

Their View

The latest tragedy in Kabul

SEWELL CHAN

Los Angeles Times via TNS

The killing of at least 13 U.S. service members, mostly Marines, and dozens of civilians in a pair of suicide attacks outside the Kabul airport Thursday is an outrageous act of terrorism — in this case, at the hands of ISIS-K, an Islamic State affiliate that is active in Afghanistan and Pakistan. President Joe Biden was right to vow vengeance. “We will not forgive, we will not forget, we will hunt you down and we will make you pay,” he said at the White House.

The attacks are not, however, the work of the Taliban, which has retaken Afghanistan in mere weeks as the Western-backed government and security forces collapsed with scarcely a fight.

Nor are the attacks a sign of failure by the Biden administration, as a host of armchair critics, Washington commentators and Republican cynics have suggested.

We support Biden’s decision to withdraw U.S. forces from Afghanistan by Aug. 31, and his insistence on sticking to that deadline.

In the 11 days before the president addressed the nation Thursday afternoon, the U.S. military had evacuated 100,000 people from Kabul — 7,000 in the previous 12 hours alone.

These airlifts have been one of the most complex logistical undertakings in military history, reminiscent of the British evacuation at Dunkirk in 1940 and the Berlin airlift of 1948-49.

No one will soon forget the chaos that accompanied the fall of Kabul, including the heart-wrenching scenes of desperate Afghans holding onto the sides of military aircraft, some later falling from the sky (or dying inside the landing gear). Those moments captured the desperate measures Afghans were willing to take to escape the threat posed by the Taliban to an entire generation’s worth of progress — in education, women’s rights, literacy, health outcomes and personal freedoms.

Critics of the evacuations have made entirely disingenuous, self-serving or simply misleading arguments over the last two weeks. Here is our best attempt to address the major criticisms.

Why do we have to leave Afghanistan at all?

President Donald Trump, in direct negotiations with the Taliban that excluded the Afghan government, agreed in February 2020 to a complete withdrawal of U.S. forces by May 1, 2021. When Biden took office, he postponed the deadline to Sept. 11, 2021 (later moved up to Aug. 31). Biden, whose objections — while he was vice president — to further intervention in Afghanistan were overruled by President Barack Obama more than a decade earlier, has been steadfast and consistent in arguing that the Afghanistan war had achieved its main objective — eliminating the terrorist threat from al-Qaida — and promising that he would not hand off the problem to a fifth president. He has kept that promise.

Why not maintain an uneasy status quo indefinitely, keeping about 2,500 U.S. troops on the ground?

Aside from the fact that Trump had considered this option and rejected it, would the American people really want an indefinite troop presence in Afghanistan after spending more than \$1 trillion and losing about 2,400 military members? A majority of Americans want out of Afghanistan. One sign of a quagmire is when the missions and aims of the operation can no longer be articulated, much less achieved. The U.S. had long ago reached that point in Afghanistan. Whether the goal was counterinsurgency, nation-building or promotion of women’s rights — all legitimate goals — none would have been achieved by keeping thousands of troops in hostile territory in a “forever war” of the kind both Trump and Biden vowed to end.

But didn’t Biden bungle the planning and execution of the withdrawal?

The administration has acknowledged that the Afghan government collapsed far faster than intelligence analysts and most military and diplomatic experts had anticipated. Fair enough. But the truth is that the Afghan government had itself urged against a mass evacuation, fearing that the sight of thousands of Afghans leaving on planes would undermine the already shaky confidence in the government of President Ashraf Ghani and his Western-backed forces. Moreover, as Biden reiterated Thursday, no war ends with a completely smooth, bloodless withdrawal of all troops and allied civilians. “Getting every single person out can’t be guaranteed with anybody,” Biden said.

Will every American who wants to get out be able to?

Most likely. The government is “aggressively reaching out” to several hundred Americans known to still be in Afghanistan. Many of them are married to Afghans, or are Afghan Americans, and have reasons for wanting to stay — or, in some cases, have refused to leave unless their Afghan relatives and associates can also leave.

What about all the Afghans who worked with and supported the U.S. during the last 20 years?

Our view is that every one of them should be given support in leaving. That effort must not, and will not, end after Aug. 31. The U.S. has already pledged to get out every Afghan who has been granted a special immigrant visa. Because of unforgivable bureaucratic delays, not every deserving Afghan has been granted such a visa. But at this point, the Taliban is not allowing Afghans without paperwork to reach the Kabul airport. So staying at the airport beyond Tuesday would be futile. “Millions of Afghan citizens,” who don’t like the Taliban but also did not work for the United States, “would get on a plane tomorrow if they could,” Biden said Thursday. But the sad reality is that most will not make it out.

Isn’t this a god-awful tragedy?

Yes. Also an inevitable one.

U.S. SOLDIERS DIE



“U.S. SOLDIERS DIE” BY DICK WRIGHT/POLITICALCARTOONS.COM

Your View

Americans must work together for truth, democracy and health

Our country is in serious trouble. Our democratic republic is in danger of disintegrating. We are at a critical crossroads and must begin working together to heal the division tearing our nation apart. We must reunite to stand up for truth.

The main truth we need to stand up for is the legitimacy of the 2020 presidential election. Joe Biden won the election with 306 electoral votes and 7 million more popular votes than his opponent. Tragically, then-President Donald Trump began spreading his dangerous conspiracy theory that the election had been stolen, though there was no proof. His court cases were summarily dismissed. The Supreme Court refused twice to take up his argument. The Georgia Secretary of State refused Trump’s illegal request to invent enough votes to give him Georgia’s electoral votes. Vice President Mike Pence refused Trump’s illegal request to nullify the electoral votes. This dangerous lie led to the Jan. 6 insurrection, resulting in several deaths, injured police officers and desecration of our Capitol. Unbelievably, after fleeing from this domestic terrorist mob and staying in lockdown for several hours, most Republican congressmen, including Morgan Griffith, voted to reject the electoral counts, breaking their oath to the Constitution.

We must also stand up for truth in science. Too many elected officials have demonized the COVID vaccines and the wearing of masks. These measures aren’t about individual freedom. They are about defeating this deadly pandemic. As the pope recently observed, “Getting the vaccine [and

Giving your view

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wearing masks] is an act of love.”

So, let’s start working together by getting news from reliable sources, holding elected officials accountable for the truth, and showing the spirit our parents and grandparents showed during World War II to defeat fascism. Let’s show the world that we can save our democratic republic and make it stronger than ever.

Patricia BeCraft
Wytheville, Virginia

Sara Jennings
Marion, Virginia

Protect yourself and others: Wear a mask and get vaccinated

The current surge in COVID-19 infections with the delta variant demands that we redouble our efforts to protect ourselves and others from

this deadly virus. Our best protection includes masks over the nose and mouth, the COVID-19 vaccines, “social distancing,” and handwashing, as well as avoiding crowds, unvaccinated people and non-maskers.

Masks that cover your nose and mouth prevent nose/mouth mucus droplets from getting to other people. The viruses depend on their free ride on those mucus droplets to get from an infected person to their next victim. They get out of the infected person’s nose and mouth through breathing and talking. They get into the next person’s body via his/her nose. Your mask (covering your nose and mouth) prevents transfer of mucus droplets and viruses from you to another person or from another person to you.

The vaccines have been shown to be highly effective in preventing disease with COVID-19 and in making the illness milder if you do get sick, thus keeping you out of the hospital, the ICU and the morgue. They have been shown to be effective against the delta variant, too, especially in preventing serious illness and death.

Breakthrough infections occur in fully vaccinated people. They are often caused by the delta variant. They usually seem like a URI — with runny nose, sinus congestion, headache, fever and fatigue. Your COVID-19 vaccines will keep these infections mild — they’ll keep you out of the hospital and keep you alive.

Your best protection from COVID-19 now is to wear your mask when among other people away from home, especially indoors, and to get vaccinated. This is how you take care of yourself and other people!

Dr. Neal R. Sanders
Johnson City, Tennessee

Forgive student debt perhaps, but lawmakers should question reasons for high education costs

There has been lots of talk from mostly Democrats in Congress about forgiving student debt.

That’s a nice thought.

I wish someone would forgive my Christmas debt of 2020, when I overspent online just a bit. Maybe we could also forgive Disney World debt for those families who spend tons of money to have that once-in-a-lifetime experience in the Magic Kingdom.

Forgiving student debt comes with lots of questions. Do we forgive the debt of students who dropped out of college or do you have to have a diploma and good grades to have the debt forgiven? What if you worked your way through college and didn’t take a loan? Do those industrious students get a tax break or some other benefit for their hard work?

While these questions are pondered and considered on the way to an ultimate solution that will make millions of indebted Americans very happy, Virginia lawmakers should spend some time considering why public universities cost so much in the first place.

All three of my children are in college this fall so I feel uniquely qualified to speak on this matter.

Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam visited Virginia Tech July 29 to tout a \$111 mil-



Roger Watson

Bristol Herald Courier managing editor

lion allocation in additional financial aid, but if he would actually look at a billing statement for a semester at Virginia Tech he may have some questions about what is actually being charged in the first place.

I have no issue with the tuition in-state bill. The cost of \$5,875.50 for a full-time student seems fair. It’s all the unexplained fees that are tacked on that raise questions. Here is a sampling of the additional fees on my daughter’s tuition bill for the fall semester. There’s an athletic fee of \$181, a business fee of \$225, a health fee of \$278.50, a library fee of \$51, an orientation fee of \$285, a rec sports fee of \$167.50, a student activity fee of \$165, a student cultural activities fee of \$82, a student services fee of \$151, a technology fee of \$39, a transportation services fee of \$97 and a software bundle

charge of \$84.24. In total, the fees equal an additional \$1,806.24 for items that I have no idea what they are for or why they are necessary.

So after all that is taken care of we are at a total of \$7,681.74 for a semester. We are finished, right? Nope. The tuition and all those fees still don’t allow her to park on campus. That was an additional \$330. All the fees listed also don’t buy food. A meal plan was \$358 more. Then Thursday morning came a call to buy a book for another \$123. Make no mistake, those athletic fees do not get her football tickets. If she wants to jump to “Enter Sandman” in Lane Stadium every game this season, toss in another \$150.

It’s time for Virginia lawmakers to take a close look at the cost of higher education at state schools and make changes to make that education more affordable.

Preventing families and students from having to take out large loans on the front end instead of having to find ways to forgive those loans on the back end will help provide a permanent solution to this problem of paying for a college education and potentially open the doors of our universities to more students not scared away by the initial sticker shock of a semester of college.

“Comedy is surprises, so if you're intending to make somebody laugh and they don't laugh, that's funny.”

— Norm MacDonald (1963–2021), Canadian stand-up comedian, writer and actor known for his deadpan style

Their View

In Virginia, we ignore aging dams at our peril

CHRIS GENTILVISO
Richmond Times-Dispatch

In September 2018, the impending arrival of Hurricane Florence prompted the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation to take action.

In an advisory to dam owners, officials warned that the storm could dump 10-20 inches of rain in some areas of the commonwealth if it were to linger. DCR urged owners to connect with engineers to understand specific issues with their structures; find and review their emergency action plans (if one was in place); safely lower water levels in their dams' lakes (if possible); and visually inspect their dams to ensure that debris would not negatively impact any spillways.

Three years later, Hurricane Ida posed its own set of severe-weather challenges. On Sept. 3 — days after the storm's initial arrival in Virginia — DCR issued an alert to homeowners and even renters to secure flood insurance in time for peak hurricane season. Officials cautioned that standard policies likely do not cover flood-related issues, and that 1 inch of water in a 2,500-square-foot home could result in more than \$25,000 in damage.

The commonwealth was spared the worst of Florence's and Ida's wrath. But both of these memos raise the question: Do we react to crises as they happen — or worse, after the fact? Or do we make investments now to shore up vulnerabilities in aging dams? We ignore them at our peril — Virginia has to prioritize them in its infrastructure improvements.

Healthy dams are an essential piece of our everyday lives. Per DCR, they support water supply, irrigation, recreation, hydropower, fish and wildlife habitat, and flood reduction systems. But far too many of Virginia's structures don't meet that “healthy” bar.

The National Inventory of Dams, a database operated by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, shows that as of 2018, the average age of structures in the commonwealth was 56. In its 2021 infrastructure report card, the American Society of Civil Engineers cited 356 Virginia dams as carrying a high hazard status. That means if they were to fail, there would be a probable loss of life or serious economic damage, DCR explains.

Fairfax County's Office of Emergency Management outlines reasons why a dam could fail: overtopping sparked by flooding that exceeds a dam's capacity, structural failures involving construction materials, poor maintenance and upkeep, and more. And all of those aforementioned causes require resources, whether in the form of money, labor, goods or other needs.

But dams are especially hard to manage in Virginia for two reasons. First, ownership varies between public and private entities. While state officials can regulate the build, design and servicing of a dam, and establish criteria for compliance, not every owner has the resources to make necessary upgrades. A majority of the 2,500-plus regulated dams in the commonwealth are private, DCR noted in May.

Second, as climate change brings forth more high-powered storms, state officials' attempts to assess or improve existing dams — or even identify new ones — face an uphill battle.

The National Inventory of Dams features an interactive map showcasing the location of structures across the U.S. Under the “select a measure” prompt, the first option is “dams by hazard potential.” The map then becomes color-coded: Red means high, yellow means significant (a failure might cause loss of life or appreciable economic damage), and green means low (no expected loss of life or sizable damage, other than to the owner's property).

But a good portion of Virginia dams uniquely are coded black in the database, meaning their hazard status is undetermined. In a September 2019 interview with the Richmond Times-Dispatch, Russ Baxter, then-deputy director of soil and water conservation and dam safety and floodplain management for DCR, explained that these structures might not have been reached by staff members, or information from the owner still might be needed.

A September 2020 Virginia Mercury report added that there's a colonial twist behind private dam challenges in Virginia. The piece pointed to a 2013 research paper by Jill Fraley of the Washington and Lee University School of Law explaining the property quandary.

“Through a mechanism called King's Grants, some Virginia landowners hold title not simply to property surrounding a navigable waterway, but also to the soil beneath the river and to dams crossing the river,” Fraley wrote.

Along with this historical quirk, DCR currently lists only four regional dam safety engineers on staff, with one vacancy. In 2018, Gov. Ralph Northam issued Executive Order 24, which was aimed at “increasing Virginia's resilience to sea level rise and natural hazards.” Part of that directive included a “review of compliance with flood protection and dam safety laws.”

A July 2019 report addressing the executive order concluded: “With the potential for more frequent and heavier precipitation events, the Dam Safety Program must be more robust to protect the lives and property of Virginians.” That has to include more staff members.

Congress recently has upped federal involvement in the issue, with the July introduction of the Twenty-First Century Dams Act. The Association of State Dam Safety Officials supports the \$21.1 billion bill as a step toward improved “safety, grid resilience benefits and power-generating capacity.”

Within the American Society of Civil Engineers' infrastructure report card categories, several items have received great attention through recent COVID-19 relief and recovery programs, including broadband, stormwater and drinking water. As hurricane season continues through the end of November, we ignore aging dams at our peril. Virginia has to prioritize them in its infrastructure improvements.

ONLINE EXPERTS



ONLINE EXPERTS BY DAVE WHAMOND, CANADA. POLITICALCARTOONS.COM

Making a few laps for a good cause

I got as close as I will likely ever get to being a NASCAR driver Wednesday as I cruised around the Bristol Motor Speedway (BMS) along with approximately 80 fellow motorists as part of Speedway Children's Charities Laps For Charity.

For \$50 to the organization, I had the chance to drive my car along with the others around the track behind the pace car.

The closest I had come to being a NASCAR driver before had been on several occasions when law enforcement officials throughout the Southeast asked if I thought I was a NASCAR driver. Usually the question comes in a frustrated tone with a citation book in hand.

I was concerned that despite my legally documented need for speed I was a little out of my league with a black Camaro parked in front me and a yellow Lamborghini to my left when I pulled into the BMS parking lot, but I am proud to say the Herald Courier, Sundrop, Exxon, Bojangles Lexus held its own as we made laps around the



Roger Watson

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The Last Great Colosseum. Before we began, I shifted the car over into “sport” mode for probably just the second time ever. Unfortunately, the car did not automatically transform into a Porsche 911, but it was good enough.

The experience of driving into the speedway, down the steep banking of turn three and around to pit road was breathtaking. It was actually my first time inside BMS. We had some time to get out of our cars, take a look around and take some pictures while waiting for the others to come into the speedway. Then it was time to go.

Taking a look at the steep turns and

trying to get up off the apron of the track on the way into the speedway, I thought getting up on the banking would be a problem — it was not. Once we got going down the back stretch, the car flowed into the turn as smooth as butter. Darrell Waltrip once compared Bristol to racing in a barrel. It kind of felt like that as I was just enjoying accelerating through the 650-foot front stretch when it was time to move into turn 1 again. It felt like I was flying. I could have sworn I was going 90 miles an hour, but when I looked down at the speedometer it only showed us topping out at around 65.

After I stopped worrying about being the only driver of the day to have a spin out, I had a blast. By the end of our time on the track I was ready to do a bump-and-run on that black Camaro in front of me and take the checkered flag.

The next time my driving practices are black-flagged by a law enforcement officer and they ask me if I think I am a NASCAR driver, I will say, “It's not my full-time job, but I have made a few laps at Bristol.”

This is how a Republican lie is born

WASHINGTON — This is what happens when an entire political party takes leave of reality.

On Tuesday morning, one of the most senior and important Republican senators used one of the most prominent settings in official Washington to level one of the most serious allegations possible against the commander in chief. And his charge was based on an utter fabrication.

Sen. Jim Risch of Idaho, ranking Republican on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, used a hearing intended for sworn testimony from the secretary of state on the Afghanistan withdrawal to allege that President Joe Biden is mentally incompetent.

Risch first devoted his opening statement to continuing the long-running Republican narrative. “We know for a fact the president of the United States is somewhat disadvantaged here in that someone is calling the shots. He can't even speak without someone in the White House censoring it or signing off on it,” the senator claimed. “As recently as yesterday, in mid-sentence, he was cut off by someone in the White House who makes the decision that the president of the United States is not speaking correctly. ... This is a puppeteer act.”

Then, as the first Republican questioner, Risch used his time to elaborate on the slander. “Somebody in the White House who has authority to press the button and stop the president, cut off the president's speaking ability and sound,” he told Secretary of State Antony Blinken. “Who is that person?”

Blinken chuckled as he replied that the loose-lipped Biden “speaks very clearly and very deliberately for himself.”

Risch was unconvinced. “Are you saying there is no one in the White House that can cut him off? Because yesterday that happened and it's happened a number of times before that.”



Dana Milbank

Smiling, Blinken assured Risch that “there is no such person.”

Risch insisted, again, that “it happened yesterday at the Interagency Fire Center. It was widely reported. ... Are you telling this committee that this does not happen, that there is no one in the White House who pushes the button and cuts him off in mid-sentence?”

After yet another back-and-forth on the matter, Blinken finally told the senator: “I really don't know what you are referring to.”

There's good reason for that: It didn't happen.

The episode is worth unpacking because it shows, in miniature, how misinformation infects the Republican Party, rapidly spreads through partisan media and contaminates elected GOP leaders — who amplify and defend the falsehood, even when it's shown to be wrong. This is how lies are born.

(In this case, it wasn't even a *useful* lie. By making it his lead-off attack, Risch distracted attention from the Biden administration's botched pullout from Afghanistan, a serious matter. Instead, Risch used the forum to portray Biden as senile, based on rubbish.)

The story begins with the White House's Monday press schedule, which announced that Biden would receive a wildfire briefing in Boise. The press coverage was listed as “out-of-town pool spray at the top.” In English, this

means that a group of the traveling White House press corps is admitted to the event at the beginning and then brought out after journalists get some video and audio. It's a routine practice presidents have used for decades. And that's exactly what happened Monday. According to the pool report, the group was escorted in at 12:08 p.m. for the start of the briefing and “escorted out at roughly 12:35” — a relatively long spray.

That would have been the end of the matter, except that somebody in the research department at the RNC, watching the White House's livestream, decided that something nefarious had happened. “White House feed cuts out as Biden starts to ask a question,” the RNC tweeted.

Rupert Murdoch's New York Post, crediting the RNC for the scoop, published an article under the headline, “White House livestream cuts Biden mid-sentence as he goes off script.”

“An official White House livestream of President Biden's remarks was abruptly cut off mid-sentence on Monday,” it began, linking Monday's “incident” to White House officials' “fear he'll veer wildly off-message.”

All that was left was for Risch to trumpet the fabrication — and then to demand to know why Blinken was “unaware this is actually happening.”

Had Risch been duped, or was he deliberately parroting disinformation? I explained to Risch's aides what had actually happened and asked whether there would be a clarification. There would not be. “Who cut off the president? Please advise,” repeated Risch spokeswoman Suzanne Wrasse.

So Risch knows the facts but perpetuates the fiction. If only somebody could “press the button” and cut off the GOP lie machine before it destroys us all.

Follow Dana Milbank on Twitter, @Milbank.

Their View

Broadband hits bump via lawsuit

The [Lynchburg] News & Advance

We’ve advocated previously for efforts to increase broadband services to underserved areas. That need became especially evident last year when schoolchildren and employees alike were compelled to work from home to avoid exposure to COVID. Even in forward-thinking Albemarle County, there were stories of parents huddling with their children in cold cars after hours on school grounds, while the kids tried to get their homework done using the school’s hotspot.

Now a lawsuit from Culpeper County is raising an obstacle to fast-tracking of broadband extensions.

Or, maybe it’s fairer to say that a law enabling fast-track projects has created an obstacle to landowners’ exercise of their constitutional private property rights.

The court will have to figure out which.

The law allows electric and communications utilities to string fiber along existing poles, lines and conduits without getting a separate round of approvals from, or providing compensation to, landowners. The new law allows such uses even if the utility is using existing easements outside its service area.

Under the doctrine of eminent domain, utilities and other entities can take or use private land if they prove that the use meets a public need. Fast internet access would certainly qualify as a need in today’s economy.

But when such projects take or use private property, owners are supposed to receive fair compensation.

The 2020 law essentially eliminates that feature for fiber-optic cable hung by electric utilities in existing easements.

In one way, that makes sense: If the utility poles, lines and conduits already exist, why not take full advantage of them? And as quickly as possible, without the time and expense of executing new eminent domain procedures?

The Culpeper case says: Here’s why not.

At its heart is the constitutional issue of protection of private property. If an electric company hopes to put an old easement under a new use, it should compensate the owner for that new — and additional — use, the lawsuit says.

The question of contracts also comes into play. The landowners who filed the suit had “contractual rights under their 1989 easement agreement,” according to U.S. District Judge Norman Moon in a ruling last month. The attempt to use that easement to add fiber “altered their contractual agreement,” he said.

Can a state law revise or subvert an existing contract? It certainly can’t violate constitutional protections — although whether the fiber law rises to the level of a constitutional concern, as claimed by the plaintiffs, has yet to be decided.

Meanwhile, we suspect that the reality of using an existing easement is a lot more complicated than it looks on paper.

How is the new fiber to be added to existing poles or other infrastructure?

It won’t just magically appear.

Adding fiber surely will involve equipment and personnel coming onto landowners’ property. That in itself is a use and a taking.

And it can be damage-causing.

We’ve encountered numerous credible stories over the years of damage and injury caused by utility crews. Gates left open, causing livestock to stray. Pasture and cropland destroyed by heavy equipment. Expensive competition animals mutilated when encountering gear left in fields.

Extending broadband service to all reaches of Virginia is an important and worthwhile undertaking — but it isn’t as simple as lawmakers in Richmond might believe.

The lawsuit raises some important issues, too. We’ll watch the progress of the suit with interest.

Information link: <https://bit.ly/3kGcy35>.

HC BRISTOL HERALD COURIER **Jim Maxwell,** publisher

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REPUBLICAN CLONE CAR



“REPUBLICAN CLONE CAR” BY JOHN COLE/THE SCRANTON TIMES-TRIBUNE, PENNSYLVANIA

Va. Employment Commission must do better

Tanya Warmbein of Coeburn, Virginia, has felt the devastating economic effects of the pandemic and the bureaucratic nightmare that is the Virginia Employment Commission personally.

The 52-year-old mother of six was advised by her doctor in March of 2020 to quit her job as a caretaker for the elderly because she was at great risk due to a diagnosis of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) as well as chronic liver disease.

If she had not quit, it is unlikely Warmbein would have been able to maintain a position anyway with a chronic cough associated with the COPD that quickly made her a societal outcast as any cough or clearing of the throat led to suspicion she was infected with COVID-19.

“It got bad,” she said in an interview last week as she explained an encounter in a grocery store in April of 2020. “I was with my friend and as I was walking out I did a usual (cough) because I have a lot of phlegm buildup in my throat and a guy started picking me apart. How dare I? I should be ashamed of myself going out like that with the pandemic going on.”

She also helped make ends meet by selling soaps she made, but with her normal venues to sell the items closed, that dried up as well.

Warmbein joined the thousands of Virginians receiving weekly unemployment compensation and everything was fine until April of 2021 when the deposits mysteriously stopped. Warmbein had reached the one-year end date for benefits and learned she needed to simply reapply. She did that, still no money came. She called the VEC and was told multiple times she would have her payments soon. She is still waiting for a payment nearly six months later. She estimated the VEC owes her approximately \$8,000.

“You get different answers every time,” Warmbein said. One time she was told the problem was because she changed her phone number. Another time she was told they had to do a fact-finding process. Another time they said they had to verify her identity.

“You’re told so many things, but



Roger Watson

BHC Managing Editor

the one thing you’re always told is ‘be patient,’ she said. “It doesn’t work that way. I can’t even apply for welfare because I’ve never gotten denied.”

The last thing Warmbein was told about her case was that they were waiting for a deputy to approve the payments. She said she has been waiting on the deputy’s approval since July.

Warmbein hasn’t just been sitting around waiting on a check. She said she has been looking for work but has been unsuccessful so far.

“I’ve applied to so many places,” she said. “I’m 52 with health issues.”

She said she has applied for any job she can find in the Coeburn area.

“I went for caregiver. I went for cashier, call center, gas station, whatever is local. Supermarket, Walmart. I even tried McDonald’s. I don’t care. It’s not that I’m too good to work,” she said. One of the things Warmbein believes is keeping her from finding a job is an inability to lift 50 lbs. due to her health issues. “I look at it through the eyes of the employer. If there are people 30 years old applying or an old woman 52 with health issues, who are they going to take?”

Her job search has been made more difficult by her losing the ability to legally drive because she couldn’t afford to pay auto insurance.

The lack of income has caused her to have to sell personal items to put food on the table, including her late parents’ wedding bands.

“That was one of those horrible moments in life where you feel guilty because you’re trying to hold on to those things. It didn’t bring much money, but it had so much sentimental value,” she said.

The tragedy of the situation is Warmbein’s story isn’t unique. She is

not the only Virginian whose life has become ensnared in the tangled red tape of the VEC’s inefficiencies. There are an estimated 100,000 Virginians just like Warmbein waiting on appeals or disputed claims.

Warmbein said she has sent “dozens of emails” to Delegate Will Wampler. When contacted, Wampler said the emails went to his office’s spam folder because Warmbein’s name came through with just “first” and “last” as her name. (That’s how her email appeared in my inbox as well.)

“We are going to dig in on her case and see if we can get her some help,” Wampler said. “My office has been engaged on VEC issues. They started pouring in in June following the pandemic.”

Wampler said many times his office runs into the same dead ends that his constituents encounter.

“This is an operational error and an operational deficiency at the VEC,” Wampler said. “This belongs to the governor. This is something Governor Northam had the ability to act on throughout the pandemic and failed to. He could have brought additional resources and other agencies to help out with this like some of our other neighboring states have done, but instead has just kind of let this process lag and let people’s lives hang in the balance.”

Warmbein understands she is not alone in this trouble.

“I’ve ran across people who have been sleeping in their cars,” she said. “I know there are a lot of people that believe because they sold two pairs of gym shoes on Craigslist that they are self-employed or gig workers. A lot of people cheat, but a lot of people are also very honest and are being done wrongly.”

The VEC’s deficiencies have exacerbated the detrimental effects of the health pandemic for many Virginia families and have now caused an economic pandemic for many across the state. It’s time for the Northam administration to take decisive action to make sure the people of Virginia, like Tanya Warmbein in Coeburn, desperately waiting on deposits to hit their accounts, find some hope and some help very soon.

Message to vaccine mandate protest-quitters: Goodbye and good riddance

“If you want to leave, take good care, hope you make a lot of nice friends out there.”

— from “Wild World” by Cat Stevens

This is for those of you who’ve chosen to quit your jobs rather than submit to a vaccine mandate.

No telling how many of you there actually are, but lately, you’re all over the news. Just last week, a nearly-30-year veteran of the San Jose Police Department surrendered his badge rather than comply with the city’s requirement that all employees be inoculated against COVID-19. He joins an Army lieutenant colonel, some airline employees, a Major League Baseball executive, the choral director of the San Francisco Symphony, workers at the tax collector’s office in Or-

ange County, Florida, and, incredibly, dozens of health care professionals.

Well, on behalf of the rest of us, the ones who miss concerts, restaurants and other people’s faces, the ones who are sick and tired of living in pandemic times, here’s a word of response to you quitters: Goodbye.

And two more: Good riddance.

Not to minimize any of this. A few weeks ago, a hospital in upstate New York announced it would have to “pause” delivering babies because of resignations among its maternity staff. So the threat of difficult ramifications is certainly real. But on the plus side, your quitting goes a long way toward purging us of the gullible, the conspiracy-addled, the logic-impaired and the stubbornly ignorant. And that’s not nothing.

We’ve been down this road before. Whenever faced with some mandate



Leonard Pitts

imposed in the interest of the common good, some of us act like they just woke up on the wrong side of the Berlin Wall. “There’s no freedom no more,” whined one man in video that recently aired on “The Daily Show With Trevor Noah.” The clip was from the 1980s, and the guy had just gotten a ticket for not wearing his seatbelt.

It’s an unfortunately common refrain. Can’t smoke in a movie theater? Can’t crank your music to headache decibels at 2 in the morn-

ing? Can’t post the Ten Commandments in a courtroom? “There’s no freedom no more.” Some of you seem to think freedom means no one can be compelled to do, or refrain from doing, anything. But that’s not freedom, it’s anarchy.

Usually, the rest of us don’t agonize over your intransigence. Often it has no direct impact on us. The guy in “The Daily Show” clip was only demanding the right to skid across a highway on his face, after all. But now you claim the right to risk the health care system and our personal lives.

So if you’re angry, guess what? You’re not the only ones.

The difference is, your anger is dumb, and ours is not. Yours is about being coerced to do something you don’t want to do. Like that’s new. Like you’re not already required to get vaccinated to start school or travel

to other countries. For that matter, you’re also required to mow your lawn, cover your hindparts and, yes, wear a seatbelt. So you’re mad at government and your job for doing what they’ve always done.

But the rest of us, we’re mad at you. Because this thing could have been over by now, and you’re the reason it isn’t.

That’s why we were glad President Biden requesting asking nicely, started requiring vaccinations everywhere he had power to do so. We were also glad when employers followed suit. And if that’s a problem for you, then, yes, goodbye, sayonara, auf wiedersehen, adios and adieu. We’ll miss you, to be sure. But you’re asking us to choose between your petulance and our lives.

And that’s really no choice at all.

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