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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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30.07.2020

Trump's War on the Environment and Its Inhabitants



Oil wells on federal lands in Colorado. Photo: BLM.

There are no limits to the pernicious ugliness of Donald Trump and his administration. We have examples of personal ugliness toward the late Senator John McCain and his family as well as the treatment of the Gold Star family during the 2016 presidential campaign. There is policy ugliness in the racist Muslim travel ban, which the Supreme Court upheld, and the cruel separation of families at the U.S.-Mexican border, with children held in isolation from their parents. The use of federal forces against peaceful protestors in Washington, D.C. in June and in Portland in July are fascist in their intent. The director of the Federation of American Scientists' Government Secrecy Project,

Steven Aftergood, remarked that the “use of military aircraft in a domestic operation should set off all kinds of alarm bells.”

Trump’s lack of responsibility for the dangers and deaths of the pandemic should ensure his defeat in the 2020 presidential election, but there are no certainties in American politics. Trump’s ignorance and indifference toward the novel coronavirus, which is causing tens of thousands of additional deaths, is ironic, given his attacks on Barack Obama for the Ebola outbreak in 2014. Trump proclaimed that “President Obama has a personal responsibility to visit & embrace all people in the US who contract Ebola.”

The most loathsome aspect of Trump’s pathological behavior is related to the pandemic. Covid-19 is an infectious disease caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). And yet Trump continues his attack on bedrock environmental regulations established over the past fifty years. During the 2015-2016 presidential campaign, Trump promised to dismantle most of the key climate and environmental policies that were in place. He has been enormously successful, according to the New York Times, with more than sixty environmental rules and regulations officially reversed, revoked or otherwise rolled back. An additional 34 rollbacks are in progress even during the pandemic.

“Science denialism” is one of the worst aspects of the current political climate, and Trump and Vice President Pence are leaders of the movement. A key indicator of Trump’s hostility to science, his anti-intellectualism, was the two-year delay in appointing a director to the White House Office of Science and Technology, the science adviser to the president. Until Trump entered the White House, the record for presidents without a science adviser belonged to George W. Bush, who went nine months without one. Trump’s adviser, Kelvin Droegemeier, a meteorologist, was not confirmed until January 2019. He is conspicuous by his absence in the current health crisis.

Trump’s climate denial has made the United States an environmental “pariah state” in a global community committed to addressing the problem of climate change. Trump’s withdrawal from the Paris accord made the United States the only nation in the world to reject the climate accord. The two original outliers—Syria and Nicaragua—have joined, and Nicaragua stayed out initially because the agreement didn’t go far enough. Trump has undermined the rich legacy of the Obama administration in the environmental field, which included getting the world’s other major polluters—particularly China and India—to agree to reduce their emissions.

The reversals of Obama's legacy have worsened the environmental degradation at a time when the respiratory impact of Covid-19 is unabated. Transportation and the production of electricity are the greatest contributors to greenhouse gas emissions in the United States, accounting for more than half of the total. Trump's Environmental Protection Agency has severely weakened the Obama-era fuel economy and greenhouse gas standards for passenger cars and light trucks. The EPA revoked California's power to set stricter tailpipe emissions standards than the federal government, and withdrew the legal justification for limiting mercury emissions from coal power plants. The Obama-era Clean Power Plan, which set strict limits on carbon emissions from coal- and gas-fired power plants, was replaced by a ruling to allow states to set their own rules.

Meanwhile, White House press secretary Kayleigh McEnany argued last week that "science should not stand in the way" of the full reopening of schools, meaning "kids being able to attend each and every day at their school." Accordingly, the director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Dr. Robert Redfield, reversed direction and played down the health risks of returning to school. As the pandemic began, Trump tried to cut the CDC budget, arguing that the charge Covid-19 would be worse than the flu was the Democrats' "new hoax" designed to unseat him. After accepting the validity of the pandemic, Trump touted ineffective drugs as a miracle cure and even suggested that injecting bleach into the body could cure the sick. His ignorance and contempt for science is endless.

(For the Record: As of July 25, 2020, more than 4 million people in the United States have been infected with Covid-19, and more than 149,000 have died. China with three times the population of the United States reports 86,000 infections and 4,600 deaths.)

His authoritarian contempt for the U.S. rule of law is contributing to the violence and discord in U.S. cities where Trump has employed unidentified federal law enforcement officers, unmarked cars, helicopters, and aerial surveillance to end peaceful protest. The helicopters deployed a downdraft tactic designed to terrorize peaceful protesters in Washington, D.C., and the Air Force deployed a surveillance aircraft in Portland with state-of-the-art sensors typically used in war zones. The aircraft is outfitted with long-range surveillance equipment that supports U.S. Special Forces on their ground operations.

Steven Aftergood has asked the right questions on the use of the surveillance aircraft: “What is their mission? Under what authority are they operating, and who authorized them? It seems like the administration is pushing right through what had been established norms of transparency and accountability.” Similar questions must be asked regarding the immigration law enforcers—trained for shootouts on the Mexican border—now being deployed in Portland and Kansas City. The Pentagon seems to object to using the military in these domestic situations, but there is no sign that the Department of Homeland Security has any qualms about the misuse of their capabilities.

The acting secretary of the department, Chad Wolf, is a former lobbyist and congressional staffer without experience in any of the functions of DHS. He has no law degree, no experience in law enforcement, and no military background. The Federal Protective Service (FPS) is in Portland as an unidentified force in unmarked rental vans. It has taken on agents from U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement and the Border Patrol who have been given sweeping powers. Thus, Trump has sent a force reminiscent of the military’s Delta Force to patrol American cities under the guise of protecting federal property. “The scandal isn’t what is illegal,” said the journalist Michael Kinsley. “The scandal is what’s legal.” The DHS, which has had five directors in Trump’s three years, is only too glad to do Trump’s dirty work.

Along with Wolf at DHS, Trump has the politicized support of Attorney General William Barr and Secretary of Health and Human Services Alex Azar. Barr is operating Operation Legend, a federal interagency law-enforcement effort, active in Portland and Kansas City; there are plans to place agents in Albuquerque, Baltimore, Chicago, and Philadelphia. The inspectors general of the DHS and the Department of Justice are investigating the deployment of federal forces to U.S. cities led by Democratic mayors.

Azar is a former pharmaceutical industry lobbyist and executive with strong conservative credentials. He worked for several years under Ken Starr in the Whitewater investigation, and he clerked for Associate Justice Antonin Scalia. Azar is providing guidelines for the pandemic that are consistent with the political demands of Trump’s policy advisers and inconsistent with the demands of the public health and scientific community, including his own CDC.

The corruption of Donald Trump means that lives are being lost and laws are being broken. There is no sign of congressional oversight and accountability for the excessive

actions of the Trump administration. The Senate is firmly in the hands of Trumpian loyalists, who are blocking legislation that would address the economic and social costs of the pandemic. The House of Representatives is in the capable hands of Nancy Pelosi, but the legislation that comes out of the House sits on the desk of Senator Mitch McConnell. Who knew that “one man; one vote” actually meant that McConnell is The Man? So “one man; no vote.”

CounterPunch 29.07.2020