

Nygaard Notes

Independent Periodic News and Analysis

Number 665

February 2, 2021

Beyond Biden

As the endless 2020 presidential campaign droned on and on, I began to encourage people to vote for Joe Biden for tactical reasons. That is, to vote Trump out of office rather than to vote Biden in. I was even heard to say “Vote against Trump, then organize against Biden.” This upset some people, as the contrast between Trump and Biden is so stark that it’s hard not to LIKE Biden. After all, he’s not Trump! Why, then, would I encourage people to organize *against* him?

The reason was neatly summarized by the headline of an editorial in the British newspaper The Financial Times: “Bidenomics Can Preserve Support for Capitalism; No Radical, the Democrat Wants to Save Markets by Softening Them.”

After noting that “Bidenomics” includes plans to raise taxes on corporations and the wealthy to finance public programs, the Financial Times story, published this past October (before Biden won the election) encourages its upper-crust readers to think strategically. Here’s how they put it:

“Those in Mr Biden’s fiscal crosshairs would be forgiven for reaching nervously for their wallets. But they should also take the long view. Since John Maynard Keynes, the best case for state intervention has not been to abolish the market, but to preserve public support for it. An unchecked capitalism would not survive the electorate’s judgment. Sure enough, there have been times since the 2008 crash when popular resentment of inequality, especially among the young, has threatened to spill over into demands for total systemic change. If implemented, Bidenomics would make life more burdensome for business and for high-earners. But it might also avert a larger reckoning further down the line.”

When I read that paragraph, it put me in mind of a paragraph that I published back in January of 2003, in Nygaard Notes #190. It was the opening paragraph of an essay entitled “Wealth and Power,” and it touched on the social change dynamic that evokes fear in the hearts of capitalists and hope in the hearts of the rest of us. I said:

“Wealthy and powerful people would normally support policies that increase both their wealth and their power. However, if forced to choose, the intelligent elite will give up some wealth if that’s necessary in order to retain power. Why? Because every elite knows that, if you have power, you can always get wealth. But if you don’t have power, then your wealth could be taken from you. That’s why true majority rule in an unequal society is always a threat to those at the top.”

Perhaps the true genius of Trump was his ability to convince large numbers of the lower castes to identify with the tiny minority of those at the top, rather than acting in solidarity with the non-elite majority. After four years of Trump, what we’re left with is an economy where everyone believes that they could win the lottery and is willing to fight for the right to buy tickets.

The Biden Vision

On the domestic front, the hope of liberal Democrats, led by Joe Biden, is that higher taxes will be used to finance a stronger safety net that will take the edge off of the growing resistance to the cruelty of a capitalist, everyone-for-themselves economic system.

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Greetings,

Joe Biden. British Petroleum. Caribou. The Sale that Failed. Systems. Movements. Social change. The Gwich'in People. It's all here. Hope you enjoy it.

Happy Groundhog Day!

Nygaard

Biden *from page 1*

Internationally, the vision of an economy organized by and for the wealthy, and led by the wealthiest country of all, is what motivates the liberal internationalists of the Biden administration as they strive to – pardon the expression – make America great again on the global stage. They think it is America's destiny to occupy the seat at the head of the table.

In a November 23rd statement, President-elect Joe Biden stated, “I need a team ready on day one to help me reclaim America's seat at the head of the table, rally the world to meet the biggest challenges we face, and advance our security, prosperity, and values.”

A couple of days later Biden told NBC News that “We're at the head of the table once again. America is going to reassert its role in the world and be a coalition builder.”

Yet here is Biden's Secretary of State, Tony Blinken, writing in 2017 in the New York Times: “The world does not organize itself. In the absence of an engaged, diplomatically energized America, others will set the agenda, shape the rules and dominate international institutions — and probably not in ways that advance our interests or values.”

What are “our interests”? What are “our values”? And if, as the above statement implies, the goal of U.S. diplomacy is to advance “our interests,” then how is this different from the “America First” policies of the 45th President? One has to wonder: Is this the best that the two-party system in the USA can offer?

Here at home the Republican party promotes a laissez-faire system of One Dollar, One Vote, in which an anti-democratic Market shapes an ever-less-democratic U.S. society in its own image. Meanwhile the Democratic party—despite the hysterical fears of the Trump loyalists that they are socialist or “communist”—dares suggest little more than that we maybe could raise taxes on the rich a bit so as to subsidize a pathetically-inadequate “safety net” for the victims of a Market careening out of control.

On the international level, the two parties offer a similarly hollow choice. On the one hand, the Trumpublicans vision of America First has left the U.S. isolated and impotent. On the other, the Democrats see the U.S. as a revived Superpower leading the way to a New World Order just like the old one, with the US “at the head of the table.” An alternative vision—which sees the U.S. as just one voice among many striving for sustainable development and a durable peace in a cooperative multipolar world—may be where the world is headed, but within our borders it's a non-starter. In fact, it's virtually unthinkable.

There's nothing wrong with taking a few days, or weeks, to celebrate the people's victory that removed the malignant ideology of Trumpism from the White House. But then it really is time to organize against Biden, not because he's a bad person, but because a social change vision goes far beyond what is being offered by the Biden wing of the party.

We see the inability of the U.S. economy to provide meaningful employment to workers eager to shape a better future. We see the worldwide capitalist Empire crumbling as climate disruption presents a threat unlike any seen before. The global pandemic is making visible the competition that is built into our system, the competition that produces so few winners and so many losers.

The victory we won on November 3rd was not that the election gave us Joe Biden. The victory is that it made the vision of a post-capitalist United States just a little easier to see. That's a big victory. Let's make it mean something. ♦

Drilling for Oil in the Arctic

The sun is slowly setting on the era of fossil fuels. Probably not fast enough, but it is setting. In this essay and the next I tell a little story that connects the dots taken from a number of recent news items. I think it's very hopeful, but it's a bit confusing, so stick with me for a minute as I try to trace the path that I've been following which leads me to be so hopeful.

There has been a fight going on for years about whether or not to open the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) to oil and gas drilling. Recent news about ANWR tells an interesting story, much of it occurring out of public view.

First some history. President Dwight Eisenhower in 1960 established the 8.9-million-acre Arctic National Wildlife Range for its "unique wildlife, wilderness, and recreational values." Typically, he doesn't seem to have mentioned that the indigenous Gwich'in people have been living there for thousands of years.

The Alaska Wilderness League tells us that "In 1980, President Jimmy Carter continued this legacy by expanding the area, designating much of the land as protected Wilderness and renaming it the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge." Again, no mention of the indigenous people living in the area.

If you look at that 1980 law, you'll see Section 1003, which includes this language: "Production of oil and gas from the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is prohibited and no leasing or other development leading to production of oil and gas from the range shall be undertaken until authorized by an Act of Congress."

An Act of Congress, you say? That turned out to be rather hard to come by. National Public Radio reported in 2005 on "a wrestling match in Congress over the fate of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge that has stretched more than three decades." Add another couple of decades and we get to December of 2017. That's when Congress passed the "Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017," popularly known as the Trump Tax Cut bill, which was mostly aimed at slashing taxes on the wealthy. In fact, it was "the largest one-time reduction in the corporate tax rate in U.S. history."

But, wait! I said the bill was "mostly" about cutting taxes. If you read this bill—kind of a chore since it comes in at 185 pages—you find at the very end (page 182) something called "Section 20001. OIL AND GAS PROGRAM." And then, on page 183, you find this: "Section 1003 of the [1980] Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (16 U.S.C. 3143) shall not apply to the Coastal Plain." Remember "Section 1003"? That's the law that prohibited oil and gas production in ANWR. And the Coastal Plain is a 1.5 million acre part of ANWR which, in a bitter compromise back in 1980, Congress chose not to designate as wilderness.

It's worth mentioning here that the Gwich'in people for decades have been demanding that the Coastal Plain be designated as "wilderness" in order to "recognize the rights of our Gwich'in people to continue to live our way of life by prohibiting development in the calving and post-calving grounds of the Porcupine caribou herd."

The next paragraph on page 183 of the Trump "tax cut" bill directs that "The Secretary [of the Interior] shall establish and administer a competitive oil and gas program for the leasing, development, production, and transportation of oil and gas in and from the Coastal Plain."

All of this excited Alaska's two Republican Senators and other political leaders who see Alaska's future as dependent on the sale of the state's immense natural resources. Then, on December 3rd of 2020 the media reported that "The Trump administration said [today] that it would sell oil and gas leases in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska in early January, further accelerating its last-ditch effort to allow drilling there."

And there was indeed a sale of oil and gas leases in the Coastal Plain in early January, and the results of that sale are what gives me hope, as I explain in the next essay. ♦

Goodbye Fossil Fuels

On Trump's last full day in office, January 19th, the U.S. Bureau of Land Management announced that it had issued leases covering nearly 685 square miles in Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR).

The next day, shortly after he was inaugurated, Joe Biden announced plans for a temporary moratorium on oil and gas leasing in the ANWR. Then, a week later, on January 27th, Biden signed an executive order that paused new leasing of oil and gas development on all federal lands. *Inside Climate News* commented that "It's hard to overstate the symbolic importance" of that order.

But what gives me hope in this decades-long saga is something that happened three weeks earlier, on January 6th. That's the day that the Trump-orchestrated sale of oil and gas leases in the Coastal Plain took place. January 6th, of course, was the day of the insurrection in the nation's Capitol and, since that was such big news it's likely that no one noticed this particular sale of oil and gas leases. But let me tell you about it.

"What We Already Know to Be True"

The Coastal Plain potentially sits atop billions of barrels of oil, according to federal estimates reported by National Public Radio, so officials expected the January 6th sale of the oil and gas leases to bring in \$1.8 billion over a decade, to be split between the Alaska and federal governments. It didn't come close. The website Backpacker.com summed it up: "The sale completely flopped, raising only \$14.4 million of the expected \$1.8 billion—0.8% of what it expected to garner—and leasing just 11 of the 22 tracts of land."

In a story filed that day (January 6th) NPR reported that "One of the Trump administration's biggest environmental rollbacks suffered a stunning setback Wednesday, as a decades-long push to drill for oil in Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge ended with a lease sale that attracted just three bidders — one of which was the state of Alaska itself. Alaska's state-owned economic development corporation was the only bidder on nine of the parcels offered for lease in the northernmost swath of the refuge, known as the coastal plain. Two small companies also each picked up a single parcel. Half of the offered leases drew no bids at all." NPR added that "oil analysts have for months been predicting little interest in the sale," due to "a global recession, low oil prices and an aggressive pressure campaign against leasing by drilling opponents."

Danielle Fugere is the president of a shareholder advocacy group called *As You Sow*. In a January 7th press release she said, "Yesterday's almost non-existent bidding for oil and gas leases in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge was not surprising. It confirms what we already know to be true: the era of drilling for oil at any cost is over. There is simply no realistic future scenario under which high-cost drilling in the Refuge will be viable. The world is awash in unneeded oil and gas reserves, the energy market is moving away from high-carbon fossil fuel energy, and the human and environmental costs of drilling in this highly sensitive area are too high."

"We'll Stop You"

NPR reported that "Despite the lack of industry interest, Alaska's Congressional delegation applauded the sale on [January 6th], and so did officials with the Bureau of Land Management, describing it as historic and a success."

No surprise there, but NPR couldn't help but notice that "Opponents had a different reaction" to the sale. And that includes Desirée Sorenson-Groves, director of the Arctic Refuge Defense Campaign, who remarked "I laughed out loud. It was a joke. A joke to the American people. I'll tell you, I have a message to those who bid today, there were only three. But here's the message: You will never ever drill in the Arctic Refuge. We'll stop you." ↗↗↗

→→ Another source quoted by NPR was Larry Persily, “a longtime observer of the oil and gas industry in Alaska,” who said “It was, in the oil industry terms, a dry hole. A bust. They had the lease sale, the administration can feel good about it, but no one's going to see any oil coming out of ANWR.”

The indigenous Gwich'in people have lived in and around the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge—which they call Iizhik Gwats'an Gwandaii Goodlit, or The Sacred Place Where Life Begins—from time immemorial. They still live there, and they still depend on the 150,000-strong herd of caribou that return each year “to feed, calve and nurture their young through the precarious first few weeks of life.” Oil and gas leasing threatens the delicate balance that sustains the largest caribou herd in North America, and thus the Gwich'in communities that depend on them.

“It Has Basically Nothing”

Recall that the most basic task of capitalism is to commodify everything it encounters. Recall, in other words, that nothing exists in the world of capitalism unless it can be bought and sold. Keep this in mind as you read the following paragraph, which concluded the NPR report:

“Roger Herrera, a retired British Petroleum executive and longtime lobbyist for an Alaska group that pushed Congress to open the refuge, said he was ‘hugely disappointed’ in the results of the sale. ‘Alaska is a natural resource state,’ he said in a phone interview. ‘You take away its natural resources and it has basically nothing.’”

(British Petroleum, by the way, ended up exploiting Alaskan oil back in the 1960s, after being kicked out of Iran in the 1950s, when it was the Anglo Iranian Oil Company. The nationalization of that company by the democratically-elected head of state, Mohammad Mossadegh, resulted in his overthrow in a CIA-orchestrated coup in 1953, which has everything to do with the hostility between Iran and the U.S. that continues until today. No time to go into that whole story...)

Writing on the MSNBC website on January 11th, climate journalist Emily Atkin characterized the January 6th sale as “Trump's failure to sell off one of America's last untouched swaths of wilderness to fossil fuel companies,” commenting that “It's one of the most significant failures of his administration's entire anti-climate agenda — and the first significant win of 2021 for the global climate movement.”

Atkins notes that “There is a lot of work still left to do. But the fact that the divestment movement was able to achieve so much during a global pandemic and a climate-hostile administration — while helping prevent one of the worst potential climate outcomes of Trump's presidency — is a powerful signal of its effectiveness.”

Atkins refers here to the global movement for fossil fuel divestment (sometimes also called disinvestment) which is asking individuals and institutions to move their money out of oil, coal and gas companies.

The failed sale of oil and gas leases in The Sacred Place Where Life Begins is a story of waking up, a story of turning away from an economy based on extraction and exploitation. It's a hopeful story of systems changing before our eyes.

Presidents get too much credit when things go well, and too much blame when things go poorly. The possibilities and limitations of our political leadership depend on the systems—the underlying social forces—that make a culture what it is. Why did the ANWR gas leases sale fail so spectacularly? To answer that we need to first address another question: What makes change happen, anyway? That's the subject to which we now turn. ◆

Thinking Systems, Seeing Movements

In the previous essay I quoted a National Public Radio story that attributed the failure of the ANWR oil and gas lease sale to “a global recession, low oil prices and an aggressive pressure campaign against leasing by drilling opponents.” But there’s much more to it than that! And therein lies a lesson.

News reporting tends to focus on the activities of powerful people and institutions. As a result, we hear about laws that are passed, executive orders that are announced, clashes between state and federal governments, and so forth. This reflects a bias, but I’m not talking about a “liberal bias,” or a “conservative bias,” as so many people do these days.

I’m talking about a cultural bias, an institutional bias, toward what I have called “Individualist Thinking.” Reporters who have been socialized in the Thought System of the United States find themselves drawn toward individualized reporting on specific policies, or on actions that have dates attached, things that one can point to and say “This happened on this day.” Thinking inside the box in this way leads them almost inevitably to limit their reporting to things like laws passed, executive orders issued, elections won or lost. The typical story in the daily news is about people trying to make things happen, and we are encouraged to support those whose intentions are to cause the changes that we’d like to see.

This kind of reporting is short-term, and is a result of conventional thought patterns that are based on a linear, “cause-and-effect” way of seeing the world. Actor “A” tries to do something, and if they succeed it causes Result “B”. Details at 10:00!

I call this Individualist Thinking, and I contrast it with Systems Thinking, which focuses neither on intentions nor causes, but rather on conditions and outcomes. Systems Thinking allows us—requires us—to back up and see the bigger picture. When we do so we can see that specific policy changes can only occur in certain environments. Systems thinkers know that “social” change (as opposed to policy change) is the result of innumerable factors and events that occur over time and come together in unpredictable ways.

It’s like climate disruption. The news cycle can’t help but focus on specific events: the latest hurricane, wildfire, flood, drought. Climate reporting—climate *thinking*—looks at the conditions, the various systems and actions and accumulated practices that give rise to those specific events.

The environment that produced “the first significant win of 2021 for the global climate movement” on January 6th included a combination of “market forces,” grassroots resistance, growing respect for indigenous sovereignty, communications technology, global climate disruption, and the gradual but unstoppable increase in participation by traditionally marginalized people in the U.S. political process.

This is how a movement works.

Market forces threaten voiceless people, and that threat causes them to start organizing, which makes their voices louder. Climate disruption scares white people so much that they start to tune out the dominant voices, which also allows other voices to be heard. Smart phones and the internet allow people to hear each other without waiting for corporations to bring them the news. Voting rights struggles and demographics team up to bring more marginalized people into the rooms where decisions are made. As more and more people get organized around more and more issues, “market forces” tell capitalists that it might cost too much to maintain a fossil fuel-based economy.

There is no single “cause” that brings cultural change, that brings social change. It’s a pipeline struggle here, and another one over there. It’s a demand that treaty rights be respected. It’s a call for reparations, for a truth and reconciliation process that deepens our understanding of how we got here and points us in a new direction for the future. It’s workers, it’s parents, it’s artists, it’s writers, it’s farmers, it’s teachers and students, young and old, all of us working to build a true multiracial democracy in which humans come to terms with our natural environment and learn – together – how to ↗↗↗

live on this earth without trying to dominate it.

Things are always changing, and each of us has a role to play in how that change unfolds. Systems thinking allows us to see how the little stories in the daily news cycle add up to be the big stories that can help us choose our path forward. Choose carefully. Work hard. Don't give up. We're all a part of something big. ♦

A Word from the Gwich'in

I'll end this issue of Nygaard Notes with some words from the Gwich'in people themselves, as found on the website of the Gwich'in Steering Committee.

The Gwich'in are the northernmost Indian Nation living in fifteen small villages scattered across a vast area extending from northeast Alaska in the U.S. to the northern Yukon and Northwest Territories in Canada.

The word "Gwich'in" means "people of the land," and it refers to a people who have lived in the region since before the U.S. and Canada existed. Today, the Gwich'in homelands span both countries. Oral tradition indicates the Gwich'in have occupied this area since time immemorial, or, according to conventional belief, as long as 20,000 years.

Speaking with One Voice

The Gwich'in Steering Committee was formed in 1988 in response to proposals to drill for oil in the Sacred Place Where Life Begins, the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

Our elders recognized that oil development in caribou calving grounds was a threat to the very heart of our people. They called upon the chiefs of all Gwich'in villages from Canada to Alaska to come together for a traditional gathering – the first in more than a century. At the gathering in Arctic Village we addressed the issue with a talking stick in accordance with our traditional way, and decided unanimously that we would speak with one voice against oil and gas development in the birthing and nursing grounds of the Porcupine Caribou Herd. Our unified voice is expressed in a formal resolution, Gwich'in Niintsyaa. [See the link on the page.]

Time and time again, the Gwich'in Steering Committee has presented testimony in front of the US Congress, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Indigenous Peoples, and public hearings. Without this testimony many would not know that this is a Human Rights issue to the Gwich'in.

Our achievements would not have been possible without the ongoing wisdom and guidance of our elders and our many friends and supporters.

Visit their website to read more, and to become one of their many friends and supporters.
<https://ourarcticrefuge.org/>

“Quote” of the Week: “*Aggressively Promoting the Lie*”

In a January 13th essay on the website of the indispensable Brennan Center for Justice, entitled “The Assault on Democracy Didn’t Start Last Week,” voting rights advocate Zachary Roth said this:

For about a decade and a half — since Donald Trump was a reality TV star who most of us could safely ignore — the GOP has been aggressively promoting the lie that drove the invasion of the Capitol, that illegal voting is rampant. For almost as long, Republican-controlled states have used this lie to justify voter suppression laws that disenfranchise many more legitimate than illegitimate voters, and usually target racial minorities. In fact, even now, GOP lawmakers are using Trump’s bogus voter fraud claims to prepare new restrictive measures, especially targeting mail voting, which skewed heavily Democratic. McConnell et al haven’t lifted a finger in response to this potential new wave of suppression (in fact, Graham advocated for it in order to, he has said, ensure that Republicans can continue to win elections.)

More than 106 bills are being considered in 28 states that would make it more difficult to vote in future elections. On the bright side, 406 bills to make it easier to vote are being considered in 35 states. At the end of January the Brennan Center published “Voting Laws Roundup 2021.” Read it to find out what’s happening in YOUR state.
www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/voting-laws-roundup-2021

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Minneapolis, MN 55406
E-mail: nygaard@nygaardnotes.org
Web: www.nygaardnotes.org