Wealth Rules the World
(Is There Really Any Doubt Anymore?)

by Hendrik Van den Berg, UNL Economics Professor

We like to believe that we have a democracy and that our votes ultimately decide important social and economic issues. People in other so-called democracies like to think the same thing. But, increasingly, observant citizens of Greece, France, Holland, the United States and elsewhere are beginning to see their democracies as little more than shams to keep citizens occupied and quiet while the real rulers consolidate their power. Who are these ‘rulers’? Here are several recent developments that clearly expose their identity.

Greeks vote for change, but they end up with more of the same

When the U.S. subprime loan bubble collapsed, the globalization of our economies (which no one voted for) quickly spread the effects and caused financial crises in most other countries of the world. In 2009, the first actual decline in worldwide production since the end of World War II hit the Greek economy especially hard. With falling demand for Greek exports, the Greek balance of trade worsened and its economy was suddenly deprived of the customary inflows of foreign loans and investment. Although Greece’s foreign debt in 2009 was not all that much higher, relative to its GDP (Gross Domestic Product) than many other similar countries, its debt began to grow rapidly, especially as its GDP declined when the global recession set in.

Greece was in a difficult situation because it had abandoned its own money for the euro—the new European money managed by the “European Central Bank” (ECB). In accordance with the “Maastricht Treaty” of 1992 that paved the way for European Union countries to create and implement the single currency, Greece was required to borrow from banks or in the privately manipulated ‘open markets’ every single euro it needed to balance its budget. Without its own money, Greece could not directly supply money to its banking system to finance domestic private investment, nor could it directly provide money for its government to boost employment or pay for employment-generating projects.

In 2010, the center-right government of Greece sought the help continued on page 3
Nebraska Report

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We Think You Ought to Know...

The Great Plains Conference of the United Methodist Church hosted a speaking tour in Nebraska by the Rev. James Atwood, author of America and Its Guns: A Theological Exposé, March 16-18. Speaking on the topic of “Envisioning a Future Without Gun Violence” to audiences in Lincoln, Omaha, Grand Island and Columbus, Atwood shared the following information on this ongoing national tragedy:

• In the war in Iraq 4,400 American servicemen and women were killed. In the same period of time 220,500 American citizens were killed by guns on our streets, in our schools and homes.
(U.S. Dept of Defense and Center for Disease Control record all deaths in America)

• The annual cost of firearms violence for the U.S. economy is $100 billion dollars.
(Gun Violence: The Real Costs, by Philip J. Cook and Jens Ludwig, Oxford Press 2000)

• The Consumer Product Safety Commission and all other government agencies are prohibited by law from examining the safety of any firearm or piece of ammunition.
(The Consumer Products Safety Act, 1972)

• Former CEO of the NRA, Warren Cassidy said, “You’d have a far better understanding of the NRA if you approached us as you would one of the great religions of the world.”

• After 20 first graders were murdered by a mentally ill young man with an assault weapon in Newtown, Connecticut, current NRA CEO Wayne LaPierre vowed, “The only thing that will stop a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun.” Note: The average hit ratio for New York City Police involved in a shooting where the subject does not fire back is 30%. During a gunfight the hit rate falls to 18%.
(Dahl, Julia, Empire State Building Shooting Sparks Questions About NYPD Shot Accuracy, August 29, 2012. CBS, NYC)

• David Kopel, a leading gun rights theorist, NRA Board Member, and Associate Political Analyst of the conservative Cato Institute, calls guns “the tools of political dissent.” He contends gun owners have no obligation to obey or respect any law that has been made through our established democratic process, if they happen to disagree with it. An article of faith for hard-core extremists is “people have a right to take whatever measures are necessary, including force, to abolish oppressive government.” Or again: “armed resistance to government is legitimate and appropriate.”
(Cited in Horwitz and Anderson, Guns, Democracy, and the Insurrectionist Idea, 2009)

• 88% of the American people favor background checks on all guns sold, including NRA members and gun owners. NRA members are 75% in favor.
(Frank Luntz, Republican Pollster, July 2012. Gun Owners Poll.)

• In 2003, Congress passed a law that bars Federal Law Enforcement from releasing any information that links guns used in crimes back to the original purchaser or seller.
(Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (BATF), Investigative Operations at Gun Shows.)

• The BATF can check gun dealers for illegal sales; but only once a year.
of the ECB and the “European Commission” (the executive branch of the European Union). These two European institutions brought in the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to oversee the ‘aid’ to Greece, and this ‘troika’ agreed to provide lower-interest loans to replace the private loans. But, as always, these loans were conditional on Greece undertaking neoliberal ‘economic reforms’ such as privatizing government assets (the commons), strengthening private property, reducing government expenditures, deregulating labor markets, and replacing regulatory structures with ‘free markets.’ These reforms were, allegedly, to make Greece better able to reduce its overall debt. Instead, these austerity reforms drove the Greek economy further into recession, and Greek debt actually rose from just over 100 percent of GDP in 2009 to over 180 percent today. The recession reduced GDP by about 25 percent, which by itself raised the debt to GDP ratio by a third. And, the depression also decreased government revenues more rapidly than the mandated expenditure cuts that pushed the economy into depression in the first place. The ‘reforms’ thus did not reduce the debt. Instead, after six years, they have destroyed the Greek standard of living, with purchasing power reduced by more than 30 percent and unemployment approaching 30 percent (nearly 60 percent for the 16-25 age group).

Given these economic results, many Greeks protested. But to no avail. In 2010, the two large centrist political parties appointed a new prime minister, an international banker (I am not making this up!), all without holding a new election. Soon, reform agreements between the Greek government and the troika were signed and, as stated above, the government debt grew faster and incomes fell and unemployment rose. Finally, at the beginning of 2015, the voters got the opportunity to vote. The left-wing “Syriza” party in coalition with a small libertarian party won a majority of seats in Parliament, and they defiantly formed a government pledged to undo austerity. Most popular among Greek voters was the promise that Greece would no longer negotiate with the troika; it would simply change its policies regardless of what the troika demanded to keep the ever more burdensome loans flowing.

Since the election two months ago, however, the enthusiasm is beginning to turn into indignation as people suspect they have been had once more. The new president, Alexis Tsipras, is no longer talking about major changes in the mandated ‘reform’ program. He has now even called for ‘temporary’ continuation of the austerity measures while negotiations continue with the very same three members of the troika he had promised to never ever negotiate with again. Even the popular finance minister, Yanis Varoufakis, has changed his tune: before the election, he claimed he would fire the Finance Ministry’s foreign consultants, but he has now hired the same financial firm (“Lazard”) that advised the previous centrist/right-wing government on the privatization of government assets.

Arguably, Greece has few choices but to do what the troika tells it to do. Without further lending from the IMF, the European Central Bank and other official European assistance, the Greek government would have to default on its loans and it would be without money to spend. Its budget deficits require it to find money to borrow. The leaders of other European Union countries—especially Germany—have aggressively stated that Greece must follow the agreed austerity program; there is no permissible alternative. To force the Greek government to stop its opposition to the imposed austerity program, the ECB stopped taking Greek government bonds as collateral for borrowing by Greek private banks from the ECB—even though such ‘lender-of-last-resort’ lending is standard practice by every central bank in the world. But now this standard lending facility has been replaced by an “Emergency Liquidity Assistance” program just for Greece that is also run by the European Central Bank, but is no longer automatic as the lender-of-last-resort central bank lending always has been. Greek President Tsipras opined the ECB was “holding a noose around Greece’s neck.” It appears that Greece has no choice, however, but to continue with the same policies that were already strangling its economy for years to come.

Greece does have other choices, of course. For example, it could simply unilaterally refuse to pay its debt to the European Central Bank, the European Stabilization Fund and the IMF. It would obviously have to abandon the euro, since there would not be enough euros in circulation in Greece to support normal economic activity. Greece would have to go back to issuing its own money (the drachma), but in this case, it would never run out of money to fund government spending. Obviously, the drachma would be valued very lowly in the foreign exchange markets, but that would actually greatly help Greek exports and limit imports, thus correcting the large trade deficit that Greece had to finance by means of foreign borrowing of euros.

This is essentially what Argentina did in 2002. After linking its currency 1 to 1 to the U.S. dollar and running up extraordinary dollar debt, Argentina first negotiated an IMF loan with a mandated austerity program. Just as with Greece, the economy only sank deeper into debt. Then, after civil unrest caused three changes in presidents in two weeks at the end of 2001, Argentina unilaterally decided to use its remaining dollar reserves to offer 30 cents on each dollar of debt held by private creditors, and it paid back all IMF debt outright to get out from under IMF supervision. It established a new domestic money, and it let the exchange rate decline. The immediate effect was an increase in inflation, frozen bank accounts, cancelled loans, and a sharp fall in output. Soon, however, Argentina restored its trade balance with its depreciated currency. And, with the power to print its own money, it was able to increase government expenditures that directly benefited unemployed workers while also stimulating domestic demand, unemployment soon fell back to normal, and the poverty rate was cut by two-thirds in just three years. These things would never have happened if Argentina had continued with austerity programs mandated by the IMF.

Why does Greece not make the same decision and go back to the drachma?

Money buys a huge number of politicians, most of the media, and nearly all national and international institutions such as central banks, the IMF and the European Commission.

Why are the so-called radical left Syriza Party and the Greek voters so constrained that they cannot even begin to think about making such a decision?

Obama promised to “renegotiate” NAFTA, but now we only get more of the same

During the 2008 presidential campaign, candidate Obama promised to “renegotiate NAFTA.” However, once in office there was no ‘renegotiation’;

continued on page 4

MARCH / APRIL 2015 NEBRASKA REPORT, P. 3
Wealth Rules, continued

felt they had been hurt by any change in domestic laws that diminish the value of their investment. ISDS rules mandate compensation for such policy shifts, and the size of the compensation is determined by a designated private arbitration process to which governments have no recourse.

At the insistence of a foreign investor who alleges to have been disadvantaged, a private panel would be set up to decide whether, say, a new Guatemalan law banning the use of cyanide in gold mining requires the Guatemalan government and its taxpayers to compensate a Canadian gold mining firm operating in Guatemala for the higher costs associated with a less environmentally damaging production method. The purpose of such rules is, of course, to discourage new environmental laws in the first place. Also, note how much power this gives private corporations over public policy in other countries. Simply put, such rules imply a huge loss of national sovereignty and a huge gain in corporate power.

Now, the Obama Administration that was going to renegotiate NAFTA is asking for authority from Congress to complete negotiations for two new regional trade agreements: the “Trans-Pacific Partnership” (TPP) between the U.S. and a number of other countries surrounding the Pacific Basin including Japan and South Korea, and the “Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership” (T-TIP) between the U.S. and the European Union countries. Since these countries already largely trade freely with each other, obviously there are other things in these agreements that are driving corporations and financial firms to push for these agreements. Both of these agreements contain ISDS procedures. Leaked excerpts of these secretly negotiated agreements show that they have little to do with free trade and much to do with expanding corporate power over individual governments. President Obama is not just going along with this, but he has been leading the way in pushing the negotiations forward. We were lucky that Harry Reid, the former Senate majority leader, heeded the wishes of labor unions and refused to bring the matter up for a vote in the Senate. But now the Republican leadership can count on all Republican and, yes, many Democrats to vote for finalizing these secret negotiations. Hopefully, some of the foreign countries will ultimately object and stop the negotiations. Don’t hold your breath, though, as the Socialist president of France is quietly leading the way to promote the T-TIP in Europe.

The French vote for change, and they get more of the same

Speaking of France, the Socialist French government has introduced a new labor law that rolls back restrictions on work hours and Sunday labor, eliminates regulations on many professions, and cuts retirement benefits for many workers. Furthermore, the Socialist government has increased its overseas military involvement as well as arms sales to many less-than-democratic regimes, and it has reached an extensive agreement with the national business employers association to cut business taxes and reduce business regulation. At the same time, the Socialist Party leadership has rammed through sharp decreases in government expenditures across the budget in order to meet European Union budgetary guidelines. There will be further privatization, public transportation will be cut, education is being cut, retirement benefits are being cut, and unemployment benefits are being limited in time. Incredibly, the Socialist government is drastically consolidating the country’s political units by, for example, abolishing the local ‘departments’ that date back to the French Revolution and creating ‘more efficient’ larger units; this will, of course, effectively make it easier for corporate lobbyists to control the political system in this country renowned for its citizen political engagement. The news media spent most of their time arguing about how to redraw the map, while avoiding the issue of what regional consolidation really means.

The French Socialist Party candidates in 2012 captured the Presidency, ample majorities in both the National Assembly and the Senate, and the majority of local offices. The voters had tired of the center-right party of President Nicolas Sarkozy,

rather, we got more agreements just like NAFTA. The Obama Administration pushed through a new CAFTA (“Central American Free Trade Agreement”), followed by new agreements with Colombia and South Korea.

Unknown to most people, these trade agreements did much more than eliminate trade barriers. They also liberalized international banking and introduced unprecedented protections for foreign investment. In the latter case, they established “investor-state dispute settlement” (ISDS) procedures when private foreign investors

UNL Economist Hank Van den Berg posing beside public artist Tom Otterness’s “Crying Giant” sculpture at the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art in Kansas City. Like the Giant, Hank is clearly in distress. The Global 1% are ruling the world for their own selfish purposes, and we must stop them before it’s too late.

continued on page 10
The Cuban Five Are Free!
‘Cuba’s Sovereignty Not Up For Negotiation’

by Jacqui Henderson and Joe Swanson

Nebraskans for Peace joined millions of people around the world in celebration when Cuban president Raúl Castro announced on December 17, 2014 that Gerardo Hernández, Ramón Labañino, and Antonio Guerrero were at last home in Cuba. Along with René González and Fernando González, the “Cuban Five” as they became known worldwide, spent from 15 to more than 16 years in U.S. jails on trumped-up charges because of their actions in defense of the Cuban Revolution.

They were working on behalf of the Cuban government to help prevent further deadly attacks from taking place.

Since 1959, when the mass revolutionary struggle of Cuban working people ended U.S. economic and political domination of their country, nearly 3,500 men, women and children in Cuba have been killed in such attacks. The Five were working on behalf of the Cuban government to help prevent further deadly attacks from taking place.

Admitting it could produce no evidence of any act of espionage by any of the Five, Washington resorted to its long tradition of “conspiracy” charges to obtain convictions and impose draconian sentences. The frame-up charges included conspiracy to commit espionage and, in the case of Gerardo Hernández, conspiracy to commit murder. That charge was added some eight months after his arrest, to increase pressure on the Five.

Their conduct during their trials and over the course of their years in prison won them increasing respect and support. Gerardo Hernández said, “We know that right is on our side, but to win we need a jury of millions throughout the world to make our truth known.” Nebraskans for Peace joined in that “jury of millions” to free the Five, with meetings showing Antonio Guerrero’s 15 paintings for the 15 years of imprisonment. These paintings, and 16 more he painted in 2014, reflect the integrity, dignity, courage, self-discipline and humor that the Five had become known for among fellow prisoners and beyond.

Why Were the Cuban 5 Jailed?

They were imprisoned because they were living and working in southern Florida when each of them was arrested in coordinated pre-dawn raids by the FBI in September 1998. They had been gathering information on the actions and plans of counter-revolutionary anti-Cuban organizations there—including murderous paramilitary outfits that have operated with impunity on U.S. soil for more than half a century.

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Washington Continues Policy Against Cuban Sovereignty

As Washington moves toward establishing diplomatic relations with Cuba for the first time in more than half a century, a new front has opened in the decades-long battle to defend Cuban independence and sovereignty.

“In no way has the heart of the matter been solved,” stated Raúl Castro in his message to the Cuban people on December 17. “The economic, commercial and financial blockade, which causes enormous human and economic damages to our country, must cease.”

In a January 28 speech to the “Third Summit of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States” in Costa Rica, he explained: “U.S. government spokespeople have been very clear in specifying that they are now changing their methods but not their policy objectives and insist on continuing to intervene in our internal affairs, which we are not going to accept.”

Josephina Vidal Ferreiro, Cuba’s chief delegate to the diplomatic talks between Cuba and the U.S., spoke to this in an interview on Cuban TV February 2: “Relations between Cuba and the United States have been historically asymmetrical… In Cuba we don’t have sanctions against U.S. businesses or citizens. Nor do we have occupied territory in the United States that we could trade for the occupied territory at the U.S. naval base in Guantanamo. We don’t have programs financed from Cuba aimed at influencing the domestic situation in the U.S. or to promote changes in the internal order of the U.S….And we’re not going to negotiate issues of a domestic nature, of Cuban sovereignty, in exchange for lifting the blockade.”

The Lincoln Chapter of Nebraskans for Peace will be hosting a discussion of these questions about Cuba and U.S. policy with panelists on March 31 at the Unitarian Church of Lincoln, 6300 A Street, 7:00-8:30 p.m. The event is free and open to the public.

Jacquie Henderson and Joe Swanson are members of Nebraskans for Peace in Omaha and Lincoln.

Your Foundation Speaks
by Loyal Park, Nebraska Peace Foundation President

As we approach that time of the year known as ‘Tax Season,’ the decisions you made last year greatly affect what you owe or the refund you will get this year.

While it is too late to change things for the 2014 tax year, please consider what you will have to pay next year at this time. Talk with an accountant or tax advisor about how you can avoid taxes on various sources of income by making a gift to Nebraska Peace Foundation.

MARCH / APRIL 2015 NEBRASKA REPORT, P. 5
Facing the Question of Unburnable Carbon

Now that 2014 has been recorded as the hottest year globally on the instrumental record, scientists are asking a question that should resonate in oil-company boardrooms: what is going to happen to all those oil, natural-gas and coal reserves that must remain in the ground to keep a cap on future temperatures?

Given the general consensus among world climate scientists and diplomats that global temperatures cannot rise more than 2 degrees C. without doing irreparable harm to people and the rest of the planet’s flora and fauna, what becomes of trillions of dollars-worth of recoverable fossil fuels that will have to remain locked away to preserve a habitable Earth?

The value of these assets already has been estimated by scientists, whose calculations appeared in the January 8, 2015 issue of the British journal Nature. Michael Jakob and Jerome Hilaire, who work with the “Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact,” wrote that “Cumulative carbon-dioxide emissions must be less than 870 to 1,240 gigatons between 2011 and 2050 if we are to have a reasonable chance of limiting global warming to 2 degrees C. above the average global temperature of pre-industrial times.” “Reasonable,” in this case, is defined as 50 percent, calculated with a model.

This target represents one-third to one-fourth of the oil, natural gas and coal held on company balance sheets as provable reserves. What is provable and that companies own in the future tenses is a liquid figure that can be subject to upward or downward revision, given market prices and development of mining and drilling technology.

Shutting Down Shale

A few decades ago, for example, oil from shale and tar sands was known, but largely a matter of theory. By 2010, oil booms had developed in Alberta, North Dakota, and (on a smaller scale) other parts of North America using technologies like hydraulic fracturing (“fracking”) and tar sands mining as oil prices reached $100 a barrel. As prices fell by more than half in 2014, some of this production shut down.

The United States and Canada are not the only countries with oil-shale potential, but merely the first to apply the technology to production. “Encouraged by the recent shale-gas production boom in the United States, several world regions, including China, India, Africa and the Middle East, are seeking to unlock their large endowments or increase existing production,” wrote Jakob and Hilaire.

This question raises some profound social, political and economic questions in a world in which the fossil-fuel industry is superlatively equipped with payrolls, equipment and political influence to continue mining and drilling without limit on a 19th-century model as levels of greenhouse gases and temperatures continue to rise. At what point will climatic changes force a landmark change in how carbon-based fuel reserves are valued? Will it then be too late, given ‘thermal inertia’ (the decades of ‘lag time’ carbon dioxide requires before becoming a greenhouse gas) to forestall planetary disaster?

In the same January 8, 2015, issue of Nature, Christophe McGlade and Paul Ekins reported the proportion of reserves that cannot be burned to avoid such a disaster: “Our results suggest that, globally, a third of oil reserves, half of gas reserves and over 80 percent of current coal reserves should remain unused from 2010 to 2050 in order to meet the target of 2 degrees C.” They continued, “We show that development of resources in the Arctic and any increase in unconventional oil production are incommensurate with efforts to limit average global warming to 2 °C.”

In the Middle East, home to much of the Earth’s most easily and least expensively recoverable oil, about 40 percent of reserves would be required to remain unexploited to keep temperature rises within the 2-degree C. limit, McGlade and Ekins calculated. Coal, with reserves that are much larger than oil in terms both of energy potential and carbon-dioxide emissions, would have to remain mainly in the ground. China and India would face 66 percent sequester rates, and Africa 85 percent. The United States, Australia and the territory of the former Soviet Union would be required to leave about 90 percent of coal reserves locked way to provide climate stability. Nearly all (less than 10 percent) oil and gas reserves attributed to unconventional sources (fracking and tar sands) would have to be shut down or remain in the ground to maintain any reasonable chance to stabilize global climate over the long term, according to McGlade and Ekins (2015:188-189).

Given that fossil-fuel reserves had an estimated value of U.S. $27 trillion at 2014 prices, any effort to sequester substantial amounts of them would produce a financial earthquake in the fossil-fuel industry and, according to Jakob and Hilaire, force the companies to “ask themselves whether they should continue to invest in exploration for, and processing of, oil, gas and coal, or risk losing billions of dollars of stranded assets.”

Bruce E. Johansen is Jacob J. Isaacson Professor at the UNO and author of The Encyclopedia of Global Warming Science and Technology (2009).
The Case for Local Food

by Gus von Roenn

The spiritual leader of permaculture Masanobu Fukuoka said, “The ultimate goal of farming is not the growing of crops, but the cultivation and perfection of human beings.” From this perspective, the production of food is a manifestation of how we treat our soil, how we treat our environment and how we treat each other. Our whole food system, in other words, should reflect the reverence we hold for the earth and all living things.

“The Good Life” we Nebraskans so rightly celebrate has historically been tied to the bounty of our land. Our soil and water have made our state one of the world’s premier agricultural powerhouses. In stark contrast to our forbears, however, we no longer grow much in the way of actual food for our tables. Nebraska’s productive capacity is now geared largely to growing commodity crops like corn and beans and beef for export. A mere ten percent of the food we eat is grown here in the state. Fully one fifth is imported from other countries.

This emphasis on export production and global markets has dramatically altered not only our state’s economy, but our relationship to our food system. We’ve become so disconnected from the source of our food that we no longer realize how much of our diet could be produced locally. There’s no reason really for us to rely on California to supply almost half of our fresh produce. A surprising amount of the vegetables we eat can be grown here year-round. Our reliance on a global production and distribution system, though, has now made it economically difficult for farmers and market gardeners in Nebraska to grow food for the local market. The scales are tipped against them.

And yet, in terms of economic impact, product freshness, nutrition, sustainability and food security, the retail market of small producers provides the best overall benefit for our local communities. Purchasing locally supplied products not only puts quality food on our plates, we get the peace of mind that comes with knowing our farmers are receiving an equitable share for their products, ensuring their future prosperity.

With a little help from the rest of us, a local foods revival may well be just on the horizon. University of Nebraska Specialty Crops Extension Educator Vaughn Hammond notes that already there are ripe markets for niche products like “grapes, fruits, nuts, pastured cattle, hogs and poultry to name just a few…” Hammond encourages us to, “Step up and take the challenge. Commit to buying more locally produced agriculture products. Commit to enhancing your community and commit to getting to know your farmer.” This MUST be our mission every day, week, month, season and year. And when you do take advantage of the freshness provided by locally produced products, don’t hesitate to share it with your friends and neighbors. Brag, even, about this freshness when you invite over your family and friends. We, the consumers, are local foods’ best advocates.

Fresh food sells itself practically anywhere in the world.

Here in Nebraska, though, we need particular help with promoting the purchase and consumption of seasonally produced local food. Humanely raised animals and organically grown vegetables are worth purchasing for many reasons. But as creatures of our global food system, we as consumers have gotten used to having

by Jim Knopik

Family farmer and rancher Jim Knopik of Fullerton, who co-owns the organic meat operation “North Star Neighbors” near Belgrade, Nebraska, submitted the following testimony to the Legislature’s Agriculture Committee February 24 on two bills relating to the expansion of local food options in Nebraska.

Senator Johnson and members of the Agricultural Committee, my name is Jim Knopik. I am testifying in support of LB 544 and LB 558. I could not make it to Lincoln to testify in person today by doctor’s orders. I do hope you will consider my experience as a farmer of 67 years. I am a cow/calf farmer/rancher with my son who farms our land organically and runs our cow herd in a system call ‘mob grazing.’

I believe it is important to know that 20 years ago our family was one of the largest farming operations in western Nance County. No brag, just fact. Proud? My father was. Me proud? I think, just a fact. We farmed together with two of my brothers and my two sons—or four families altogether.

We had six center pivots, about 1800 more acres of dry land crops... wheat, corn, milo, oats and alfalfa and a 500 cow/calf operation. We used chemicals, fertilizer, big machinery and lots of fossil fuels. I even had a 500-head hog CAFO [concentrated animal feeding operation]. Most of our ways of farming were touted as the best technology research had to offer.

About 17 years ago I had a wake-up call. No, not a serious health problem but a corporation wanting to move into our neighborhood with a half a million-head hog operation. From that experience I learned that not only that family corporation wasn’t good for animals or humans, but our operation wasn’t exactly kind to the environment either. That is when our family split up and my family began to farm organically. It should be noted that this split was not because of conflict in our family, but lenders having leverage over financial decisions.

What did I learn from my personal research and hands-on work? Farming with chemicals and artificial fertilizer kills the living organisms in the soil making it a dead zone. With no life or organic material in the soil, it becomes compacted and unable to absorb rain water or break down animal waste so it can be used by crops.

When moisture cannot be absorbed by the soil during high-rainfall events because of these conditions, runoff of rain water becomes a problem. Without living organisms in the earth to come up, feed on residue and take it down into the soil, it is most likely to erode and get carried away downstream into streams, rivers and other reservoirs, including the aquifer. This is one reason that large feedlots and CAFO operations can continue spreading manure year after year on the same land. Their dead soil calls for more manure because it can not break it down to be used by the crop grown on the land and/or has been carried away.

My purpose today is to make us all aware that conventional farming and production agriculture as currently promoted by large seed, fertilizer and chemical companies is not fully taking into account the impact on our ecosystem. These technologies...
Three Amazing Palestinian Women

by Sandie Hanna, who visited Palestine in 2014 with the Presbyterian Peace Making Program

Ayah, Mari, and Tamara came to the USA to tell stories. The stories are of how they live as young, educated, Palestinian women under Israeli Occupation, an occupation which began in 1967 and continues to do the work of the 1947-48 “Nakba”* even today. That work is the systematic erasure of their existence in Palestine. In their lifetimes, the three tell of seeing the changing of the land’s beloved natural appearance by Israeli destruction of thousands of olive trees, its intentional eroding of their self-worth, and its forced separation of their families and communities. [*The Nakba is the displacement of an estimated 700,000 Palestinians who fled or were expelled when hundreds of Palestinian towns and villages were depopulated and destroyed by the radical Zionist Israeli government which preceded and followed the Israel Declaration of Independence in 1948.]

These women came under the auspices of the American Friends Service Committee, each being a member of its program called “Palestinian Youth Together for Change.” After arriving in Philadelphia on March 3rd, by the 8th they were comfortably talking to an audience of 140 at Presbyterian Church of the Master in Omaha, Nebraska. The potluck dinner event was sponsored by the Nebraskans for Peace—Palestinian Rights Task Force. It was attended by people from all over the area including many from the local American Palestinian community. It made a front-page article in the Omaha newspaper on the 9th and a supportive piece in the paper’s editorial page on the 11th.

Ayah, from Gaza, knows firsthand the feeling of nearly being killed by an Israeli bomb when she and her family members went out to shop for groceries during a declared ceasefire last summer. She knows the futility of continuing a relationship with a young man from the West Bank because of restrictive Israeli rules designed to separate Palestinians from each other and prevent such marriages. She tells how her Palestinian education in Gaza was controlled by the State of Israel and resulted in the kind of education that you memorize, vomit back onto test papers, and soon forget. Restricting the education of young people is a form of child abuse, she told the listeners. Limiting the food available to the citizens of Gaza, forcing them to drink polluted water, and prohibiting historic use of their land, air and sea for fishing areas are all forms of human rights abuse by Israel’s government.

Tamara, from Jerusalem, can entertain you with a story of her “one woman protest” against handing over her Israel-required, racially-discriminating ID card at a Separation Wall checkpoint. But then, it wasn’t really funny when one considered that it could have been a matter of life and death for her. Many need to pass through the checkpoints in that 25-foot-high cement wall around the West Bank to get to their jobs, their own land to till, or to hospitals for emergencies and the natural events of life such as childbirth. They are held up daily by the whims of 17- to 18-year-old, semi-automatic weapon-carrying, Israeli Defense Forces soldiers.

Mari, from a Palestinian town inside Israel, joined an interfaith group on a congressional visit to U.S. Representative Brad Ashford’s office in Omaha while here. She stressed the importance of him seeing for himself the plight of Palestinians under the Israeli Occupation. She reminded him that it is being supported by U.S. tax dollars. She announced that she would be happy to be his guide on such a trip! She also pointed out the control of education by Israel that allowed no mention of even the word “Palestine” as she grew up. The historical facts of the 1947-1948 ‘ethnic cleansing’ were certainly never mentioned. She has no particular identity in which to place her family’s stories.

All three women spoke at UNO classes, an evening UNO event sponsored by the Arab Student Association, and the KFAB Scott Voorhees’ talk show. They weren’t shy. They told it like it is. They described Israeli discrimination against Arab Jews, African Jews, and Russian Jews as well as Arab-Israeli citizens of the Muslim and Christian faiths. They used words like ‘Apartheid.’ They expressed their hope for a one-state solution. Since the State of Israel has so divided Palestine into pieces with its continuing illegal settlement programs, they announced a two-state solution as impossible. They desire one state fully dedicated to equal rights for all citizens. They even said they didn’t care what such a state was named or which flag it flew. They named the “Boycotts, Divestment and Sanctions” (BDS) movement as the way to convince the State of Israel to create a truly, democratic state.

In 2005, Palestinian civil society issued a call for a campaign of BDS against Israel until it complies with international law and Palestinian rights. A global movement against Israeli Apartheid is rapidly emerging in response to this call. Please contact your members of Congress and ask them to stop funding Israel until it complies with this request. Learn more about BDS here: http://www.bdsmovement.net/.
Racism in Nebraska and the White Misperception of Senator Ernie Chambers

by A’Jamal Rashad Byndon
NFP State Board

In the past few months, there has been a great deal of controversy regarding racial issues in Nebraska. The most prominent incident concerned newly elected State Board of Education member Pat McPherson, a Republican activist who maintains a website on which President Obama was called a ‘half-breed’ by a commenter. To their credit, there was an immediate call for McPherson’s resignation from Nebraska’s Republican congressional delegation and our new Tea Party-backed governor. In spite of the 6-2 vote by his White board colleagues urging him to step down, however, McPherson has adamantly refused to budge.

McPherson supporters cited his right of freedom of speech. They pointed to Senator Ernie Chambers’ race-related statements and, calling for equal treatment, requested his resignation from the unicameral. Chambers is Nebraska’s longest-serving and one of its greatest state senators. A quick review of the record shows that his comments were uttered in the context of providing a history lesson on racial injustice. What raised my eyebrows, though, was that a board member from the Millard Public Schools showed up without authorization from the board to vocally support McPherson. Beyond raising issues of freedom of speech, this whole episode has served as a mirror for Nebraskans’ thinking and behavior about race.

A Nebraska Watchdog reporter, for instance, said that she found it surprising how many reporters gave Senator Chambers a free pass. In implying a kind of racial double standard, she raises a valid point that warrants greater statewide and community discussion.

When someone who is a member of a group of people at the bottom of the social economic system sounds off, do their comments carry the same weight as a biased male’s from the White majority? A White colleague told me that, at times, I see racial issues where he sees none. These are sensitive issues of perception and point of view. Are we ready to pull the bed sheets back on these absent but needed conversations? Is we so afraid of the past that conversations about race are deemed off-limits?

The problem of racial injustice (and our perspectives about it) need to be raised and addressed head-on. And we need to try look at this issue through the eyes of a neutral party. If someone came from another planet and asked us why African Americans, Native Americans, and many Latinos are at the bottom of the economic and social system, in spite of those groups’ members having been in this country for centuries, could we explain it? Would we say that those races are inferior? The 1994 book The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life by Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray makes that assertion and is treated as gospel in many conservative circles, like for instance the Fox News channel. When I listen to Fox News, one of the highest-rated news outlets in this country, I hear comments that I perceive as racist. Am I to believe that Fox listeners are intellectually superior to me—or rather that racism is alive and active in the U.S.?

For months now we have been hearing about racial unrest in Ferguson, Missouri, New York City and elsewhere. In every case, the law enforcement officials were exonerated by the respective grand juries. How can that happen, particularly when the White officers were clearly observed killing a Black man? How is it that in the United States many Whites and Blacks report seeing polar opposites in spite of seeing the same images?

Each year a naïve White person asks, aren’t race relations improving? I point to the facts and wide gaps between the various racial groups. Yes, it is possible to look at the higher incomes and social status of a few elite people of color and assume race relations are getting better. However, when racial groups are compared, it’s obvious we are moving in the wrong direction. A recent report from the University of Nebraska at Omaha Center for Public Affairs Research (CPAR), compiled by David Drozd, has found an alarming trend involving increasing rates of poverty among Omaha’s minority populations. http://www.unomaha.edu/news/2015/01/drozd.php.

Fifty years after Selma, the racial ‘divide’ is still there, embodied even in our language. We should not call people names. But when you hear the words: ‘unqualified,’ ‘illegal aliens,’ ‘Affirmative Action-hire,’ ‘free- and reduced-lunch students,’ ‘thugs,’ ‘those people’ and a host of other coded racist words and phrases, whom are they talking about? We know. The images are ready-made. People of color, though, have not always developed the sophisticated mythology to insult or to raise ‘straw men’ arguments about the majority White population on blogs or AM news stations, as many White racists in Nebraska and elsewhere have.

Years ago, a Black Republican told my college class that racism would disappear overnight if Whites would just stop being racist. He clearly laid the cause of racism at the feet of only White people. I have heard and read many definitions of racism. Most of those definitions were supplied by White people who have never experienced racism, or read any books or articles on the topic. When are the “victims of American democracy,” as Malcolm X once said, going to tell their story?

When African Americans are talking, they are speaking to their group’s members and Whites are merely eave-dropping on the conversations. For years, Senator Chambers provided a weekly community education program on cable television in Omaha. There were thousands of people in the city who listened to his words of wisdom because the major media rarely report his comments in context. When his show was canceled, the community—Black as well as White—lost the means to learn and educate itself on matters in the community and state government. If the racial divide in America is ever to be truly bridged, the voices we need to be hearing from are precisely those of people like Senator Chambers. We need to be hearing more of these voices, not less.

We have a lot to do to improve race relations. If you want to help, please contact me and become part of the solution by joining NFP’s Omaha Chapter’s Race and Violence Task Force. A’Jamal Byndon 402-578-6729 or abyndon@gmail.com.
Wealth, continued

which had pushed through various unpopular privatization and deregulation measures. Sarkozy had also taken a leadership role in the NATO attack on Libya that has thrown that country into chaos and ISIS’ hands. But the wholesale shift of the government to the Socialist Party has produced much of the same right-wing policy.

Allegedly, France had no other choices under the euro. Since France did not have its own money and it could not let its money depreciate to maintain its trade balance, the 1930s, famously pointed out that democracy of itself does not cut the power of the wealthy because they still control the culture and the political rhetoric. In short, democracy is no barrier to the continued rule of the wealthy. Because the wealthy have more money, they also have more political and cultural power.

It is really uncomfortable to have to face the fact that our society is under the complete control of a wealthy elite that does not care about the well-being of all its citizens. And, there appears to be no easy solution. Yes, we can lobby for a constitutional amendment to overturn the Supreme Court’s “Citizens United” decision. But remember that much of Obama’s backsliding on foreign wars, drone assassinations, foreign trade policy and bank bailouts happened before the Supreme Court decision. The political money is already so well entrenched that there are multiple ways for it to influence and shape political decisions.

A tempting alternative strategy might be to stop supporting major parties dominated by corporate money. To some extent people are already doing this. In France, the “National Front Party” attracts nationalists fed up with the two traditional parties, and the “Front de Gauche” (Left Front) attracts disillusioned socialists for the same reason. In the Netherlands, polls show that the two non-traditional parties that in 2012 formed the ruling government coalition with 55 percent of the seats in parliament would only control 14 percent of the seats if a vote were held today. The problem is that new parties do not always imply more democracy. A fragmented political system can break down into permanent conflict, effectively giving wealth even more opportunity to further its interests. More worrisome are the apparent gains by extreme right parties throughout Europe—not to mention our own ultra-right tendencies here in the U.S. Remember that Adolph Hitler first rose to power in the Weimar Republic through normal democratic procedures. Equally worrisome is the Tea Party in the U.S.—a party actually organized by certain corporate interests (specifically the Koch brothers) to take advantage of the dissatisfaction with a political system that, ironically, has been taken over by those self-same corporate interests…

And so human beings all go on with life as it is being shaped in our autocratic plutocracy. On a certain level, we are all complicit as we help generate the profits of our employers, spend our incomes on the stuff that our manipulated culture tells us we should want, salute the flag that far too often is cynically waved to justify the violence and terror needed to protect and further the interests of the wealthy, trust in ideologies and creeds that assure us everything will work out all right in the end in ways not unlike the ‘invisible hand’ of the mythical market system, and vote in our democratic elections thinking that this will somehow make things different.

Political scientist Rosa Luxemburg pointed out that the business and financial elite have institutional and cultural ‘hangers on’ (from government to law enforcement, religion to education) to advance their interests. In my own field of economics, for example, professors routinely promote the idea that right decisions in ideologies and creeds that assure us everything will work out all right in the end in ways not unlike the ‘invisible hand’ of the mythical market system, and vote in our democratic elections thinking that this will somehow make things different.

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MARCH / APRIL 2015 NEBRASKA REPORT, P. 10
markets do not really work all that well, or that markets actually do not even exist for most of the important decisions we have to make, but the myth sounds nice. And almost no one in academia will stand up and admit this is what we professors are doing.

Our political, social and economic systems are being hijacked before our eyes and most people, tragically, either do not understand what is really happening, or find it too discouraging to cope with. So we go out and buy what the advertising industry tells us we should want this year, and we take on debt to buy what we cannot afford. But we are not confronting the reality that international financial and business interests (the “Global 1%”) are now controlling the world—maximizing profits to the exclusion of all else. In this world, profit isn’t everything—it’s the only thing. And labor unions, environmentalists, regulators, moralists, socialists and anyone else with a broader social perspective are viewed as barriers to profits. Things have gotten so bad in our political discourse, today, that to even suggest opposing this corporate and financial domination is viewed as downright un-American.

Our local food advocate Hammond promotes this message while speaking throughout the state. I had the privilege to see his presentation at a “Small Acres Conference” in Fort Calhoun this past February. His loudest exhortation that day was to urge his audience to go out and see the farms their food comes from. Call and make an appointment! Our local producers are proud to show you what they do. These farmers believe food is more than a commodity to be bought and sold. They are in this business because they believe in producing something superior to what you find in our grocery store aisles. The love and care necessary to raise quality food is a skill these local farmers have mastered. It’s our responsibility to buy what they’re producing.

Gus von Roenn is a permaculture designer based in Omaha.

Jim Knopik, conclusion

gies are negatively changing our climate.

If you consider that much of our erodible land has been turned into dead soil—soil that is depleted of its many living organisms—then our land is left vulnerable to drought, heavy rains and runoff.

Displacing family farmer ownership of land with absentee owners has become a symptom of focusing on the bottom-line factor in decision-making. USDA farm programs, the Chicago Board of Trade and lenders have a different agenda than ‘feeding the world’ or protecting our valuable resources. Conventional farmers are subject to their rules.

In the past ten years, since we have changed the management practices on our farm, we are retaining the water that falls on it. I have seen heavy 6-7 inch rains fall on our pastures and fields with hardly a drop leaving our land. I believe that the Missouri River flood of 2011 may not have happened at all if sensible management practices had been used on the land above it.

Today, conventional agriculture and technology is placing our world on a straight line to more serious problems, with drier and hotter conditions creating havoc and violence. It has been said that agriculture is the lifeblood and the economic engine of our state. Without artificial transusions of out-sourced minerals and chemicals, genetic manipulation and antibiotics and subsidies, however, conventional farming and concentrated livestock operations are as dead as the soil they have abused.

There is a myth that Big Ag is feeding the world. It’s really not about food for healthy consumption, though. It’s all about the production of money in the global economy.

Today, even in a ag state like Nebraska, we need a backup plan—an insurance policy that at least begins to provide some way for people to provide for themselves.

Local food raised by small farmers and gardeners can bring people together. It can provide a solution to many of our social problems and can improve our environment in many ways.

Please allow our local entrepreneurs a fair chance to succeed. Please support this legislation. Thank you.

Gus von Roenn, conclusion

exotic foods available to us every day of the year. Urging our friends and neighbors to ‘eat seasonally’ and to buy products from only from local producers will create a stronger, healthier and more locally-based economy for all of us.

Critically acclaimed food author Michael Pollan has said “we” (local food advocates) have been using the wrong talking point to promote local food. On a modern conventional farm, the energy needed to transport your food thousands of miles actually represents only a small percentage of the total energy used to produce a product when considering the additional costs of mining, producing and shipping all of the soil, plant and animal inputs throughout the growing season. Instead, Pollan suggests that we purchase locally produced products because our small farmers are producing a crop worthy of putting in our bodies. Many modern farms use high amounts of chemical inputs for fertilizing, insect management, weed management, disease management and sanitizing. These farms are factories or laboratories that require full protective gear for workers that grow your food. Unless you know your farmer, you do not know how your food was raised. It is that simple.

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Gus von Roenn is a permaculture designer based in Omaha.

Paul Olson, conclusion

of organizations that propelled a war-hawk Ronald Reagan to support START. Now we need a new freeze in new places—especially in the Middle East, and our Senators won’t have it.

A nuclear wannabe Iran without restraints (and a raft of other Arab nuclear wannabes—Egypt, Saudi Arabia and possibly Turkey—all unrestrained) will not help Israel. A recent article in the conservative Economist (March 7, 2015), entitled “The new nuclear age,” speaks of the nuclear weapons competition disguised as ‘modernization’ underway in the U.S., Russia, China, North Korea and possibly India/Pakistan and, further, argues, “if [nuclear] weapons proliferate in the Middle East, as Iran and Saudi Arabia and possibly Egypt join Israel in the ranks of nuclear powers, each will have to manage a bewildering four-dimensional standoff.” If that standoff occurs and Nebraska senators have their way in rejecting or nullifying an agreement, neither Iran nor Israel will gain.

At a later time, once the Shia threat of Iran recedes, the Sunni powers in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Turkey (currently silently allied with Israel to resist the Shia) will no longer patronize Israel. They will do what Israel says Iran is trying to do once they have nuclear weapons. Ultimately the United States and the world will not gain.

We need agreements to avert disaster. Israel, if armed conflict becomes the rule of the day, will look like Hiroshima. The rest of the Middle East will look like 1945 Europe. As the fiery storm descends, we will shout with Conrad’s Kurtz from The Heart of Darkness, “The horror, the horror.” No paper letter signed by 47 U.S. senators will stand in the way.

I am indebted to Dan Schlitt and Kathleen Johnson for many helpful suggestions on this editorial.
A couple of notes: recently I wrote an email to our tried-and-true donors, calling attention to our financial situation at the end of 2014. Thanks for your responses. Once more, we made it. Thanks also to the many who have written or testified on legislation in response to NFP Legislative Monitor Tessa Foreman’s analyses of our priority bills.

We have a habit of choosing especially dense or problematic U.S. senators. In my lifetime, first came Kenneth Wherry and Hugh Butler, who teamed up with the Dixiecrat senators to defeat Truman’s civil rights legislation in return for goodies for a Montana power company. Wherry was also an ardent homophobe whom the locals recently wanted to put in the Nebraska Hall of Fame. Then there were Carl Curtis and Roman Hruska, sometimes voted the two worst senators in the United States Senate—Hruska, the defender of mediocrity on the United States Supreme Court and patron of John Dean of Watergate fame. We had a reprieve with Exxon, Kerrey, Hagel, Nelson and even sometimes with Johanns. (I may not have liked their positions, but they worked hard). Now we seem to be back in the pits.

Our current Nebraska Senators, Deb Fischer and Ben Sasse, have signed a letter to the Iranian government, saying that—if an executive agreement with Iran is negotiated by the Obama Administration and the five other governments negotiating with it—it will likely be rejected or nullified by them once Obama leaves office. Though they do not know the final negotiation terms, they know they will likely repudiate them. This is virtually equivalent to nullifying an unseen treaty. International law as interpreted in most nations considers executive agreements as treaties.

Do our senators have any idea what that means? They are not saying that, if Iran breaks the agreement, the U.S. will nullify it. They are saying that, if a new U.S. regime comes in, they—the Republicans leading the Senate—will likely destroy the agreement.

Senators Fischer, Sasse and most of the Republicans in the Senate have told the Iranian government that, if it enters into an agreement with the six negotiating countries, the next administration (presumably a Republican one) will undo it just because they can (March 10, 2015 Wall Street Journal, “Treaties vs. Executive Agreements: When Does Congress Get a Vote?”). That pronouncement comes from a political party whose leaders threw out Iran’s democratically elected leader in 1954, and set in motion 60 years of Middle Eastern turmoil. The 1954 Republican administration and the British threw out the duly elected Iranian government of Mohammed Mossadegh and installed, as monarch and absolute dictator, Shah Reza Pahlavi—a narcissistic despot serving only his own vanity and Western oil. After the Shia overthrew him, their clerics installed the Ayatollah Khomeini and, later, the Ayatollah Khamenei—two rulers popular for anti-American rhetoric and no less despotic than the Shah.

Now Iran appears to have a somewhat sensible president in the form of Mr. Rouhani. On our side, we have an American president who, save for his Ukrainian missteps, seems to seek a modicum of stability and peace.

The stakes are high. A meddling Israeli head of state comes to the U.S. Congress to tell us that the six power negotiations will reach a bad deal though the terms of the agreement have not been announced. Is the U.S. dumb? Are all five other powers crazy? Russia, China, Britain, France and Germany? All dumb? Mr. Netanyahu’s Iran without nuclear weapons is a nuclear threat, but an Israel, with 150-300 undeclared weapons, is not? Routine International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspections go on in Iran but none occur in Israel. (Iran has done wrong in supporting militias on Israel’s borders and we ought to guarantee Israel’s safety through the United Nations, but Israel’s continuous cruelty to the Palestinians does not help.)

Who will say, “Come let us reason together?” Our senators’ letter may not be treason, as one New York paper asserts, but it is shameless. Our Senators say they will not respect an agreement they have not seen, one negotiated by a twice-elected president and Nobel Peace Prize winner. They have no alternative proposal nor does Israel. They must want a nuclear-armed Iran or a nuclear war against it. (A conventional war will not work as we learned when we sent Saddam Hussein after Iran in the 1980s).

NFP fought for the nuclear freeze in the 1970s-80s, one of the thousands conclusion on page 11