

Laughing Ourselves to Death at the Gridiron Dinner

As Democrats embrace rugged individualism, the pundit class leans into public health apartheid.

By Gregg Gonsalves

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US Attorney General Merrick Garland, who tested positive for Covid after attending the Gridiron Dinner, speaks during a press conference at the US Justice Department on April 6, 2022. (Photo by Anna Moneymaker / Getty Images)

Last week more than 50 of the crème-de-la-crème of American politics and journalism—almost all Democrats—made the personal lifestyle decision to get Covid-19 at the

Gridiron Dinner, where a brass band kicked off the festivities, “some of the comic skits featured actors dressed as the coronavirus, like large, green bouncing balls with red frills,” and, as tradition would have it, guests joined hands for the singing of “Auld Lang Syne” to conclude the evening.

Our pundit class, from Leana Wen to David Leonhardt, have told us that since we’re all vaccinated we have nothing to worry about, so all that was asked of attendees was to provide proof of immunization. In D.C. now, they are all vaxxed-and-done and, gosh-darn-it, they mean it. No pre-event testing, no special attention to ventilation in the ballroom, no thought of spacing out attendees rather than have them sit at long, narrow tables for hours. Because everything is optional now, everything is up to individuals. Here is Leana Wen saying the quiet part out loud in *The Washington Post*: “I also think it’s acceptable if event organizers choose not to exercise precautions, and instead put the onus on individuals to decide the acceptable risk for their own medical situation.” Normal means never having to say you’re sorry. Even if your guests get Covid-19 , they’ll always have Paxlovid, prescribed for them by the White House physician or concierge internists in the district. As David Leonhardt reminds us, masks and other protections are only for the recently infected, progressive Covid dead-enders, residents of nursing homes, and people with cancer.



The Biden Stop on Lula's World Tour

What makes the Gridiron Dinner deplorable is that no one really gave a damn about doing the bare minimum such as the mitigation efforts I just described—and then made it almost certain that the setting would be most hospitable to the virus. Inviting a brass band and singing a New Year's Eve anthem? In April, indoors? Might as well have gotten out a garden mister and sprayed the room with SARS-CoV-2. Right now, as we read in *The New York Times*, “there are no reports of any symptoms more serious than a sore throat or mild fever”—which is indeed a blessing—but knocking out a cabinet secretary for two weeks or, God forbid, sending them to the hospital was a risk everyone seemed willing to take. And remember, more than a few of the folks at the shindig were in their 70s and 80s, and no one seems to have thought twice about them either, including my old friend Tony Fauci, who is 81 and was in attendance.

There is a decadence to the Democratic embrace of rugged American individualism, where we owe each other nothing, that's almost, well, Republican in spirit. Personal risk. Personal choices. Personal responsibility. Paul Ryan—remember him?—would be proud. The Gridiron Dinner was

just American Covid-19 policy personified: no precautions beyond vaccination and Paxlovid for the unfortunate few who catch SARS-CoV-2.

Except that this is policy for the privileged, who are boosted (probably twice by now—and, full admission, I am doubly boosted myself) and know just whom to call to ensure they get the best medical care should they get sick. But, as Harvard emergency physician Jeremy Faust just wrote, this notion that we can calculate our own personal risk is a chimera: “Nobody has a good handle on what their individual risks truly are. How could they?... the math is remarkably complicated. We can’t expect people, even experts, to do this on the daily. That makes the ‘leave it all up to individuals’ approach pretty unworkable at the moment.”

Furthermore, as Aparna Nair, a historian of public health, told Ed Yong at *The Atlantic* last year, “Framing one’s health as a matter of personal choice ‘is fundamentally against the very notion of public health.’” This isn’t just a theoretical concern. Right now, the anemic Covid-19 funding bill in Congress has no money for the Health Resources and Services Administration’s program for Covid-19 testing and treatment for the uninsured. Until the Biden Administration extended the national Covid-19 public health emergency yesterday, millions were at risk of being kicked off the Medicaid rolls on April 15; now they have a reprieve for 90 days. Moreover, only 30 percent of Americans are boosted, meaning they lack critical protection against current Covid-19 variants, and many areas of the country are still far

behind in getting people even the first series of shots.

Meanwhile states are closing public testing and vaccination sites.

I am not even sure anyone is trying anymore in the heady reaches of the Biden administration. Scott Kominers, a professor at Harvard Business School, last week excoriated the new Covid.gov website—meant to provide links to all anyone might need to find testing and treatment, but which he described as a labyrinthine boondoggle, full of dead-ends and false leads. Of course if you have the right connections, you will never go to a site like this, because you will have everything delivered to you on a silver platter with just a text.

Covid lingers too, among the potentially millions with long Covid, among the hundreds of thousands of orphan children, millions more grieving their dead. What happens to them, now? If it's just about what you and I do in our private lives, do any of those people really matter?

Republicans and Democrats alike, we are essentially leaning into public health apartheid in America now—creating two tiers, one for the privileged and those with resources, and another for everyone else. It's brutal, but is being normalized by our elected officials and their appointees, and by pundits like Wen and Leonhardt, who frankly see more to gain from telling people what they want to hear rather than what the nation as a whole needs: to keep our eyes on the prize, keep key programs in place, do better on everything from vaccination and boosters to providing masks and tests, to

improving ventilation in public and private buildings. And that's without even considering programs to mitigate the social and economic toll of the pandemic.

Yes, the political headwinds are strong, but if you pretend the pandemic is over, you'll soon be begging for the bare minimum—which is exactly the position the White House now finds itself in, even as it acknowledges that we will need far more resources for this fight now and for the foreseeable future.

Instead, we are heading into this spring and summer less prepared than we were a year ago. Everyone seems to be betting against the virus, literally betting our lives the worst is behind us, that we won't see anything like the carnage of the past winter—when nearly 200,000 Americans died of a variant David Leonhardt again and again told us was mild, of little concern to most people. Jacob Bacharach wrote about Leonhardt's relentless positive spin on the pandemic in *The New Republic*: “I cannot for the life of me decide if he is Dr. Pangloss or if he is Candide—the relentless crackpot optimist or the disappointed student who finally throws up his hands and concludes that we must, each of us, tend our gardens alone.”

Or perhaps—as I speculated back in October—Leonhardt, Wen, and the celebrants at the Gridiron Dinner are more like the courtiers in Poe's “The Masque of the Red Death” who think their power and privilege can insulate them from the plague. After all, privilege and power worked for years to keep them safe and happy before 2020—and they cannot wait to get back to that happy state of affairs. We can hear their laughs—at the Gridiron Dinner, or with Leonhardt

chuckling as he and Bill Maher joked, in front of millions last week, about the MAGA vaccine hold-outs and the progressives clinging to their masks. Except what is happening now is not funny, not funny at all for so many Americans.

Sarah Wildman, whose daughter received a liver transplant as part of her cancer treatment in March 2020, wrote a piece for *Times* last Saturday about how we've treated the vulnerable during this pandemic:

I keep thinking of failures—of education, of empathy, of imagination. It is a time, Alice MacLachlan, a professor of philosophy at York University in Toronto, wrote to me, when we might also notice the carelessness, fear and arrogance that accompany our relationship to wellness and illness. Carelessness about how our choices affect others. Fear we might ourselves become unwell. Arrogance in our surety that we will never fall on that side of the ledger.

Carelessness, fear, and arrogance are the reigning spirits of the age. Carelessness—indeed, recklessness as policy—when community spread of the virus has been downgraded by the CDC as an indicator of trouble, suggesting that getting infected with SARS-CoV-2 doesn't matter. By creating maps that show a sea of reassuring green (for low hospitalizations and deaths) from coast to coast, even though virus transmission is still high in many communities, you're going to confuse people at best, or mislead them deliberately. And arrogance, thinking you'll always be fine while making decisions that heighten the risk for so many, knowing that

the people who matter will never criticize you, will, in fact, amplify your nonsense and punch down on anyone who disagrees.

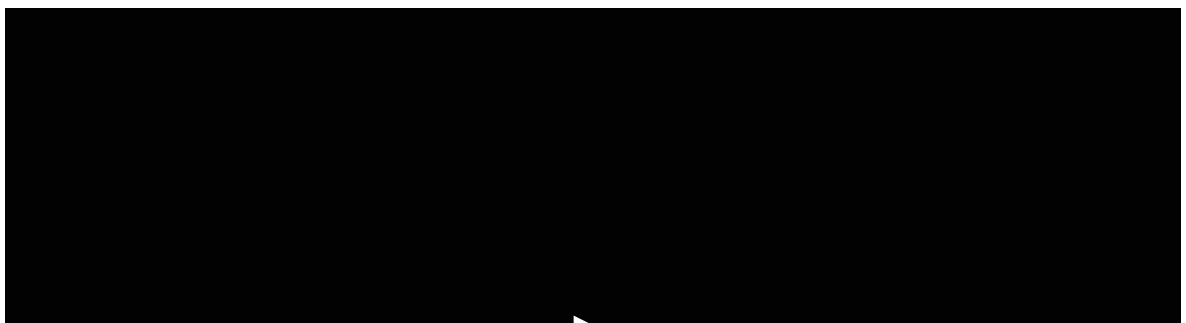
But you've still got to wonder if all this is a bit of whistling past the graveyard. Might there be fear, too, among the D.C. machers—perhaps themselves immunocompromised or vulnerable in some other way, or who perhaps love someone who is? Or among those who fear that the Biden administration—with the full-throated support of so many other influential people—might just be setting us up like Humpty-Dumpty for a great fall if and when the virus roars back?

But never you mind! There are all tomorrow's parties to consider. Like the White House Correspondents' dinner next week! I heard they got Trevor Noah.

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JAILS AND PRISONS CONGRESS MASS INCARCERATION

Even After a Landmark Bill, the Fight for Prison Phone Justice Isn't Over

The FCC needs to understand its landmark mission.

By Wanda Bertram

TODAY 5:30 AM



A prison inmate makes one of her daily allotment of six phone calls at the York Community Reintegration Center on May 24, 2016, in Niantic, Conn. (John Moore / Getty Images)

For decades, prison phone companies have seen the millions of people in jail in this country and their families as a captive market, desperate to talk on the phone, lacking the means to advocate for themselves, and—crucially—stuck in facilities that could also use an infusion of cash. The profits have come easy. In Dauphin County (Harrisburg), Pa., for instance, a recent investigation revealed that the jail's phone provider made enough money in three years to kick back a whopping \$3.4 million to the jail itself.

Days before that investigation was published, President Joe Biden signed the Martha Wright-Reed Just and Reasonable Communications Act, a bill that empowers the Federal Communications Commission to rein in the rates that companies charge incarcerated people and their families to stay in contact. The hard-won law will mean a fairer market for phone and video calling services in jails and prisons. It requires the FCC to promulgate regulations, sometime in the

latter half of 2024, ensuring that the costs these individuals and their families pay for phone and video calls are “just and reasonable.”

But the fight to spare families from exploitation isn’t done yet.

For one thing, the FCC might not regulate these costs to the extent that it can or should. The agency has a record of making decisions about prison exploitation issues that effectively favor companies over consumers. In regulating other prison phone issues, the FCC has seen fit to ask companies for their business data via the honor system, and made decisions with this data rather than scrutinizing the economics of delivering services to prisons.

The FCC has always had the power to regulate *some* of the calls people make from prisons and jails—those which are designated “out of state” calls. *Even with that power*, the regulator has capped per-minute rates for those calls at 21 cents per minute, a much higher price than necessary. To give some sense of how burdensome those rates are for families, 21 cents per minute is how much the Dauphin County Prison—the Harrisburg jail mentioned above—charges for phone calls. One mother in Dauphin County told Pennlive.com that she has forked over \$400 to \$500 a month to talk to her incarcerated son. Meanwhile, a handful of counties across the country have negotiated phone rates with their providers as low as one or two cents per minute—proving the possibility of much lower rates.

Furthermore, the largest prison telecom companies—Securus and GTL—are rapidly expanding their exploitative practices beyond phone and video calls to technologies that

the FCC cannot (yet) regulate. Families eager to stay in touch are now offered electronic messaging and tablet computers; on the tablets, incarcerated people can also purchase entertainment, such as (in West Virginia) reading e-books for five cents per minute. As if that weren't bad enough, the companies are pushing families toward expensive communications options by encouraging facilities to prohibit physical mail and in-person visits, passing these off as measures against drug contraband.

These newer products are already profoundly lucrative for the companies. Data from the jail in Albany County, N.Y., suggests that video calling, electronic messaging, and entertainment services account for more than three-quarters of the money Securus takes home from its contract in Albany. While one of these services—video calling—can now be regulated thanks to the Martha Wright-Reed Act, the others do not fall under the Act's purview, meaning there is much work to do.

Seven miles down the road from the Dauphin County Prison stands SCI Camp Hill Range, a Pennsylvania state prison where phone calls cost six cents per minute. The mother of a son at Camp Hill Range pays a fraction of what she would pay if her son were locked up in Dauphin County. The prices of phone calls differ across correctional facilities because they are completely arbitrary, set by the whims of companies and governments looking to make easy money off people in terrible situations.

By law, states can set much tighter caps on phone rates than the FCC does and the companies must obey whichever applicable cap is lower. So far, three states—Illinois, New

Jersey, and California—have shown the potential of this action. Illinois capped phone rates from its prisons at seven cents per minute; New Jersey set caps at 11 cents, while prohibiting jails and prisons from taking kickbacks from the companies. California capped rates at seven cents for both prisons and jails, and last year, it went even further: It made calls from prisons free, funded by a small portion of the state budget.

Meanwhile, in 2020, Connecticut not only made phone calls from correctional facilities free—it passed a law ensuring that all other prison and jail communications services must be free as well. With this law, Connecticut ensured that its reforms would not be undermined and that people in prison, like everyone else who uses a phone, would receive some consumer protection.

The Martha Wright-Reed Act is a huge victory for advocates who have spent decades fighting the exploitation of incarcerated people and their families. But their fight is not over. Until the FCC takes action with its newfound authority, families will continue to pay absurd rates to talk to their loved ones behind bars. The prices of services like electronic messaging and tablets will remain untouched, set unilaterally by an industry notorious for its misconduct. Meanwhile, a handful of states have taken the baton and are going further to rein in this corporate greed than the feds have—and maybe ever will. When will more states follow their lead?

Wanda Bertram Wanda Bertram is the communications strategist at the Prison Policy Initiative. She is the co-author of the organization's recent report *State of Phone Justice 2022: The Problem, the Progress, and What's Next*.

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