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USA

# “Noise as Usual” — Or Crisis Now?

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**One year after the far right Supreme Court majority wiped out federal abortion rights, the deadly effects spread — and so do state-by-state battles over reproductive rights. With so many other basic rights at stake — from voting to contraception to essential transgender medical care — is a massive U.S. political crisis looming?**

AS THE UNITED States hurtled toward an unthinkable, and entirely artificial, default on the “full faith and credit” of meeting its debt obligations, the question arises: was the appearance of crisis more a case of “noise as usual, only louder”? Hadn’t we had debt-limit brinksmanship before — a periodic and partisan theatrical game of chicken, ultimately refereed by ruling class imperatives not to end in mutual suicide?

Against this logical assumption was another fact: a powerful far-right faction, within the traditionally preferred party of the capitalist ruling class, that was prepared to let default happen — even ready to force it, on the assumption that the resulting chaos or collapse would propel them to victory in the 2024 election.

The imminent crisis, ultimately, was defused with the wide Congressional vote and 63-36 Senate approval for the McCarthy-Biden deficit-and-budget deal. The practical imperatives of “divided government” and the demands of ruling-class financial institutions prevailed. The hot media debate over “who won” — House Speaker Kevin McCarthy for blackmailing the President to negotiate over the debt ceiling, or Biden for maneuvering McCarthy into budget deals without savage social spending cuts — is ephemeral and unimportant.

The rightwing playbook since the 1980s has been to run up deficits under Republican administrations with military spending, untax-the-rich policies and unfunded corporate subsidies, then scream “out-of-control spending” to force Democratic presidents to make cuts. In recent history, only the Bill Clinton administration produced a balanced budget — at the expense of America’s miserable welfare system and the working poor.

Looking forward, what’s important is the connections of the debt-and-budget fights to the broader dysfunctions of U.S. bourgeois politics. Republican demands will persistently center on cutting the safety net for working people and vulnerable populations, despite food and housing inflation that’s constricting tens of millions of people’s lives, without reducing the military budget or fossil-fuel corporate subsidies — and most definitely nothing to raise revenue from the severely under-taxed super-wealthy and big business.

The Republican — and Wall Street’s — goal meant “putting paid” (to borrow the apt British phrase) to what remained of the Democrats’ once-expansive “Build Back Better” infrastructure programs, along with emergency spending that propped the economy and actually reduced poverty during the pandemic. What’s left are mostly measures like in-shoring semiconductor production and escalating the scramble for lithium — elements aimed at countering the global reach of China, on which both ruling class parties generally agree.

The sausage-making deal process did little or nothing to solve real issues, whether the national debt, inflation, housing costs and homelessness, or anything else — nor could it have done so in existing political conditions. On the one hand, there is a genuine problem following the runup of the national debt to \$31 trillion, mostly under the Reagan-Bushes-Trump regimes and recently the COVID pandemic crisis — and now higher interest rates, which at five percent mean interest payments of \$1.5 trillion on the debt annually. (Corporate and individual debts are another whole issue.)

Seriously addressing the debt would require major military budget cuts, reversing tax cuts and loopholes for rich and corporate America, and ending destructive fossil fuel and agribusiness subsidies — none of which are remotely on capital’s agenda.

On the other hand, a feature of the present deal is new “work requirement” restrictions imposed on some food assistance (SNAP) recipients (although partially offset by new eligibility for military veterans and some homeless people). At a time when SNAP should be expanding, tighter work requirements and the associated administrative hoops are morally bankrupt, politically stupid for the Democrats, and fiscally irrelevant, a “bipartisan” trifecta — 1) stomping on the face of the most vulnerable working poor experiencing job precarity and insecurity, 2) repelling and demoralizing a good part of the Democrats’ voting base, and 3) not saving any measurable money.

## Confluence of Attacks

While the far right’s blackmail threats fizzled in the debt ceiling fight, their convergence with unbridled state legislatures’ and Supreme Court assaults on democratic rights suggest that in the arena of U.S. bourgeois politics, the crisis is now.

The attacks are out in the open, well covered in much of the media — we are not making any spectacular revelations here — and importantly, they’re met with as much resistance as targeted populations and communities are able to mount.

The overriding twin dynamics of the reactionary assault are white racism, and unrestrained corporate greed. The first of these is politically leveraged to enable the second, the real priority of ruling-class America. Labor rights. and environmental protections are gutted, while headlines are dominated by “culture war” attacks on Critical Race Theory, Black Lives Matter and the mythical “woke mob.”

Mounted in state arenas, the attacks are also propellants for the Ron DeSantis presidential campaign, with its shambolic but also profoundly menacing features. How long before the public gets sick of his “Florida is where woke goes to die” mantra — or whether DeSantis or some other reactionary emerges as the main Republican challenger to the career fraudster and soon-to-be serial criminal defendant ex-president who commands the party’s present frontrunner status — are secondary questions.

The infrastructure for the brutally reactionary social agenda is provided by well-funded fake-grassroots and advocacy forces — call them Moms for Illiteracy, Americans for Plutocracy, Club for Greed, Prolife (until you’re born) America, etc. The infamous American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) provides language to be cut and pasted into rightwing state legislation.

In almost all cases these measures are against majority public opinion. In some cases they’re blatantly unconstitutional as well as sadistic, notably laws criminalizing essential medical care for transgender people and youth in particular. Abortion bans are metastasizing following last year’s unhinged Supreme Court overturning *Roe v. Wade*, with increasingly deadly effect.

Book bans and forced library closures — and most important, the rising resistance against them — are covered elsewhere in this issue of *Against the Current*. The miseducation of American kids includes prohibition of teaching about racism, U.S. history as it actually unfolded, or anything to do with gender or sexual realities.

In Michigan, rightwing state reps who are now in the minority have proposed — even with no immediate chance of passing — compulsory school teaching of “the Christian foundations of America” and the Pilgrims’ quest for religious freedom. (Recall Malcolm X’s memorable line: “We didn’t land on Plymouth Rock. Plymouth Rock landed on us.”)

Old and new restrictions on voting rights proliferate —to take just one example, the move in Ohio to make ballot initiatives (such as enshrining reproductive rights in the state Constitution) effectively impossible.

## Supreme Court Stranglehold

The outrage of outlawing transgender medical care stands alongside a Texas district court judge’s ruling to bar mifepristone, the abortion and miscarriage care drug that’s been available and proven safe for over two decades. Lawmakers and governors banning transgender care clearly feel empowered by the extreme right’s control of the ultimate “umpire,” the U.S. Supreme Court.

This far-right Court majority seems partly restrained by the fear of being totally delegitimized. The mifepristone ban directly threatens so many people and produces such anger that the Supreme Court was forced to put it on hold and might kick it to next year’s session.

Transgender care directly impacts a far smaller proportion of the population — about one half of one percent — and their families. In some ways, the strategy of singling out a relatively small targeted group, despite the obvious fact that it makes a mockery of equal protection promised on paper by the Constitution, becomes even more dangerous in both its immediate effect and wider consequences. It opens a bigger can of poisonous worms for the political suppression of essential medical services that so-called “conservatives” disapprove in the name of “traditional values.”

It’s all the more important, as we’ve said before, that delegitimizing the present far-right Supreme Court majority is not a “threat,” but an urgent necessity. What we’ve called the WSCOTUS (White Supremacy Court of the United States) majority has also been exposed as one of the most corrupt and clientelist institutions in U.S. politics — which is saying a lot.

From Clarence Thomas — bought and paid for by sleazoid billionaire Harlan Crow — to John Roberts’ wife making \$10 million by matching lawyers with elite firms including some with cases before the Court, the fact emerges that “ethics standards” when it comes to these Supreme Court Justices are functionally nonexistent. Since their purpose is to serve and protect the wealthy and powerful, it’s hardly surprising that these “conservative” Justices find it appropriate to live like them.

There is nothing much “conservative” about them. Principles of respect for precedent, avoidance of drastic radical change by judicial fiat, and consideration for the impact of Court rulings on real people’s lives, mean nothing. (Those of us who do want radical changes don’t expect them to be handed down by courts, but rather to be won through powerful social movements and political action.)

The most recent decision in this regard, *Sackett v. EPA*, guts longstanding Environmental Protection Agency’s regulatory authority. While the Court unanimously agreed that the plaintiffs’ property rights were unreasonably violated in this particular case, the far-right majority took the occasion to basically wipe out the Clean Water Act.

This kind of ruling has become standard for this Court majority, whose only “conservative” allegiance is to elite

privilege and power. A remaining question, which will reveal something important about the speed of the overall rightwing offensive, is whether this SCOTUS is ready right now to expose itself by affirming a mifepristone ban — creating an immediate national health emergency — or upholding an insane “independent state legislatures” theory allowing the overturn of election results.

Either or both of these could trigger an authentic constitutional crisis. In case of a court-imposed mifepristone ban, progressives and reproductive rights advocates must demand that Biden immediately issue an emergency order to the FDA and the drug manufacturer to keep it available.

## Clouded Prospects

We’ve noted that it’s way early to handicap what might emerge from the nasty, brutish and long electoral season. Far more important right now is to uphold and magnify the existing and growing resistance, which is impressive although inadequately represented in daily headlines.

Notably, abortion rights organizations and networks have creatively mobilized to make the service available to people who need to travel long distances within or across state lines. There are many other examples of standing up to rightwing authoritarianism, including at community levels under the mass media radar.

Politically, it’s critical to spell out why the Democratic Party is such an abject failure in turning back the attacks. Its mega-donor base requires the party establishment to rely on the illusion of victory by appealing to that elusive suburban “socially liberal but fiscally conservative” population — while the much larger majority of the working class is actually more “fiscally liberal” in wanting to save and expand programs like social security and medicare, living wages and a social safety net that works.

And while strikes, labor contract fights and union organizing might seem a step removed from the reactionary assaults on democracy and vulnerable people’s lives, they are actually of central importance in shaping society’s future. Underlying the right wing’s attacks and anti-“woke” antics is an agenda of capital — to keep wages low, work and life for the majority precarious and insecure and to enforce “discipline” and individualism against social solidarity and struggle.

The ruling corporate elites for their part care little or nothing about issues like abortion rights, transgender medical care, public libraries or education or so-called “culture wars” one way or the other. What matters is preservation of their profits and structural privilege — and to whatever extent the far right’s social agenda and ugly racism help advance that agenda, they’re quite happy to accept its support.

That’s why the answer to the question we posed of whether the present moment is somewhat louder “noise as usual,” or the onset of “crisis now,” might well be — both.

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