

JAMELLE BOUIE

## Grievances On Parade

REPUBLICANS CHOSE NOT to produce a platform for their convention, no statement of values or declaration of principle. Instead, the party has approved a resolution to “enthusiastically support” President Trump’s “America-first agenda,” whatever that may be. And while the White House has produced a bullet-point outline of its second-term agenda, this week’s convention itself has little content planned other than cultural grievance and worshipful praise for the president. As one veteran congressional aide told Politico, the only thing Republicans believe now is “Owning the libs and pissing off the media.”

It’s easy, observing all of this, to say that the Republican Party has fallen fully into a cult of personality around Trump and his family, a shocking number of whom have featured speaking roles at the convention. It’s also easy to say the party has no ideas or plans for the future. But that would be a mistake. For the Republican Party, the situation now isn’t too different from what it was in 2016. Trump lacked a serious agenda then just as he lacks one now. Rather than bring a new program to bear on the party, he has made the equivalent of a trade: total support for his personal and political concerns in exchange for almost total pursuit of conservative ideological interests.

The past three and a half years have only shown the wisdom of this pact. Republican indifference to the president’s corruption, criminality (yet another former campaign adviser was arrested last week) and prejudice — which freed him to profit from the office and turn the bureaucracy into an instrument of his will — has been rewarded with deregulation, cuts to the social safety net and the installation in the federal judiciary of a large new cohort of reliably conservative judges.

In which case, why fix what isn’t broken? If there’s no platform for the Republican National Convention, if the party has agreed to simply support the president’s second-term agenda, it is because the basic arrangement between Trump and the Republican Party is still intact. Should he win a second term, we’ll see more of the same: an administration that pursues as much of the party’s agenda — redistribution to the wealthy, deep reductions in the state’s ability to solve problems for the

### The Republican Party may not have a platform, but it has a plan.

general welfare — as possible and a Republican Party that looks the other way as Trump turns the federal government into a patronage machine for himself, his family and his allies.

It is noteworthy that under Trump the Republican Party has abandoned the rhetoric of limited government and natural rights. But this has less to do with the party’s agenda than it does with its public image. Gone is the militarism and evangelical piety of George W. Bush’s Republican Party or the libertarian-inflected outrage of the Tea Party. Instead, predictably, we have the Fox News aesthetics of a president who rose to political power via the cable news channel and who exists in a codependent relationship with the network. He relies on its coverage for ideas, messaging and even personnel, and Fox, in turn, tailors its coverage and commentary to his preferences. It is not for nothing that when Fox breaks with Trump, it’s a story. You can see the Fox News devotion of the Republicans in their choice of speakers for this year’s convention. Whereas the 2012 convention saw speeches from a wide range of Republican lawmakers and officials, Trump’s event is a glorified cable news panel, with appearances from figures like Charlie Kirk — the pugilistic founder of Turning Point USA, an activist group for young conservatives, who let the convention know that “Trump is the bodyguard of Western civilization” — and Mark and Patricia McCloskey, a couple filmed pointing guns at Black Lives Matter protesters in St. Louis.

Other speakers include frequent Fox News guests like Rudy Giuliani, Franklin Graham, Representative Dan Crenshaw of Texas and of course, the president’s children, Eric Trump and Ivanka Trump. (Donald Trump Jr. spoke on Monday. “The Biden,” he said, channeling Fox, “is basically the Loch Ness Monster of the swamp.”) There will be traditional Republican lawmakers in speaking roles, like Senators Tim Scott of South Carolina and Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, but they aren’t part of the core message.

It is not news that the Republican Party has a stagnant governing agenda cobbled together from the long-discredited dogmas and shibboleths of the conservative movement. “The current iteration of the G.O.P. is indifferent to the substance of government,” Steve Benen, a political writer and producer for “The Rachel Maddow Show” on MSNBC, writes in “The Impostors: How Republicans Cut Governing and Seized American Politics.” “It is disdainful of expertise and analysis. It is hostile toward evidence and arithmetic. It is tethered to few, if any, meaningful policy preferences. It does not know, and does not care, about how competing proposals should be crafted, scrutinized or implemented.”

What is news is the extent to which the Republican Party has embraced the trappings of its leader, which is to say, the trappings of a right-wing cable news network: a nonstop parade of conspiracy, demagoguery and grievance, in service to a cult of personality, all for the sake of a politics of plunder, theft and extraction. □

# The G.O.P. Swaps Libertarianism for Bloat

Stephanie Slade

IN 1975, the future president Ronald Reagan said, “I believe the very heart and soul of conservatism is libertarianism.”

Today, many leaders of the Republican Party have coalesced around a desire to purge libertarians, with our pesky commitments to economic liberty and international trade, from their midst. If Mr. Reagan’s agenda was a three-legged stool of religious traditionalism, a strong national defense and free-market economics, they hope the latter leg can be reduced to sawdust and scattered to the winds.

The Republican Party seems to become more comfortable with top-down economic interventionism by the day. Rising stars denounce the global market integration that has defined the postwar era. Last year in a speech calling for a national pivot to “common-good capitalism,” Senator Marco Rubio of Florida declared, “Our challenge is an economic order that is bad for America.” Senator Josh Hawley of Missouri insists, “It’s time we ended the cosmopolitan experiment.”

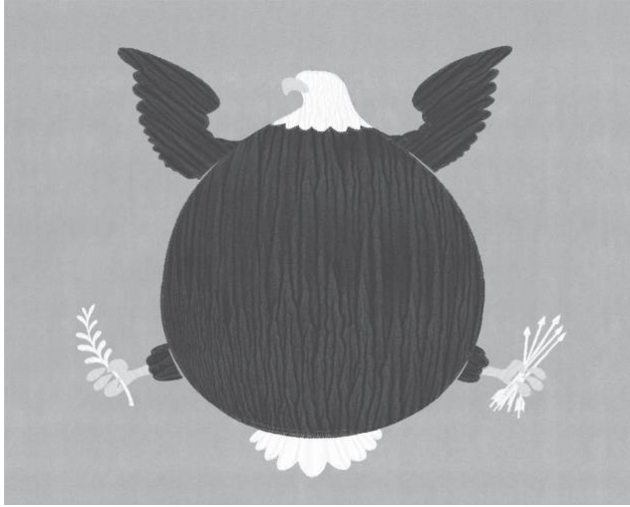
Should these big-government conservatives get their way, libertarians believe — like a majority of Republicans once did — that the result will be slower growth, less dynamism and fewer opportunities for all. We need the solution to most problems starts with removing the market distortions that government interference created in the first place.

Top-down economic planning, from the left or the right, inevitably leads to sclerosis, incompetence and cronyism.

Global capitalism remains the greatest engine of prosperity. In the past five years, according to the World Bank, the percentage of the world’s population living in extreme poverty dropped into single digits for the first time. President Trump’s trade war, though, has shown us that “managing” the economy nearly always backfires. In December, a Federal Reserve study found that the 2018 tariffs were “associated with relative reductions in manufacturing employment and relative increases in producer prices.”

The economic agendas of big-government conservatives could easily be confused for proposals from the left. Consider Oren Cass, a former adviser to Senator Mitt Romney. At last summer’s National Conservatism Conference, Mr. Cass argued for a robust “industrial policy” for the United States. That would include a federal program of research-and-development subsidies, infrastructure investments, “bias[ing] the tax code” in favor of producers of “physical things,” aggressive retaliation against countries that don’t abide by our trade rules and more.

More recently, Mr. Cass has begun arguing for a new model of corporate governance that would privilege worker well-being over corporate profits — in other words, conservatives’ ability to open up and employ people. It is meant as an alternative to both the conventional corporate mentality, in which shareholders’ bottom line is king, and the modern push for progressively inflected corporate social responsibility. Regulatory constraints to impose his new model are justified, he



ALEX NABAUIM

### Why are the Republicans giving in to big government?

says, because neither of those approaches has produced sufficient investment by companies into their workforces and communities. What constitutes optimal corporate investment is apparently for bureaucrats in Washington to decide.

Advocates like Mr. Cass see this shift as a political necessity for Republicans. They believe the outcome of the 2016 election proves that the Republican base is looking for a hand up; the rest of the field was busy mouthing platitudes about liberty, but only Mr. Trump spoke to their concerns. This may be a bigger political gamble than conservatives appreciate. Survey research strongly suggests that Americans still support open markets. In July 2019, the Pew Research Center found a solid 65 percent of Americans saying that free-trade agreements “have been a good thing for the United States,” up from 45 percent just before the 2016 election. So during President Trump’s protectionist first term, support for international commerce has robustly increased.

Last September, Gallup found that 87 percent of Americans have a positive view of “free enterprise” and 70 percent think “business can do things more efficiently

than government can.” These results hold regardless of party affiliation, but they’re stronger on the political right. Only 7 percent of Republicans said there was too little government regulation of business and industry, for example, compared with 46 percent of Democrats.

Could it be that the 2016 upset was attributable to something other than a rejection of limited-government principles among the Republican base? I am not predicting that the libertarian moment has finally arrived. A 2017 study suggested that people who want the government to stay out of your bedroom as well as your pocketbook (as the saying goes) make up a vanishingly small share of the voting population. But within the Republican coalition, there is a genuine constituency for economic freedom.

Big-government conservatives pointing to a crisis of “stagnant wages, a labor-force exodus, too many unstable families and crumbling communities” caused, they believe, by the unwillingness of elites to protect working-class jobs from foreign competition. The dream of a family supported by a single breadwinner is increasingly out of reach, they say, especially for men without college degrees.

Yet some scholars have questioned the data underpinning this narrative. Michael Strain of the American Enterprise Institute, for example, notes that the wages of non-supervisory workers have increased by 33 percent, accounting for inflation, since 1990; when taxes and transfers as

well as inflation are considered, incomes in the lowest quintile of households rose by 66 percent over the same period.

To the extent that the cost of living can seem to be spiraling out of control, the phenomenon is overwhelmingly driven by health care, higher education and housing — three sectors that have long been heavily regulated and wildly subsidized. And thanks to global capitalism, even the least among us today have access to an ever-improving array of food, medicine, technology, entertainment and more.

This is why libertarians highlight market distortions. Instead of spending ever more on rental assistance for low-income families who must then compete with one another and their wealthier peers, increase the housing stock and drive down prices by getting rid of zoning and land-use restrictions; instead of using tax dollars to prop up dying manufacturers, accept the affordability and abundance that imports offer and unleash America’s productive capacity to tackle other problems (including things like climate change) and create new jobs.

In trying to direct the economy from Washington, conservatives would be doubling down on progressives’ mistakes. And in trying to duplicate their political success from 2016, Republicans may be tearing out their movement’s heart and soul. □

STEPHANIE SLADE is the managing editor of Reason magazine.

# Why College Football Players Should Boycott

Buzz Bissinger

COLLEGE football is a mess. It has been a mess for a century, with dreams of proposed reform in the wasteland of forgotten file cabinets. I was part of the reform movement for a while, writing that college football should be banned because it has nothing to do with academics. It doesn’t. But it is interwoven into the social fabric of colleges and universities. The games are pomp and pageantry and incredible athleticism and tribal fan lunacy. So I eventually gave up on any meaningful change in the sport.

Until the pandemic. Out of catastrophe come opportunity. With the season fundamentally halted by the decision of the major conferences of the Big 10 and the Pac-12 not to play, we should recalibrate the college football industry and confront the issues that players, previously shunted into silence, have brought up because of the repercussions of Covid-19: not just obvious health issues but compensation issues and racial issues and exploitation issues. Now it’s just sport. It’s just a game.

“Game” implies something fun and benign. But college football is a huge industry. The five major conferences bring in

at least \$4 billion in revenue annually. Yet those who make the game, play the game, are the game, expose themselves to brain injury and crippling arthritis and now the pandemic, don’t receive a dime of revenue.

The big programs make millions off them — profits for the top 25 most valuable teams range from roughly \$27 million at Clemson University to roughly \$94 million at Texas A&M University, according to a 2019 study. Head football coaches at Football Bowl Subdivision schools make an average of \$2.7 million. Dabo Swinney of Clemson, \$9.3 million; Nick Saban of the University of Alabama, \$8.9 million; Jim Harbaugh of the University of Michigan, \$7.5 million.

Everybody except the players. It is a system of serfdom unlike any not just in sports but in corporate America. The N.C.A.A., perhaps the worst umbrella organization in history and dedicated to protecting the college football industry, keeps using the transparent fallacy that players are compensated by the scholarships they receive as well as other ancillaries like trainers and tutoring. So what? The true value of a scholarship varies wildly, and it is no substitute for the money players generate.

The National College Players Association and Drexel University’s sport management department did a study showing that major college football and basketball players generated as much as \$1.5 million each beyond the value of their scholarship. And this is from a few

years ago.

The problem with this calculation is determining the exact amount, leading to endless disputes over revenue and profit and loss and the wholesale price of a hot dog. A simpler and quicker method would be to tie annual player compensation to the Football Bowl Subdivision schools to the salary of the head coach.

As an example, let’s use Swinney’s \$9.3 million a year at Clemson. Divide that by the number of players on scholarship, limited to 85 by the N.C.A.A., and you come up with an individual share of

### Mistreated athletes have an opening to demand what they deserve.

\$109,412. For the average F.B.S. salary of \$2.7 million, the player share would be \$31,765.

Since coaches’ salaries generally reflect the size of a program, the smaller it is the less a player would make. If a school thinks a player share is too much, lower the salary. There would be no exceptions for programs crying that they lose money. If that is true, drop football. Compensation issues are only part of the college football mess. Because of the George Floyd killing and the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement, players are now talking about racial inequities.

Thirty years ago I wrote the book “Friday Night Lights” about high school football in Odessa, Texas. I saw unflinching racism both shockingly overt and subtler: a double standard of expectation for Black football players versus white football players; the attitude that white players perform well because they work hard and Black players perform well because they are naturally gifted and often don’t work hard enough.

Has that changed? A report commissioned by the University of Iowa and released last month found entrenched bullying and racial bias in the football program. Colorado State suspended its football program this month after allegations of racism and verbal abuse.

Then there is the lack of hiring of Black head coaches. Out of 130 F.B.S. schools, 14 head football coaches are Black. It is a disgrace at universities that are on the defensive because of the issues raised by the Black Lives Matter and are preaching di-

versity and yet have done nothing in this arena despite years of criticism.

This month 13 players from the Pac-12 came out with a list of demands before the conference season was canceled: player-approved measures to address not just Covid-19 but “serious injury, abuse and death”; 50 percent of profit-sharing conference revenues for every sport to be evenly distributed among participants; 2 percent of conference revenue to be set aside for financial aid for low-income Black students and community initiatives. Their voices are strong and have gotten attention.

Another players’ group, We Want to Play, has members across all Power 5 conferences and has raised issues similar to those of the Pac-12 group, including the creation of a college football players’ association.

The Big 10 and the Pac-12 may be out, but the Atlantic Coast Conference and the Southeastern Conference and the Big 12 are still planning to go ahead. It is not surprising, since many of the states advocating play are the same states that find wearing protective masks optional and college football a sacred American right.

Football is not like other sports. It is blood, mucus, sweat and spit, bodily meals with virus craves. How can these schools even be contemplating the risk when several medical advisers to the N.C.A.A. said it was ill advised? Some coaches have suggested that football players alone should return to campus, which provides additional evidence that they are viewed more like employees than traditional students and should be compensated.

The pandemic has provided a window. The absence of a normal college football season gives players a chance they will never have again. The 13 Pac-12 players said they spoke on behalf of dozens of others who raised similar concerns. They threatened to boycott over the virus, and they should continue to threaten boycott over the other vital issues they raised. You don’t need a union for that. You need more voices from every conference and every team to build national unity and fortitude.

You can play football without a coach. You can play it without fans or cheerleaders or mascots. But as far as I know, you can’t play without players. □

BUZZ BISSINGER is the author of “Friday Night Lights and” the forthcoming “The Mosquito Bowl.”



JOSHUA S. KELLY/USA TODAY SPORTS, VIA REUTERS

# Opinion

The New York Times

## EDITORIAL

### The F.D.A. Chief's Fuzzy Math



OLIVER CONTRERAS FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

On Monday night, Dr. Stephen Hahn, the commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration, addressed inaccurate and misleading remarks he made in a news conference the previous evening. Dr. Hahn had initially claimed that plasma from recovered Covid-19 patients — what's known as convalescent plasma — could save 35 out of every 100 people who contract the disease.

As he has since explained on television and Twitter, his initial assessment conflated two different things: relative risk reduction (that is, how much a treatment reduces the risk of death in one group of patients compared to a different group) and absolute risk reduction (that is, how much a treatment reduces the risk of death in a group of patients compared to the rest of the population who didn't get the treatment).

To proponents of convalescent plasma therapy, this might seem like an inconsequential flub: Why split hairs if lives were saved? But the survival benefit Dr. Hahn initially mentioned applies only to a narrow subset of patients: Those younger than 80 years old who were hospitalized but not on ventilators and who received plasma with high levels of antibodies within three days of diagnosis were 35 percent less likely to die than those who received plasma with low levels of antibodies.

If the former group of patients were compared instead to the wider population, the benefit would shrink considerably. (The data in question also has several other serious limitations, which the commissioner did not acknowledge or address.)

Dr. Hahn knows this — or at least he ought to. As an oncologist by training and a former hospital executive, he should be familiar with basic statistics. The trouble is, Dr.

Hahn is serving a president who routinely demonstrates an overt hostility to science and who is facing a tough re-election. And he's being pressed by that president to clear drugs and vaccines for use as quickly as possible — even if they may not have been proven safe and may not be effective.

Convalescent plasma is not an unreasonable thing for doctors and scientists to pin their hopes on — it has proved effective for other diseases, and so far it does appear to be safe for Covid-19 patients. But it has not yet shown any real benefit for them, and it's the job of officials like Dr. Hahn to be as clear as possible about that. There is a playbook for communicating information during a public health crisis — it calls for honesty about what isn't known and transparency about how decisions are being made in light of that uncertainty.

Dr. Hahn could have stood by leaders from the National Institutes of Health who advised hitting pause on the use of convalescent plasma until more data was available. Or he could have defended F.D.A. scientists who advised moving forward even though data was limited. Instead, he followed his boss's lead, propping up victorious statements with fuzzy numbers. That's perhaps unsurprising: In a world where disinfectant therapy is discussed with a straight face, the difference between relative and absolute may indeed seem small.

But even small compromises with the truth can have big consequences for public trust, and for the course of global pandemics. It's worrisome that a doctor in charge of one of the nation's top regulatory agencies — who will play a leading role in the coming decisions about which vaccines are safe and effective enough to be injected into Americans' bodies — doesn't seem to realize that.

THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN

### Trump Should Learn German to Deal With China

IF JOE BIDEN is elected president, his top foreign policy challenge will be China — but not the China that he dealt with under Barack Obama. It will be a much more aggressive China, a China looking to supplant American technology dominance, smother democracy in Hong Kong and cyberstunt your personal data. Pushing back on that China, without blowing up the global trading system, will require reversing one of Donald Trump's biggest mistakes — his failure to build a partnership with Germany to counter Beijing.

Yes, you read that right. The Cold War with the Soviet Union was fought and won in Berlin. And the looming Cold War with China — over trade, technology and global influence — will be fought and won in Berlin.

As Berlin goes, so goes Germany, and as Germany goes, so goes the European Union, the world's biggest single market. And whichever country — the United States or China — is able to leverage the European Union on its side in the competition for whose technology standards, trade rules and technology will prevail will set the rules for global digital commerce in the 21st century.

"The reason that the United States was on the winning side of the three great conflicts of the 20th century — World War I, World War II and the Cold War," said Michael Mandelbaum, author of "The Rise and Fall of Peace on Earth," "is that we were part of the strongest coalition. The World War I coalition we joined belatedly. The World War II coalition we joined less belatedly. The Cold War coalition to defeat the Soviet Union, we organized. This should have been the model for dealing with China."

If we make this a story of America acting against China alone — with the goal of making America, and only America, great again — we lose. If we make this a story of

the world versus China on what are the right and fair rules of 21st-century commerce — we can bend Beijing our way.

Trump had to impose billions of dollars in taxes on U.S. imports from China — and force U.S. farmers to live with China's retaliation of curtailed American agricultural purchases — just to compel China to promise to buy more American goods. But he still did not secure a sustained opening of China's economy for truly reciprocal commerce.

Trump has been tougher on China than any previous president, and rightly so in my view. As a friend of mine who does business in China likes to say: Trump is not the American president America deserves, but he is the American president China deserves.

But I prefer not to use the term "China." I prefer "1.3 billion people who speak Chinese." Because the behavior of those 1.3 billion Chinese speakers, whose economy is growing very dynamically, is not easily modified by 328 million Americans operating on Trump's America-First-America strategy.

Which is why I thought it was a huge mistake for Trump to be simultaneously hammering China and bashing Germany over European Union auto tariffs and Berlin's lagging military spending. Trump should have prioritized a partnership with Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany — also known as "the Chancellor of Europe" — who is as concerned about China's bullying as we are.

Germany has a small army that would be useless in a shooting war against Russia, but it is a manufacturing superpower that would be a decisive ally in a trade war against China.

If we make your grievances with China, but why has Trump never tried to address them with your European allies?" a veteran German diplomat asked me.

Now Trump is also punishing Germany by bringing home some of our troops there. The result? Few Research reported in May that in 2019, Germans prioritized their country's relationship with the United States over that with China, 50 percent to 24 percent. Today, 37 percent of Germans prioritize their country's relationship with the United States and 50 percent prioritize relations with China.

Do the math: On taking office, Trump tore up the Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement, which set rules for free trade in the 21st century in line with U.S. interests and was supported by the 12 biggest Pacific economies — excluding China. Now he's weakening ties with Germany.

In the middle of all of this, Trump's secretary of state, Mike Pompeo, gave a speech declaring that "securing our freedoms from the Chinese Communist Party is the mission of our time" therefore it is also time "for a new grouping of like-minded nations, a new alliance of democracies" to deter China. "If the free world doesn't change," Pompeo went on, "Communist China will surely change us."

That speech left me speechless. It's hard to have an alliance without allies.

The thing China fears most is the one thing Trump refused to build: a coalition including the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the United States and the European Union, built around Washington and Berlin.

The economic Tyler Cowen put it well on Bloomberg View the other day: The Trump China hawks "were right about everything, except how to deal with China."

The great grand strategy chess move of the 1970s was Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger building an alliance between China and America to contain the Soviet Union. The great grand strategy chess move today is building an alliance between the United States and Germany to counterbalance China. □

## LETTERS

### The Republicans' Turn in the Spotlight

TO THE EDITOR:

Re "Trump Nominated as G.O.P. Delivers Ominous Message" (front page, Aug. 25):

The first night of the Republican convention was a true personification of Donald Trump — full of exaggerations, unsupported claims, misrepresentations, unbelievable praise and bald-faced lies, Mr. Trump's go-to tactics every day.

Only the willfully ignorant believe this nonsense.

JAMES C. GOODALE  
FORT MYERS, FLA.

TO THE EDITOR:

I watched the first hour of the Republican convention. The Republicans are still playing the same old fear card, the same message they have been using since Richard Nixon's 1968 campaign. Ho hum.

MARTHA BROAD, BRYN MAWR, PA.

TO THE EDITOR:

Joe Biden is for a national mask mandate. About 177,000 pandemic deaths later, Donald Trump still opposes one.

At the Republican National Convention, Mr. Trump appeared alongside seven frontline workers. None wore a mask. All stood less than six feet apart. None were African-American or Latino, although millions have disproportionately risked their lives to help their fellow citizens as essential workers.

Mr. Trump did find a few African-Americans willing to safely sing his praises from an isolated lectern in an empty hall. They included the former N.F.L. player Herschel Walker, who claimed that our divider in chief is not a racist, but a believer in social justice. Yes,

### Diversity at the Top

TO THE EDITOR:

Re "Pushing for Racial Equity in Theater" (Arts pages, Aug. 20):

Wading into this conversation is hard for a white writer.

Recently, artistic directors in diverse cities like Philadelphia and New York have resigned or been asked to leave to make room for leaders of color. Police departments across the country are swapping white chiefs of police for Black chiefs. Publishing companies and news organizations are having internal investigations to justify removal of old leaders for new ones.

I support Black Lives Matter and all movements to make all levels of society more inclusive. I am not, however, convinced that having leaders "step aside" will be as productive as having leaders "step up" to the challenge of building inclusive organizations. Simply relegating white leaders to the sidelines of discussion does little beyond providing cover for lack of change.

It is likely to produce a backlash rather than a partnership. In a few years we will be questioning the absence of institutional memory in organizations that might have benefited from keeping a few of the old guard around, even in different positions.

Diversity is not something you create overnight, nor does it thrive simply because you put a new face at the top. It requires long, hard thinking and planning, and that is the work that needs to happen faster and more effectively.

TARA SONENSHINE, WASHINGTON

The writer is a former under secretary of state for public diplomacy and public affairs.

### How Isolation Hurts Elders

TO THE EDITOR:

Re "The Senior Facility Dilemma: Are Visitors Allowed?" by Paula Span (The New Old Age, Science Times, Aug. 18):

I have much interest in your article about the effects of isolation on elders in nursing facilities during the pandemic. I view my mother's recent death at age 96 as collateral damage from Covid-19. The lack of visitors during her facility's shutdown hastened her cognitive decline and her will to live after a fall. The facility where she lived was excellent and the staff was caring and dedicated, but that wasn't sufficient to compensate for lack of in-person family support.

Perhaps we should rethink the trade-off between maximum protection of our elderly from a potentially deadly virus versus providing for their emotional needs at a stage in life when they are most vulnerable.

SUSAN BENNETT, LEXINGTON, MASS.

and neo-Nazis marching in Charlottesville included "very fine people."

JOSHUA FULD NISSEN  
WESTON, CONN.

TO THE EDITOR:

Why would the Republicans skip the process of writing an election platform? Was the G.O.P. too disorganized to pull it off? That is certainly possible.

More likely, though, the party has no need for a platform. The only thing it stands for is whatever President Trump decides he wants to do on any given day. Heading into an election without a platform means that Republicans openly acknowledge they operate in a policy-free zone. This is no longer the G.O.P.; it is now the P.O.T. (Party of Trump).

TODD R. CLEAR, WHITEFISH, MONT.

TO THE EDITOR:

Whenever an incumbent president seeks a second term, it is always appropriate to ask two key questions: Am I better off than I was four years ago? Is our country better off than it was four years ago?

In his campaign four years ago, Donald Trump gave us a green light to ask these questions now by promising that he would "make America great again." We now can grade his performance by using that slogan. During four years in the White House, has he made America great again? Has he made a significant start on it?

Mr. Trump also said repeatedly in 2016 that he would "drain the swamp," as well as "I alone can fix it" and "What have you got to lose?" Everyone who cares about this country should think carefully about those utterances — and about whether they were fulfilled — before casting their ballots this fall.

ROBERT TILLER, SILVER SPRING, MD.

### A 'Better' Flu Season?

TO THE EDITOR:

Re "Fearing 'Twindemic,' Experts Push for Flu Shots" (front page, Aug. 17):

While the article raises appropriate concerns about the need to increase efforts to vaccinate people against seasonal flu, it doesn't mention several factors that could act to reduce the severity of this year's flu season.

The marked reduction in air travel should reduce the introduction and spread of the infection, particularly from the Southern to the Northern Hemispheres.

Additionally, although it's far from perfect, compared to past flu seasons many more people are now wearing masks, washing and sanitizing their hands, avoiding contact with potentially high-touch surfaces and markedly decreasing close person-to-person interactions that act to transmit the flu virus.

All of these factors can, optimistically, act to mitigate the severity of this year's flu, as we prepare to enter the season of the "twindemic."

LAWRENCE M. REICH, NEW YORK

The writer is an internist.

### Use of Force by the Police

TO THE EDITOR:

Re "Video Shatters Public's Image of Hoops Cop" (front page, Aug. 16):

Thank you for this important portrait of Officer Bobby White, who gained national attention for playing basketball with local youths. As an organization that offers training programs for police officers, youths and parents, we often see law enforcement officers who are positive when children are compliant and grateful.

But it's when officers can't get immediate compliance that you see their true mettle. Officers who commit ugly acts of subjugation to obtain deference to their authority reveal to youth that questioning authority often leads to use of force or assertion of police power or both.

Officer White may have acted like a mentor to young boys in Gainesville, Fla. But it appears that he and many of his colleagues were trained to assume deference and rely upon arrest, handcuffs, threats and violence to get it. That means there's always the chance they will revert to that training in any given situation, exactly as Officer White did in the second video, and no amount of basketball playing will improve that.

LISA THURAL, CAMBRIDGE, MASS.

The writer is the founder and executive director of Strategies for Youth.



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THE INDIAN EXPRESS, THURSDAY, AUGUST 27, 2020

# THE EDITORIAL PAGE

**The Indian EXPRESS**

FOUNDED BY  
**RAMNATH GOENKA**

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

## LONG ROAD AHEAD

RBI points to bleak prospects for consumption and investment in near term, underscores need for government support

**T**HE ANNUAL REPORT of the Reserve Bank of India, released on Tuesday, affirms that the recovery from the current crisis will be a painful and protracted process. While leading economic indicators do suggest that the economy has bounced back from the lows observed in April, the report corroborates the view that economic activities are plateauing at lower levels, and that the normalisation of activities to pre-COVID levels is unlikely in the near term. "The upticks that became visible in May and June after the lockdown was eased in several parts of the country, appear to have lost strength in July and August, mainly due to reimposition or stricter imposition of lockdowns," it noted. This implies that though the pace of contraction in activities does appear to have eased considerably since the easing of the lockdown restrictions, the central bank now expects the economy to continue to contract in the second quarter of the current financial year as well.

The report offers a grim prognosis of the underlying drivers of growth. On the consumption side, the data points to a remarkable decline in household financial liabilities, indicating that in line with the corporate sector, households in India have also begun to deleverage. Household financial liabilities fell to 2.9 per cent of gross national disposable income (GNDI) in 2019-20, from 4 per cent in 2018-19. And this was before the COVID-19 pandemic struck. Rising income uncertainty stemming from the subsequent job and income losses may well have accelerated this trend, and led to a rise in precautionary savings, dimming the prospects of a revival in private consumption in the near term. As the report notes, "An assessment of aggregate demand during the year so far suggests that the shock to consumption is severe, and it will take quite some time to mend and regain the pre-COVID-19 momentum." On the investment side, the prospects of a pick-up in the private sector capex cycle also appear to be bleak. Companies have utilised the cash flow freed up due to the reduction in the corporate tax rates to meet their loan obligations, and to build up their cash reserves, indicating limited appetite for launching fresh investment. A risk averse household and corporate sector, both in the midst of a deleveraging exercise, underscore the need for greater public sector spending to revive the economy. As the RBI also notes, public investment funded by the monetisation of assets, could "revive and crowd in private investment."

The central bank's continued reluctance to provide any estimate of economic growth for this year underlines the lingering uncertainty. While the National Statistics Office (NSO) will release its estimates of growth for the first quarter, indicating the extent of the slump during the period, early next week, surely the RBI should provide its own assessment of the economy, and how it sees economic activity shaping up over the medium term, to help guide policy-makers on the future course of action.

## TRUTH ABOUT PULWAMA

Co-operating in Pulwama investigation can only be in Pakistan's own interest. And in interest of peace and stability in region

**A** YEAR AND A half after the Pulwama attack, in which a Kashmiri suicide bomber detonated an explosives-laden car, killing 40 CRPF men in a security convoy on the national highway connecting Jammu and Srinagar, the National Investigation Agency has filed a chargesheet in the case. It confirms the claim made at the time by the Pakistan-based group, Jaish-e-Mohammed, that it had carried out the attack. The chargesheet says the attack was conceived, planned and controlled at every step by the Pakistan-based leadership of the Jem. It names Jem chief Masood Azhar, his brother Rauf Azhar, and another brother's son, Mohammed Usman Farooq, who is described as a "key conspirator" and a host of others. Six of those listed as the accused, including Usman Farooq, have since been killed in encounters. Mobile phones recovered from them provided much of the forensic evidence that has been included in the 13,800-page charge-sheet. The material in the chargesheet raises questions for Indian security forces about infiltration by Pakistani terrorists into Indian territory and how they remained undetected as they assembled the explosives.

The Pulwama attack set off a chain of events that culminated in the IAF strike at Balakot in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, at the site of a Jaish-e-Mohammed training camp, to which the Pakistan Air Force retaliated, downing an IAF MiG-21 and capturing the pilot. At the time, India had made it plain that it held Pakistan responsible for the attack, withdrawing the Most Favoured Nation status for preferential trade with it, and declaring that it would work to isolate Islamabad internationally. From the chargesheet, it is clear that Usman Farooq's handlers were guiding him every step of the way. It is well known that the Jem has close links to the Pakistani military establishment.

In response to an Indian dossier last March, Pakistan said it had taken into "protective custody" some 40 Jaish-e-Mohammed cadres, including Rauf Azhar and Masood Azhar's son, Hammad Azhar. But Pakistan said it needed more "proof". Delhi rightly accused it of insincerity, pointing out its inaction in other cases, including the Mumbai attacks case, despite being provided with evidence. Now, with the Financial Action Task Force watching, the Pakistan government has been forced to take some measures to comply with the international watchdog's anti-terror requirements. Co-operating in the Pulwama investigation can only be in Pakistan's own interest. And in interest of peace and stability in the region.

And James Anderson has his head and heart set on scaling more peaks

**I**N THE FINAL hour of this cricket summer in England, James Anderson, the country's evergreen seamer, collected his 600th Test wicket with his 33,717th delivery in this format. It was a rare and remarkable feat. Mount 600 is a peak unscaled by fast bowlers. And it is likely to remain unsurpassable in the imminent future. It would require a boundless amount of talent, hard work, persistence, modesty and most importantly, an utter lack of hubris.

The genius of Anderson is multi-layered. A Real Sultan of Swing, his dexterous fingers and malleable wrists follow each instruction of his mind. He can swing the ball when and where and how he wishes. He can also "reverse" reverse swing, like he so famously did to outfox Sachin Tendulkar in Kolkata in 2012. Never predictable, he kept the batsmen guessing all the time. If he pre-2012 Anderson carried the reputation of blossoming only in English conditions, a slave to clouds and moisture, in the subsequent years, he added more tools and trickery to his repertoire. His contributions were instrumental in setting up the Test series win in India in 2012 and the Ashes in 2011. For any opening batsman, he was a beast in England and a devil elsewhere.

His biggest achievement has been his longevity. Fast bowlers, stereotypically, hit their peak towards the late 20s. Anderson was just warming up to greatness at that age. The real surge began post 30s, illuminated by the figure that no fast bowler has picked more wickets (336) than him after the 30th birthday. Some bowlers would be elated to board these numbers in their entire career. Anderson has his head and heart set on more. At the age of 38, when the siren songs of farewell might have already kicked in, he is busy penning songs of doom for batsmen. The ageing Anderson is one for the ages.



other parties are engaged in a vicious legal battle. It has put the spotlight, once again, on the fraught nature of Centre-state relations in the area of higher education. The case is simple: Given the epidemic and concerns of safety, Maharashtra and some other states have cancelled the final year exams for college students and wish to award grades and degrees based on in-semester performance.

The UGC has said that this "dilutes standards" and has passed a diktat that universities must hold exams — online, off-line or blended — before September 30. It has claimed that the actions of the states have "encroached on the legislative field of coordinating and determining the standards of higher education which is exclusively reserved for the Parliament under Entry 66 of List I of Schedule VII of the Constitution." It has also claimed that its directives are to "protect the academic future of students".

These broad claims must be examined carefully. Right now, fresh graduates are losing job appointments simply because they cannot furnish a final degree certificate. And yet, the MHRD has not bothered to inform employers and institutions to defer this requirement.

Entry 66 does indeed spell out the Centre's role as "Coordination and determination of standards in institutions for higher education or research and scientific and technical institutions". It has been repeatedly used by the Centre to shape the contours of policy and governance. In fact, it is the basis of the UGC Act of 1956. That led to the UGC-NET, a qualifying examination for college teachers. The IIT Act of 1961 led to the JEE and eventually GATE, and the 2016 amendment to the Indian Medical Council Act of 1956 gave us NEET. Thus, a single provision in the Constitution and a few key Acts have entangled India's higher education in a web of qualifying and competitive exams, regulatory agencies and professional bodies. All this is in the name of upholding standards.

And yet, there have been few efforts to evolve standards and link them with concrete societal goals. There is the excessively bureaucratic national system of accreditation and rankings for institutions. This led to thousands of research papers in worthless journals and hundreds of crores spent on ex-

## UGC versus States

Time to hold the baby and throw out the bathwater

claims that the purpose of higher education is to "enable personal accomplishment and enlightenment, constructive public engagement, and productive contribution to society". But what is this in concrete terms, for students, institutions, the state and the nation? Should a "good" student be able to write a newspaper article on a local issue, or conduct a study? Should IIT Bombay or Shivaji University analyse the Kolhapur floods or measure the parameters of the epidemic in their cities? Can the state rely on its colleges for research on drinking water? Should the nation expect that elite institutions will work to improve the railways and devise timetables for shramik services? These questions have never been answered.

Instead, national competitive exams such as the JEE, NEET and GATE have become the de facto standards for education. The folly of this is well known. They adversely impact the overall development of our youth. They encourage coaching and intervene in the state's ability to provide doctors and engineers from the local population. They distort the meaning and practice of science. And yet their impact on students and society has not been formally measured or accepted by the MHRD.

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## WORDLY WISE

YOU CANNOT SPEND YOUR WAY OUT OF RECESSION OR BORROW YOUR WAY OUT OF DEBT.

— DANIEL HANNAN

for poor student employability and the reluctance of the states to invest in higher education.

Pedagogically too, it is known that students learn better when presented with real-life problems in a familiar context. And yet the case study on local problems has been absent in the curricula. When states innovate, the MHRD is more likely to steam-roll it. This was witnessed in Maharashtra, where its innovative programme, Umat Maharashtra Abhyas, linking colleges with district administration was refused support by the MHRD.

Finally, about elite central institutions such as the IITs or IISERs, the less said the better. Most regulations of the UGC or MHRD do not apply to them. They soak up most of the funds and prestige and yet their output is not commensurate.

Setting standards in higher education requires us to connect societal needs and professions with training and research. The MHRD or UGC have failed to do this. Nor have they considered the harmful impact of the de facto standards on students and society. The new NEP continues to live in the same exalted evidence-free world of national curricula and nationalised testing.

So what is to be done? The courts should point out that a constitutional right comes with duties. The UGC has failed to appreciate this. They should set aside the issue of encroachment and judge the case on concrete questions. Can the states really hold exams during a pandemic? Are they really that important? Can transport or access to computers be managed? Did the central committee consider all this? Does it have the data?

Secondly, students should understand that their future is bogged down by a higher education system and a scientific bureaucracy which is structurally flawed. It is an elite centralised system which is not accountable to meaningful jobs or welfare within the states. It is time for the states to create a system which opens up professional opportunities, standards and training for our youth to serve their community, of achieving excellence through relevance.

Sahoti teaches IIT Bombay and IIT Goa. Dharia is a researcher at IIT Bombay

## AFTERLIFE OF A VERDICT

Ending discriminatory practice of triple talaq was a much-needed reform



TAHIR MAHMOOD

ON AUGUST 21 three years ago, the Supreme Court pronounced its historic judgment in the much celebrated *Shayara Bano* case relating to the heinous practice of the so-called "triple talaq" prevalent among the country's Muslim citizens. In his judgment, the then Chief Justice JS Khehar said, "There can be no doubt, and that is our definitive conclusion, that the position can be salvaged only by legislation; unfortunately, the Union seeks to use its hands what clearly falls in its own." The operative part of the split judgment had declared that, "In view of the different opinions recorded, by a majority of 3:2 the practice of *talaq-e-bidat*, triple talaq, is set aside."

The minority judgment in the case had advised the government to enact a comprehensive divorce law for the Muslims on the lines of such laws in several Arab and non-Arab Muslim countries — which the judgment had taken pains to chronicle at length. Instead of bringing in such a law, the government of the day, however, decided in its wisdom to pass a penal law abolishing the practice of triple talaq and making it an offence.

The proposed law was first enforced by two ordinances promulgated one after the other and finally enacted as the Muslim Women (Protection of Marriage) Act, exactly three years before the second anniversary of the apex court's judgment. As the Act com-

pleted the first year of its life on the last day of the last month, the Union law minister happily tweeted: "This day will always be remembered as the day when the Indian democracy for giving gender justice, dignity and equality to Muslim women by ending the evil practice of triple talaq."

The Act uses the word *talaq* throughout its provisions but restricts its meaning by defining the word as "*talaq-e-bidat* or any other similar form of *talaq* having the effect of instantaneous and irrevocable divorce". This definition covers the so-called triple talaq — in which a husband says that he is giving "three talaqs" to his wife, or repeats the word *talaq* thrice — as also what is known in traditional Muslim law as a "single irrevocable divorce" in which the husband declares he cannot revoke the *talaq* he is pronouncing. These are the forms of divorce which textbooks on Muslim law describe as practices "bad in theology but good in law" — a funny proposition, indeed. A constitutionally sound country is not bound by law even when what is "good in theology" — of course, theology of any community. It is naive to expect it to legally enforce what is admittedly "bad in theology" in a particular community's theology.

The Act declares the so-called *talaq-e-bidat* to be "void and illegal" and also makes it an offence punishable with imprisonment for a

term up to three years and fine. The offence is to be cognisable but compoundable. A person arrested for the offence can be released on bail by the court after hearing the wife and being satisfied that there are reasonable grounds for granting bail. The Act also enables the court to order maintenance allowance for the wife and children dependent on her, as also for placing minor children in her custody.

The impression that the Act has repealed the Muslim law on divorce by husbands in its entirety is not correct. Its provisions are restricted in their effect to *talaq-e-bidat*, the two forms of which have been mentioned above. The proper way of divorce by men as prescribed by the Quran and other authentic sources of Muslim law remains unaffected by the Act. Nor does the Act in any sense the provisions of Muslim law on divorce at the instance of women or by the spouses' mutual consent.

Whether a man has pronounced a *talaq* as per authentic Muslim law or in violation of its precepts will be a matter to be proved by evidence. In the former case, the Act will not apply. In the latter case it will, and should, apply with all its vigour.

The writer is former chairman of National Minorities Commission and member, Law Commission of India

## AUGUST 27, 1980, FORTY YEARS AGO

**UP STILL DISTURBED**  
THE RETURN to normalcy of the riot-hit towns of Uttar Pradesh was disturbed following two stabbing incidents in Allahabad during the relaxation of the curfew. The district authorities immediately sent an SOS to Lucknow for police reinforcements and the curfew was withdrawn. There were two violent incidents in Moradabad during the period of curfew relaxation for Raksha Bandhan calling for instant action by the police.

**BUT AMITY OVER RAKHI**  
IN A UNIQUE show of communal harmony and fraternity, Hindus and Muslims celebrated "raksha bandhan" in Muzaffarnagar

by accepting and offering "rakhis". Several religious leaders in the district who were attended by members of both communities.

**WOOLING INDUSTRY**  
PRIME MINISTER INDIRA Gandhi told industrialists to do everything to step up production. She also asked them to make use of various incentives and concessions offered by the government. "The ball is in your court," she told industrialists. The meeting that lasted two hours was attended by the heads of major organisations like FICCI, the Association of Chambers of Commerce, and federations of export organisations. It was the second such meeting organised by the gov-

ernment. The PM said that there would be no stigma and no control for rakhi's sake.

**US HOSTAGE CRISIS**  
MILITANTS HOLDING AMERICAN hostages in Iran threatened to kill their captives if there is the slightest military move against Iran. The militants also said that they were on a full alert to foil any rescue attempt. Meanwhile, Iran's moderate National Guidance (Information) Minister Nasser Minachi has offered his resignation to President Abol-Hasan Bani Sadr. Minachi had come under criticism and was jailed last year, when the militant students occupying the US embassy in Iran had alleged that he was CIA links.





## 9 THE IDEAS PAGE

To the extent that Congress letter-writers were motivated by personal interest, they may have lost. To the extent that they sought a hearing in the party interest, they have prevailed



But what of the substance of the G-23 missive? The consensus only authorises the CP to "effect necessary organisational changes as she may deem appropriate", but briefings given on record by signatories and non-signatories point to a committee being appointed by the CP to consider such changes as have been proposed for her to "deem" what she regards as "appropriate". This is par for the Congress course, a victory for both sides — a kind of demonstration of Solomon's wisdom. The Congress has a rich tradition of intra-party differences that have



has restricted himself to questioning the propriety of red-flagging these issues and bringing them into public focus when the interim president had to be hospitalised. G-23, for their part, have clarified that they had deliberately held back the letter for 10 days because she was in hospital but are still to explain why they could not wait till she had recuperated more fully. But that is not an earth-shattering matter. The letter was confidential. The authors hoped it would be privately discussed. And beyond their intentions or expectations, they have been given

It would appear that the discussion was free and frank and marked by sharp jabs and acerbic repartee. No speaker, it would appear, was guillotined. It became clear early on that most of the G-23 approach, rightly or wrongly, was not acceptable to the majority of the CWC and was misconstrued, or deliberately construed, as a palace revolt. It was also clear that the G-23 were content at the end to go along with the general consensus. The hopes of the media that they could feast on continuing dissidence in the party and its disintegration into rival factions were, unfortunately for the media, rather

What needs to be stressed is that their proposals have been defeated but they live to fight another day. The proposals are so intrinsically sensible that they are bound to find at least partial acceptance. They did not seek Sonia Gandhi's order. They did not seek Rahul Gandhi's termination. They only sought what is more or less blindingly self-evident to every Congressman and woman. To the extent that they were motivated by personal interest (who isn't?), they may have lost. To the extent that they sought a hearing in the party interest, they have prevailed. What could be a fairer outcome?

*The writer is a Congress leader and former*

## —GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA

For employers and job aspirants, National Recruitment Agency and Common Eligibility Test promise convenience and transparency



Examination centres in every district would greatly enhance access to the candidates located in far-flung areas. There will be a special focus on creating examination infrastructure in the 117 Aspirational Districts, which will go a long way in affording access to candidates at a place near where they reside. This will prove a great boon to crores of

Initially, the CET scores would be used by the three major recruitment agencies. However, over time, it is expected that other recruitment agencies of the central government will adopt it as well. Further, other agencies in the public as well as private domain will be able to adopt the CET if they so choose. In the long run, the CET score could be shared with other recruiting agencies in the central government, state governments/Union Territories, public sector undertakings and the private sector in a true spirit of cooperative federalism.

The is the Minister of State, Prime Minister's Office, Personnel, Public Grievances and Pensions; Department of Atomic Energy and Department of Space and Mos (Independent Charge) for the Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region

## Service sector, driver of India's growth, has been left out of Centre's relief package



India is fast becoming a major quality service provider. Even before the COVID pandemic set in and just before the nationwide lockdown was announced at the end of March, the sector was booming. The widely-tracked Nikkei India PMI Index stood at 57.5 in February, up from 55.5 in January. However, IHS Markit India Services

As the post-pandemic world is taking shape, the sector is struggling hard to keep its head above water.

only use tourism, aviation, shipping, space to call centres and delivery services, the standstill in activities is bound to have a knock-out effect on employment, production and the economy as a whole. The big picture suggests that the current relief provisions for the primary and secondary sectors would also be nullified as a consequence of neglecting the tertiary sector. An immunity-building exercise through capital infusion and appropriate relaxation in relevant sectors will help the economy to survive the pandemic. Most of the services sectors are still in the dark, and, therefore, we don't see any specific fiscal and monetary stimulus for them. In fact, some sectors would find it difficult to survive if the pan-

The writers are Director (Research and Policy), Services Export Promotion Council (SEPC) and Intern at SEPC, New Delhi respectively. Views are personal.

## ALL POLITICS

**Fatima Ghazali, Patna**

TEACHING, ADAPTING

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Teacher's day & night' (IE, August 26). With the seismic shift in the education sector brought about in the wake of the pandemic, the creative initiatives are mentioned in the editorial are welcome. These are yet more small steps towards adapting to life in the times of the pandemic. Academic plans and modes of

IDEAS  
ONLINE

● HIGH RISES DON'T HAVE  
REJEET MATHEWS AND  
MADHAV PAI

● **ATMANIRBHARA**  
WITH QUALITY:  
P NARAHARI

[www.indianexpress.com](http://www.indianexpress.com)

teaching need to be more flexible.

## POPULARITY ILLUSION

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'The TINA delusion' (IE, August 26). According to the writer, attribution of PM Narendra Modi's success to "TINA" is a delusion. Similarly, his owing Modi's success to the latter's striking a chord with people is also an illusion. The BJP got a massive mandate in the 2014 and 2019 general elections by dividing society along caste and religion lines, not treating it as a whole. For the BJP, ends justify means. Success achieved through such dubious means always remains questionable.

**Tarsem Singh, Mahilpur**



OUR VIEW



## The urgency that major reforms have acquired

The annual report of RBI offered a realistic picture of the grave crisis our economy is in. It also laid out a reform agenda to jump-start growth that should have been somewhat bolder

Rarely has an annual report received such attention. This one, though, was of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) for the year that ended on 30 June 2020, covering a bit over three months of the covid pandemic. Released on Tuesday, it laid bare the crisis that India's economy is now in, and nudged the government to adopt structural reforms as a way for it to regain its growth momentum. In RBI's analysis, the mild revival of commercial activity seen in May and June may have dissipated under the re-imposition of localized lockdowns aimed at checking the pandemic's advance. With investment anemic and private consumption hit hard, as evident in RBI's assessment of aggregate demand, our economic contraction could extend into the second quarter of 2020-21, observed the report, making it clear that a recovery could be slow and painful. This is sobering indeed for an economy short of the \$3 trillion mark that had hoped to reach \$5 trillion by 2024-25. Even if this target is pushed forward by a couple of years, to account for the sharp setback caused by covid-19, achieving it would now require the Centre to rely less on private impulses and take up the role of India's principal investor and demand generator.

To be sure, the government does not have adequate fiscal firepower left to jump-start the economy, stretched as its finances are by past expenditure commitments and the current imperative to mitigate the pandemic's impact. And RBI says as much in its report: "In the case of state finances, space is likely to be squeezed so much that cuts in growth-giving capital expenditure seem quite probable." India's gross domestic product (GDP) is expected to

contract by up to 25% in the first quarter, and if this slide continues into July-September as well, as RBI expects, then the consensus estimate of a 5% full-year shrinkage could worsen, further constraining the Centre's ability to stimulate growth. Its fiscal deficit is likely to balloon to 7.5% of GDP, while tax collections remain tepid. Soaring national debt and weakening revenues have led to a hardening of government bond yields, which threatens the central bank's efforts to ease credit.

A closer reading of the report suggests that we cannot hope to attain a high-growth plane, even after getting past the corona menace, without major moves. RBI's recommendations range from a simplification of our goods and services tax (GST) to asset monetization in the sectors of steel, coal, power and railways, among others, with appropriate oversight bodies in some. "In fact," said the report, "GST Council-type apex authorities can be the way forward to revive and crowd-in private investment." RBI also called for a speedier execution of infrastructure projects, and advocated a string of structural reforms in factor and product markets, with a special focus on the financial sector. Once the shock of the pandemic is over, it would expect the Centre to lay out a credible plan for fiscal consolidation, a way to insure the economy against overall instability. All of these are worthy, if unexceptional, proposals, and the sooner the government works out the details, the better. On the urgency of another round of fiscal stimulus, however, RBI could well have been bolder. It should have, for example, offered to lend the Centre a vast sum on the basis of public-sector-unit shares, which could be pledged to it. It's an idea that deserves a top-level look in.

MY VIEW | OTHER SPHERE

## How perfect heroes can emerge from imperfect human beings

Karna was a hero for his commitments but a perfect one because he knew he was an imperfect man



ANURAG BEHAR  
is CEO of Azim Premji Foundation and also leads sustainability initiatives for Wipro Ltd.

After reading my tribute to John Lewis and Rachel Carson, my brother asked me, "What triggered you to read so much at that age?" He is three years younger than me, so he knows my childhood even more closely than my mother, having shared all of it. That we lived in a house full of books, our conversations with parents suffused by them, is an insufficient answer to that question—when he asks it. Because at the end of our childhoods, as we left Bhopal, his circle of friends seemed to include every human being in that beautiful city, and a few books. While mine seemed to comprise all the books in the city, and a few human beings. So, what he was asking was, "Can you explain this inexplicable difference?" I cannot. All I can say is that over the past 35 years, our circles of friends have become more alike. Even as my realization has grown of how much those years of frantic reading have shaped me and my commitments. Not because of the little that I understood or absorbed from what I read. But because whatever I absorbed mediated my life experience. Lewis, Rachel, King and Gandhi were all living in my head. Dharmasana and Selma were holy places. It was a long list of happy-hazard reads from much that I read. All alive for me. So, when a friend laughed after reading the same tribute, "Come on, how silly, you didn't even try to meet Lewis because you thought you would

start crying?" I knew I would have. Meeting such a one as that, in flesh and blood, would have been too much.

But a shrine to one of them is a different matter. Those are flames I get drawn to. Every time I am in Dun, I want to steal an evening to go to Kalsi. Devanampiya speaks directly across 2,500 thousand years through the edict on that massive rock. So, it was wistfully that I left Most a few years ago, not having been able to visit Karna's temple up the Tons valley. A pilgrimage remained unfulfilled. He had been in my pantheon since I read Shivaji Saawan's stirring *Mrityungee*, probably in 1980.

Abandonment and injustice from his divine and royal family at birth. Growing up nurtured by the love of ordinary folk. Mastering on his own all that was to master. Valour that was unmatched. Generosity that made his name the touchstone for generosity across millennia. And yet the butt of innuendo, derision and insult, only because of the ordinariness of his foster family—the very family that saved him and made him. Finding a friend in the prince emperor who saw in him a complete counter to his own mortal enemy. Anointed a king by the prince, but unable to escape the silent contempt of the times for his bonds with ordinariness. How can Karna not be in anyone's pantheon? He was amongst the very top in mine.

The torrent of injustices in his life swelled by three curses. Cursed by the almighty earth for feeding a hungry child milk. Cursed to die when he, the mighty warrior, would be most helpless—for the honesty of admitting to the accidental death of a cow at his hands. Cursed by his guru Parasurama, for his martial knowledge to slip away when he needed it most. Because of his unhesitating loyalty to ordinariness—a crime for which there was no redemption.

Sewan's literary technique of each chapter as a soliloquy by a key character, while remaining more or less true to the Critical Edition of the Mahabharata, inserts us into the internal torments of Karna. Most of all in the fever-

ish 20 pages of the disrobing of Draupadi. Every step of his life, despite every torment and conflict, swallowing all ridicule and insult, he is ever righteous. Why then, at that moment of epochal height, does he choose what is wrong, the only time he does so?

Pain and incomprehension haunted me over that failure of Karna. Even after reading and rereading, inspired and aflame by his final choice. That which must surely be one of the most incandescent moral actions in human literature and mythology, perhaps history.

Krishna holds his hands and reveals to him the mystery of his life. In a moment elevating him from ordinariness to divinity. And in the next, offering him the empire of all lands. If only he would side with his blood line in the war ahead. To the master of the universe, Karna refuses all three—divinity, the empire, and an end to the bane of his origin. Instead, he embraces ordinariness, and allegiance to those who stood by him against the age and its norms. He says, "What matters most in life are bonds of love, and not power over the world." Yugandhar himself is brought to tears, blessing and validating him, "Victory to Karna, Radha's son."

A few years later, glancing through a literal translation of the Critical Edition, I noticed the passage of the night before he takes over as commander of the Kaurava army. He confides in his friend Duryodhana, the perpetrator, that he is tortured by the wrong he did. Then I also discovered how that poignant encounter between Krishna and Karna ends. He confesses to being haunted by his actions and inaction on that fateful day. Apologizes and says that only his death would be sufficient atonement. And with that, I found my peace.

Karna was a hero because of the commitments he tried to live up to, but he was an imperfect man. We are all flawed and imperfect, what matters are not the tattoos of commitment on the skin, but the tattoos on the heart.

### 10 YEARS AGO



### JUST A THOUGHT

This is the time to move the Indian economy from Command and Control to Plug and Play. This is not the time for conservative approach, but it is time for bold decisions and bold investments.

NARENDRA MODI

GUEST VIEW

## Slum dwellers face the brunt of our pandemic situation

ANIRUDH KRISHNA & HARLAN DOWNS-TEPPER



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Slum residents are having a hard time dealing with the ongoing pandemic situation. When India's lockdown began, most of them in Bengaluru and Patna lost their sources of income. In May, Patna's slum residents were making only 20% of their pre-pandemic incomes. In June, Bengaluru's slum residents were forced to forgo nearly two-thirds of their former incomes.

Up to 85% in Patna and 60% in Bengaluru cut back on food and other essentials. Even four months later, in the first fortnight of August, 67% of slum residents in Patna, and 45% in Bengaluru, were yet to get their old jobs back or find new ones. Large numbers were still cutting back on food and other essentials.

Four successive months of foregone incomes have put most slum dwellers in dire livelihood situations. Residents from every slum neighbourhood we interviewed in both cities liquidated assets at least once during this period to make ends meet.

Some neighbourhoods received government assistance, especially subsidised rations, and occasionally cash assistance or free or subsidised gas cylinders, but this aid (and that from private sources, like cooked food) was mostly received in the early part of the pandemic, and more often in Bengaluru than in Patna. Even in the best of circumstances, however, stopgap relief is no substitute for sustainable livelihoods.

The longer lockdowns continue, the greater are the chances that millions of slum residents will become persistently poor. Testing, tracing and other assurance-producing mechanisms need to be stepped up so people can safely resume with their jobs.

These are some of the results of phone surveys undertaken in the second half of August in 20 slums each of Patna and Bengaluru. Slums represent the fastest-growing type of residence cluster in India. According to the national census, 65 million people live in slums. But definitional differences muddy these calculations. UN-Habitat estimates that close to 110 million, more than half the population of some cities, live in slums.

Our group of researchers has been studying these and other slums since 2011, using a toolkit that includes high-resolution satellite images, intensive ground-truthing, house-

hold and key informant interviews, oral histories and official records. We study a wide variety of settlements to tide over definitional disputes, ranging from three-floor concrete structures to those that have the flimsiest homes—blue tarpaulins or grass thatched stretched over four poles—with progressively sturdier homes in between. Average education levels, asset holdings, and occupations vary widely across types of slums.

Volatility, however, is a shared characteristic. Nearly all slum residents, even those in concrete structures, have informal jobs (no written contract, no specified tenure, no health care or old-age benefits), most live in informal homes (with no clear title). Because their lives are risky, slum residents fall into poverty frequently. Sons follow fathers into similar occupations. Few people move upward in slums. Rising middle-class incomes in cities have led to swelling demand for security guards, maids, drivers, repairmen, delivery boys, etc., and slums have grown rapidly.

**Belt-tightening with pervasive uncertainty over livelihoods could result in wide-ranging desperation**

With the help of a research grant from the International Growth Centre, we are conducting six rounds of phone interviews between late-July and mid-October to examine how these precarious situations are being affected by the pandemic situation. In each round, we interview three key informants in

each of 40 slums, an equal number in each city, selected to represent the range of slums. Nearly all these individuals have lived their entire lives in the same slum, illustrating another general truth: all but the flimsiest slums are home not to recent migrants, but to a settled population that has been in place for generations.

In comparison to livelihood situations, which are dire, covid-19-related deaths and infections have been contained successfully in slums of both cities, though the future risk cannot be ruled out. Just one covid-related death or illness was reported in all 20 Patna slums for the fortnight ending 7 August. Slums in Bengaluru reported many more cases during this fortnight than those

in Patna, but these cases tended to be concentrated in particular locations. City-wide averages can be misleading: four of our 20 slums in Bengaluru account for more than 70% of all reported covid-related sicknesses in this fortnight. Just one slum accounts for two-thirds of all deaths in this period.

There is no shortage of essential commodities in either city. Slum residents in Patna do not report significant price increases. In Bengaluru, though, these are reported, most commonly in respect of milk, medicines, cooking oil and sugar.

Reassuringly, crime has fallen sharply even as the livelihood situation has worsened. Uniformly, slum residents in both cities report that crime and insecurity are "much less than before" or "non-existent". The tranquil situation sits atop an explosive mixture. Continued belt-tightening, with pervasive uncertainty and no clear plan for wider job recovery, can result, as it did earlier with rural migrants, in wide-ranging alienation. Migrants have a safety valve, however. They can return to their village homes. A slum resident has no alternative. The only home she knows is in the city.

Emily Rains, Sujat Kumar, Mansoor Muhammad and Selva Raju contribute to this article, the first of a three-part series



## | GUEST VIEW

# We need policy action to fix our problem of the 'missing middle'

*It will take reforms to catalyse the emergence and growth of mid-sized firms that have a vital role to play in India's economy*



**GAUTAM KUMRA & ANU MADGAVKAR** are, respectively, the managing partner of McKinsey & Company in India and a partner of McKinsey Global Institute

Outperforming emerging economies have one thing in common: a vibrant set of large companies, defined as those with revenues exceeding \$500 million, that have expanded faster in scale and scope than those in slower-growth emerging economies. Such companies contribute to economic dynamism in many ways. They tend to be active exporters, play an important role in boosting wages, and spark innovation.

This is also true of India, where about 600 large firms have been significant drivers of growth and innovation. They are more than twice as productive as mid-sized firms and 11 times more productive than the average firm in the economy. They account for almost 40% of total exports, and employ 20% of the direct formal workforce. The problem is, there aren't enough of them. India has fewer large firms relative to the size of its economy than many of its Asian peers. Their revenue, at 48% of nominal gross domestic product (GDP) in 2018, has scope to grow. In China, Malaysia and Thailand, the ratio of large firm revenue to GDP is about 1.5 times larger; in South Korea, it is 3.5 times larger. This pattern holds across sectors. For example, this ratio for retailers in peer economies is up to 13 times larger than in India, while for construction firms, the gap is 7 to 12 times.

Tripling the number of large firms and enabling thousands of mid-size and small firms to climb the ladder of scale would go a long way towards turbocharging the country's competitive dynamism, boosting growth, productivity, and job creation. This is vital, given the imperative for India to get back onto a high-growth track to create at least 90 million non-farm jobs by 2030, and meet the aspirations of its growing workforce.

We estimate that India needs to enable 1,000 or more small or mid-sized firms to scale up to large firms, and 10,000 or more small firms to scale up to mid-sized firms. For this, we need to fix India's "missing middle" of competitive mid-sized firms (with revenues between \$40 million and \$500 million) that can scale up to join the ranks of large firms. India has only about half as many mid-sized firms per trillion dollars of GDP as peer economies. The number of mid-sized and small firms and their upward mobility matters because it influences the degree of competitive pressure that large firms feel. The higher this pressure, the greater the share of efficient and high-performing firms at the top.

Why this missing middle? One factor is the lack of adequate access to low-cost capital. This acts as an impediment to growth. A second factor is India's relatively high cost of doing business and its complicated compliance ecosystem. Small and mid-sized firms face greater problems from these systemic issues, as they have fewer organizational



RAMESH PATIL/ANALYST

resources to manage lengthy and expensive procedures and litigation responsibilities. For example, enforcing a contract takes up to 1,450 days in India, more than triple the time than in China and South Korea. Moreover, small firms find it challenging to acquire real estate for expansion, obtain construction permits, and pay taxes, all of which take longer in India than in peer countries.

The growth of mid-sized and small firms will require capital—about \$800 billion in 2030, or six times the amount currently used, by our estimates. Achieving this requires reforms to deepen capital markets and enable efficient financial intermediation, allowing savings to reach these companies. It will also mean taking steps to lower the barriers to and the cost of doing business. We have outlined a detailed reform agenda in a new McKinsey Global Institute report, *India's Turning Point*. If the proposed reforms are successful, the number of large firms in India could rise from 600 to more than 1,800 and their revenue could grow from 48 to 70% of nominal GDP.

Central and state governments will be integral to implementing these reforms, of course, but

business leaders will need to play their part too. India's large firms have not achieved their productivity potential in recent years. Since 2012, their profitability, as measured by return on assets, has also been falling. This needs to change.

We see three main priorities for India's firms, both firms that are currently large and aspirants who aim to enter this cohort. First, they need to raise aspirations and commit themselves to a set of business opportunities at the frontier of productivity. Second, they need to develop a long-term value-creation mindset, coupled with a strong performance-oriented culture. And finally, they need to develop a set of winning capabilities. These include customer-centric innovation, operational excellence, digitization and automation that boost efficiency, the skills needed to execute mergers, acquisitions and partnerships to scale up, and the ability to build a strong trust-based brand to attract capital, customers and employees.

India's entrepreneurs are one of the country's strongest natural endowments. Now is the time to unleash their creativity and nimbleness. The future of the economy depends on their success.

## | MY VIEW | BEHAVIOUR BY BRAIN

# Who will guide our future: Machines or human minds?

BIJU DOMINIC



is the chief executive officer of Final Mile Consulting, a behaviour architecture firm.

OpenAI's new software, called GPT-3, is by far the most powerful "language model" ever created. With small prompts, it can draft letters eerily close to what a human would produce. It can respond to emails. It can translate texts into many languages.

This language model is an AI system that has been trained on large corpus of text. In this case, "large" is something of an understatement. Reportedly, the entirety of the English Wikipedia, spanning some 6 million articles, makes up just 0.03% of GPT-3's training data. There is a point of view that GPT-3 is an important step toward artificial general intelligence, the kind that would allow a machine to reason broadly in a manner similar to humans without having to train for every specific task it encounters.

But, a few days ago, an article by Gary Marcus and Ernest Davis in *MIT Technology Review*, "GPT-3: Breviary", OpenAI's language generator has no idea what it's talking about... poured cold water on the hype

around GPT-3's launch. According to the authors, it can be used to produce entertaining, surrealistic fiction; other commercial applications may emerge as well. But accuracy is not its strong point. Although its output is grammatical and even impressively idiomatic, its comprehension of the real world is often seriously off.

To understand why this could have happened, it helps to think about what systems like GPT-3 do. They don't learn about the world, they learn about text and how people use words in relation to other words. With enough text and processing capacity, the software learns probabilistic connections between words. What it does is akin to an elaborate cut-and-paste act that uses variations on text it has seen, rather than understanding the real meaning of that material.

A software that writes without understanding what it's writing raises the prospect of frightening misuse. The creators of GPT-3 themselves have cited a litany of dangers, including "misinformation, spam, phishing, abuse of legal and governmental processes, fraudulent academic essay writing and social engineering 'pretexting'". Because it was trained on text found online, it's likely that GPT-3 mirrors many biases found in society. This is not the first time that an emergent

technology has seemed to pose an existential threat. It was feared that nuclear energy would contaminate the world, DNA engineering was expected to unleash biological warfare. These prophecies of doom did not materialize. It is important to take care of the possible negative consequences of a new technology.

But that should not put shackles on its progress. The creators of GPT-3 are already taking steps in the right direction. They prohibit GPT-3 from impersonating humans; that is, all text produced by it must disclose that it was written by a bot. OpenAI has also invited external researchers to study the system's biases, in the hope of mitigating them. Will all this mitigate human fears of this new technology?

One of the best perspectives on this conflict between brain and machine comes from an article in *Aeon*, "At the limits of thought", by David Krakauer, president and William H Miller Professor of Complex Systems at the Santa Fe Institute in New Mexico. Francis Bacon was one of the first to propose that

human perception and reason could be augmented by tools. Isaac Newton adopted Bacon's empirical philosophy and spent a career developing tools: physical lenses and telescopes, as well as mental aids and mathematical descriptions, all of which accelerated scientific discovery. A growing dependence on instruments led to

disconcerting divergence: between what the human mind could discern of the world's underlying mechanisms, and what various tools were capable of measuring and modelling.

Early tools like rulers and compasses helped humans do what once took a lot of effort with greater ease and precision. As tools became more advanced, they started doing things humans could never do. A

telescope could see far farther than what a human eye could. But the telescope still functioned like an enhanced human eye. Then came a stage where tools were performing functions very differently from humans would. With the radio telescope, machines were seeing things rather different

from how the human eye sees things.

In this age of "big data", the divergence between what the human senses can do and what new tools can do has become even more startling. These new sophisticated tools are capable of analysing "high-dimensional" data-sets, and the predictions they provide often defy the best human ability to interpret them. It has become nearly impossible for humans to reconstruct how these tools function. This has not been music to the ears of the stubbornly anthropocentric who insist that our tools yield to our intelligence. This attitude could impede the advancement of science.

Much like the compass and the telescope, GPT-3 is yet another tool that humans have at their disposal. Without tools, humans would still be spending a lot of time trying to draw perfect circles and straight lines. Tools have helped us focus our attention beyond the mundane. Similarly, GPT-3 too could help us get out of many mundane tasks of writing that we have been involved in for centuries. It could help focus human attention and intelligence on more advanced things, such as seeing galaxies that lie beyond our line of sight. No doubt, GPT-3 will also make the few personal handwritten notes you write even more precious.

## MINT CURATOR



Carpenter bees get their name from the wood they use for nests.

ISTOCKPHOTO

## Buzz over a violet beeline being made for Britain

If you see a violet carpenter bee, *Xylocopa violacea*, in Britain, it seems too exotic for our shores, and too big. It is up to 3cm long, the size of our largest bumblebee, and it looks even larger when flying with an impressive buzz. Climate change has brought this southern European species to our shores. It was first spotted breeding here in 2007 in Leicestershire, but it is still extremely rare, almost certainly because of lack of suitable breeding sites rather than the climate. The bees need rotting wood, soft enough to create nesting holes, hence the name carpenter bees. They have been accused of destroying wooden buildings but they only start colonising when the wood is already rotten so the structure was in danger before they arrived. What they are looking for now is old nest holes in decaying timber to hibernate...

The Guardian

## Save birds by painting your turbine blades black

Painting one blade of a wind turbine black could cut bird strikes at wind farms by up to 70%, a study suggests. Birds colliding with the structures has long been considered to be one of the main negative impacts of onshore wind farms, the authors observed. The RSPB welcomed the research but said the priority remained avoiding placing wind farms where there was a risk to wildlife, such as birds. The findings have been published in the *Ecology and Evolution* journal. "Collision of birds, especially raptors, is one of the main environmental concerns related to wind energy development," observed co-author Rod May. "In Norway, 6-9 white-tailed eagles are killed annually within the Smøla wind-power plant; This has caused opposition and conflict." The Smøla wind farm is on the west coast of Norway...

BBC

## Welcome to the cryptic world of crypto lending

It sounds like a surefire bet. You lend money to a borrower who puts up collateral that exceeds the size of the loan, and then you earn interest of about 20%. What could possibly go wrong? That's the proposition presented by "DeFi", or decentralised finance, peer-to-peer cryptocurrency platforms that allow lenders and borrowers to transact without the traditional gatekeepers of loans: banks. And it has exploded during the COVID-19 crisis. Loans on such platforms have risen more than seven-fold since March to \$3.7 billion, according to industry site DeFi Pulse, as investors hunt returns at a time when central banks across the world have slashed interest rates to prop up economies battered by the pandemic... Lawyers and analysts say such sites are vulnerable to coding bugs and hacks, and most are untested.

Reuters

## An AI scan of Nasa data gives us 50 new planets

British researchers have identified 50 new planets using artificial intelligence, marking a technological breakthrough in astronomy. Astronomers and computer scientists from the University of Warwick built a machine learning algorithm to dig through old NASA data containing thousands of potential planet candidates. It's not always clear, however, which of these candidates are genuine. When scientists search for exoplanets (planets outside our solar system), they look for dips in light that indicate a planet passing between the telescope and their star. But these dips could also be caused by other factors, like background interference or even errors in the camera. But the new AI can tell the difference. The research team trained the algorithm by having it go through data collected by NASA...

CNN

## World's first jump from a solar-powered plane

A Swiss team working to take a solar-powered plane to the edge of space says it has performed the first jump and free fall from an electric aircraft. The Solar Stratos team said its experimental plane took off from an airfield in Switzerland and with two people on board early Tuesday and climbed to 5,000 feet (1,520 meters) before its founder, Raphael Dönnig, jumped out of the aircraft. It said Dönnig remained in free fall for several hundred meters, reaching speeds of over 150 kph (93 mph) before releasing his parachute... The team quoted Dönnig saying the stunt was part of the goal of demonstrating that activities such as skydiving can be carried out without producing planet-warming greenhouse gases. Even commercial jet-fueled planes currently account for about 2% of the man-made carbon emissions.

AP







Important editorials from Read to Succeed 28<sup>th</sup> August