indicted on charges of taking \$60 million in bribes to pass legislation favoring a utility.

"People are questioning the current direction of the Republican Party and are open to voting for the alternative," Wood says. "We see it in people we talk to, neighbors who have been reliably Republican in the past. It will have a very significant effect in towns that are traditionally Republican."

A late-July survey by the Bliss Institute, a think tank at the University of Akron, put Biden four points ahead, 46 to 42, just outside the margin of error.

"Without a doubt, Ohio is a battleground," says political scientist David Cohen, the institute's acting director.

One newspaper's illustration of the survey results shows Biden's support cutting across Ohio like a multihued sash—from the deep-blue Cleveland area in the northeast to the robin-egg tint in the erstwhile Republican redoubt of metropolitan Cincinnati in the south.

"The suburbs are now pretty rapidly changing from being a

strength of Republicanism to being a bastion of the Democrats," Cohen says. "Educated women, especially in the suburbs, are disgusted by Trump's language. It's not only in Ohio: people across the country are tired of the craziness."

Barb Lewis, a conservative Republican county commissioner in the suburbs north of Columbus, agrees.

"We're seeing a huge gender gap," Lewis says of the more prosperous and growing communities in her Delaware County. "There certainly is a reticence among people because of the president's personal style."

But Lewis, a political scientist who taught election campaigns at Ohio State University, says those suburbanites' disdain of Trump as a person could be overcome by support for the conservative judges he's appointed and economic policies he's favored.

Fear of crime and protest violence—in Portland, Seattle, Minneapolis, and Kenosha, Wisconsin—could erode white suburban support for racial equality efforts, a major Democratic theme.

"When their personal safety is at stake, they will vote for whoever will protect them," Lewis says. Not surprisingly, an ad blitz by the Trump campaign played to those worries, warning viewers that "you won't be safe in Joe Biden's America."

Both Biden and Kamala Harris have been criticized by more left-leaning Democrats and independents for their records of being tough on crime. That may help them fend off Trump's demagogic attacks.

But Lewis says that many voters in her suburban world may still vote for Trump but be unwilling to talk about it with anyone but their closest family and friends. "If they say they are for Trump, then they will have to defend it immediately," she says.

Clinton garnered some 300,000 fewer votes in Ohio in 2016 than Obama did in 2012. Trump, in turn, bested Mitt Romney's turnout by nearly a quarter-million votes.

Trump excited white rural and working-class urban voters. Many others who lean Democratic either voted for him or stayed home to spite Clinton, figuring she would easily win.

With November's vote a clear referendum on Trump—and Sanders publicly supporting Biden—the rifts in the Democratic ranks have been healed for now, analysts and Democratic operatives say.

"I see some semblance of getting in line and behind the ticket," says Chris Redfern, who resigned his nine-year chairmanship of the state's squabbling Democratic Party after Republicans swept state elections in 2014. "This thing is baked. I don't know many undecided voters. Biden wins."

Most white working-class voters, who exit polls suggest make up more than half of the electorate, will likely stick with Trump, says Dave Betras, a longtime Democratic operative in Mahoning County, which anchors Ohio's battered steel industry.

Clinton barely won the county, which includes the once reliably blue and union city of Youngstown, while Trump surged. Signs supporting Trump, many of them handmade, flourish in yards across the region this summer, Betras said, eclipsing the

**"There are a significant number of Republicans in this state who are fed up with Trump," says Heimlich. "We're saying to them, let's put country first and party second."**

few backing Biden.

“I’ve never seen anyone defy political gravity like he does,” Betras says. “He’s the smartest stupid person I know. He has a talent and a knack to feel the mood. He seems to know what feeds the bad angels on people’s backs.”

“They say they know he’s crazy,” Betras says of Trump backers he knows. “They don’t care.”

Maybe they don’t. But Chris Gibbs, a longtime Republican stalwart in southwestern Ohio, does.

Gibbs, a 62-year-old former Republican county chairman and election board president, says he reluctantly jumped aboard the train after Trump won the 2016 nomination. Though disgruntled by trade tensions that sapped grain exports, Gibbs consoled himself with Trump’s judicial appointments and regulatory rollbacks.

He finally stepped off the train, Gibbs says, when Trump kowtowed to Vladimir Putin at their 2018 Helsinki summit.

“The Republican Party was a welcoming place, where disparate views were brought together,” Gibbs said of his old political home. “Everyone had the opportunity to be heard. Today’s Republican Party has no resemblance to that. It’s a populist cult that’s all about tearing down.”

Now Gibbs and a handful of other conservatives have founded Operation Grant, a local affiliate of the Lincoln Project, the movement of never-Trump conservatives that has been churning out damning ads against Trump.

He and his fellow Ohio deserters—all locally prominent Republicans—have no illusions about swaying a majority of their party against Trump. John Kasich, the conservative and once-popular former Ohio governor who has endorsed Biden, is widely vilified by Ohio Republicans.

Gibbs and his colleagues just hope to convince enough Republicans to make a difference.

“To me, this is a matter of conscience,” says Phil Heimlich, a Cincinnati lawyer who has served as a Republican city and county commissioner.

“There are a significant number of Republicans in this state who are fed up with Trump,” says Heimlich. “These are the people we are trying to reach. We’re saying to them, let’s put country first and party second. The man is a danger to the country and a threat to democracy.”

For his part, Gibbs points to polling that suggests Trump’s support in rural voters has been cut from about 30 points to nine.

“There is still strong support of the president. These are conservative people,” Gibbs says of his neighbors in Shelby County, a rural county north of Dayton that gave Trump 78 percent of the vote. “But everybody has their internal red lines. We are trying to get the word out in rural communities that it is OK to change your mind. . . . You can stand up.” ■

*As a staff correspondent for the Houston Chronicle, The Wall Street Journal, and other newspapers, Dudley Althaus has spent his career reporting on politics and other issues in Texas, the U.S.-Mexico border, and across Latin America.*

## Trump Economics Embrace Usual Fare of Tax Cuts for the Wealthy and False Promises to the Middle Class

By Steven Pressman

**T**WO NUMBERS REVEAL EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO know about the U.S. economy over the past two decades. Between 1999 and 2018, the S&P 500 grew 6 percent annually, after accounting for dividends (2 percent annual gain) and inflation (2 percent annual loss). Stock prices more than doubled in value over this time period. Wall Street boomed.

Over the same time period, Main Street saw 0 percent gains. Workers got shut out. According to official government statistics, median household income rose a tiny fraction of one percentage point annually, after adjusting for inflation, and less than 3 percent in total. But this overstates how poorly average Americans have fared. A 2013 change in how the government collected its data led to a 3 percent increase in reported income. That means middle-class incomes actually changed little over two decades—even as more household members were working and people were working more jobs and more hours.

These two numbers (6 percent annual growth in the S&P and 0 percent net growth in median household income) are connected. Average incomes stagnated because corporations absconded with all economic gains; their profits then increased stock prices. The two numbers also delivered a dire political outcome. A third-rate real estate developer with a history of racism and misogyny became president because Americans sought change and thought Trump understood this, that he would help Main Street.

People voted for Donald Trump feeling they had nothing to lose after decades of income stagnation.

But lose we did. America lost respect around the world. Many lives have been lost to Covid-19 due to a deadly combination of incompetence and self-serving behavior. And even before the coronavirus hit, income gains during the Trump administration headed toward Wall Street; U.S. workers saw few benefits. Significantly, the president’s two signature economic policies, protectionism and tax reform, abetted this demoralizing outcome.

Donald Trump frequently complains about the U.S. trade deficit—the United States buys more from other nations than they buy from us. For him, this means U.S. jobs get sent abroad, hurting the U.S. economy. We are losers.

But the president gets things backward. U.S. trade deficits stem from an economy that is doing *relatively better* than its main trading partners. Low U.S. unemployment leads to more consumer spending and increased imports. High unemployment abroad leads foreign consumers to spend less. As they buy fewer U.S.-made goods, we export less.

China is an exception here and accounts for a majority of the U.S. trade deficit. This is because China doesn’t play by the rules. It steals intellectual property and protects Chinese

firms from foreign competition. Cheap labor, and less spending on worker protection, lets China provide inexpensive parts to multinational firms. This puts downward pressure on U.S. wages as workers are threatened with having their jobs move to China.

President Obama developed the Trans-Pacific Partnership (which, in fairness, received uneven support here at home and a general thumbs-down from labor) to pressure China to end its trade restrictions and recognize intellectual property, using the combined force of China's main trading partners as a cudgel. President Trump withdrew the United States from the Trans-Pacific Partnership upon taking office. China persevered with its trade policies. President Trump failed to change anything. The U.S. trade deficit with China in goods barely changed: from \$347 billion in 2016 (pre-Trump) it fell to \$346 billion in 2019.

Then there was Nafta—according to Trump, the worst trade deal ever and the cause of the U.S. trade deficit with Canada and Mexico. On July 1, Trump's deal, the U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement, replaced Nafta. Yet this new North American trade deal differs little from Nafta. To the extent it does, it provides *greater incentives* for U.S. manufacturers to shed American jobs and move them to Mexico (see my article in the December 2018 *Washington Spectator*). So much for helping Main Street.

Trump has done even worse when it comes to taxation. He ran for president promising “the largest tax reductions . . . for the middle class” and a 35 percent tax cut for a middle-class family with two children. Actually, his 2017 tax bill did little for average Americans. Small tax breaks for some middle-income households will disappear over the next few years. Yet large corporations and the rich received huge tax cuts (see my article in the February 2018 *Washington Spectator*). After-tax corporate profits reached record levels.

As the tax bill made its way through Congress in 2017, the president claimed that his tax giveaway to corporations and the wealthy would trickle down. Everyone would gain. Firms would invest in efficient equipment and in their workers. Household income would rise \$4,000 to \$9,000. None of this happened. The standard trickle-down Republican hokum, peddled since the 1980s, had the same effect as in the past—the rich gained bigly.

Businesses' investment grew more slowly in 2018 and 2019 than in 2016 and 2017. This is not surprising, as the new tax law provides huge incentives for companies to invest overseas rather than in the United States. Foreign subsidiaries of U.S. companies are now taxed at half the 21 percent corporate rate that applies to domestic profits.

Firms didn't spend more money training their workers. Instead, record corporate profits were used to buy back outstanding shares of stock, with the goal of raising stock prices. Median household income rose \$553 the year that Trump's tax cut took effect—far from what was promised, and below the \$847 increase in 2017 and the \$978 gain in pre-Trump 2016.

President Trump was also wrong when he claimed his tax

bill would be revenue neutral because the enormous economic growth it unleashed (5 percent or more) would generate enough tax revenue to pay for it. The economy grew at a rate of 2.5 percent in 2018 and 2019, a bit more than the 2 percent growth the two years prior to the tax cut, but half the promised 5 percent minimum. The result was a government budget \$200 billion deeper in red ink each year.

Budget deficits are desirable sometimes. If consumers and companies can't or won't spend, the government must step in; otherwise, goods won't be sold and workers will get laid off. At other times budget deficits are harmful. The 2017 tax cut was a huge mistake because it didn't boost the economy and because workers on Main Street got nothing. It was an even bigger mistake because budget surpluses (or small deficits) during good economic times make it easier to run large deficits in difficult times. The lost revenues could have supported the millions of Americans forced to stay at home in order to reduce coronavirus infections and save lives.

Covid-19 has led to massive job and income losses and rising household indebtedness. Wall Street panicked. From mid-February to mid-March, stock prices tumbled, reversing their entire gain during the Trump administration.

President Trump panicked in turn. Rather than addressing the pandemic, he pushed to reopen the economy, caring more about falling stock prices and how they might impact his election prospects than about American lives. Instead of listening to public health experts, he politicized the coronavirus. Initially he denied the problem, claiming it would disappear by April. He promoted phony cures that “someone” told him would work. He proudly pranced about without a face mask and held rallies without social distancing, scorning the two best ways to stop the coronavirus from spreading.

The latter action put Trump's own supporters at risk. If they caught Covid-19 at a Trump rally, they would lose weeks of work while in quarantine, even if they had no symptoms, and months of work if they did. Covid-19 would spread to friends and family, putting lives at risk.

We can estimate the lives lost from not taking simple precautions and from reopening the U.S. economy too soon. Had the U.S. and Canadian Covid-19 death rate been the same, 96,000 fewer Americans would have died from Covid-19 (as of August 22). This is more than half of all U.S. Covid-19 deaths. If trends continue, by November more than 130,000 Americans will have died because the United States has not done as well as Canada. The rich can escape to their country estates, working safely from home and/or living off their wealth. Those getting ill and dying reside on Main Street. ■

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**His 2017 tax bill did little for average Americans. Small tax breaks for some middle-income households will disappear over the next few years. Yet large corporations and the rich received huge tax cuts.**

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## Endnotes to *Anatomy of Deceit*, by Anne Nelson

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