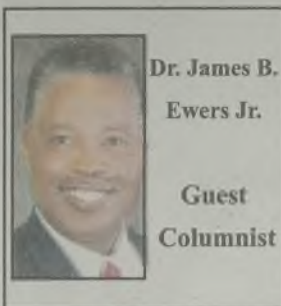


FORUM

Good news about the COVID-19 relief bill and the new vaccine



Dr. James B. Ewers Jr.
Guest Columnist

"All night long" are some lyrics used in a song by Lionel Richie some years ago. These lyrics still ring true today.

This is how long it took the Senate to pass the 1.9 trillion-dollar COVID-19 Relief Bill. It was tweaked by them and now goes back to the House for approval.

The president is expected to sign the bill this week. The passage of this bill will give Americans hope for a better day. Our country has been suffering,

so new life is just around the corner. Because of this bill, 85% of Americans will receive \$1,400 stimulus checks. This is a much-needed upgrade from the money given by the previous administration.

President Joe Biden said, "We have heard the voice of the American people."

The COVID-19 Relief Bill has been the cornerstone of the president's plan to rebuild. Since day one in office, he has been talking about it and planning for it. He coined the expression, "Build back better." This bill will allow the country to build back better.

Included in the bill will be an additional \$300 boost for unemployment benefits through Sept. 6. It will provide food, clothing

and shelter.

We are a land of plenty, so no family should go to bed hungry and without a roof over their heads. What we are seeing play out with President Biden and Vice President Harris is called compassion and empathy. These attributes were missing 90 days ago. They were not to be found. It is my opinion that as America gets better, that more people will see that President Biden is the right person to lead us.

Schools and colleges also will benefit as \$170 billion will be set aside for them. School leaders at all levels want schools to re-open. The same can be said for colleges and universities across the country. Businesses will get additional monies that will help them to open and to

serve more people. Going out to eat is an American tradition.

Having to stay inside our homes or to get take-out has not been easy.

Meanwhile, we have three vaccines now; Johnson and Johnson is the newest. So, we must take whatever vaccine is available in our area. Now is not the time to be selective. When your name is called, go and get vaccinated.

Reports say that 116,355,405 vaccines have been distributed and 87,912,323 have been administered. President Biden says that everyone who wants a vaccine will get a vaccine by the end of May. However, there are still some problems with distribution. Reports last week said that several states have backlogs.

If you live in one of those states, hold on, it is coming.

We must realize this distribution initiative is a massive and logistical undertaking. This pandemic is unprecedented. Hopefully, it will not happen again in my lifetime.

Herd immunity will, in my opinion, happen prior to October. Does that mean we will not be wearing masks or practicing being apart (social distance)? I think we will be wearing masks and using the other CDC protocols for the much of this year. Currently, medical personnel are saying that small family gatherings can be held when all parties have been vaccinated. That means we can hug our family members.

America is coming

back and we cannot hide our elation. Let us continue to do our part. Texas and Mississippi have reopened. We will see if that was the right decision.

The administration is on the right track and so is vaccine distribution. The light at the end of the tunnel is getting brighter.

James B. Ewers Jr. Ed.D. is a former tennis champion at Atkins High School in Winston-Salem and played college tennis at Johnson C. Smith University, where he was all-conference for four years. He is a retired college administrator. He can be reached at overtimefergie.2020@yahoo.com

Reflections on the end of the death penalty



Jack Payden-Travers
Guest Columnist

In 1984, my wife secured a church position in Richmond, Va., and our family of four moved from Manhattan in New York City to south of the Mason-Dixon line. That same year, Anne Holden and her husband, Tim Kaine, moved from Massachusetts back to the Commonwealth.

Tim and I met one Sunday at the Friends Meeting of Richmond. He would convince me to move forward with the prosecution of four youths who had thrown a brick through the front window of our house in the Fan District. His reasoning was that if I didn't press charges, he might well end up defending one of them years later when the boy ended up on death row facing execution

because there had been no consequences for earlier errant behavior. I did prosecute and Tim and I became friends. Neither of us knew what the future would hold.

Within weeks of us relocating to Virginia, I was sad to see that Linwood Briley was the second man to be executed in the modern era of the death penalty in Virginia. A friend at the Richmond Peace Education Center where I was volunteering invited me to attend the vigil to be held outside the gates.

Across the boulevard hundreds of people had gathered to support the killing of Linwood. Their signs read "Chicken Fried Briley" and "Fry Briley Fry." It was my first time as an adult to stand watch at a death house, but would not be my last. I don't know if Tim Kaine was at that vigil, but in the years to come, he would be the pro bono counsel for a number of men on death row.

In 2002 I became the director of Virginians for Alternatives to the Death

Penalty (VADP) when Tim Kaine was the lieutenant governor (2002-2006). He went on to serve as governor of the Commonwealth (2006-2010). Under his watch, 11 men were executed. The day of each execution, I would attend a noon hour vigil in Charlottesville and then drive to Richmond for a vigil outside the Office of the Governor and leave a personal note asking Gov. Kaine to commute the sentence of death to life in prison without parole, before driving on to Jarratt, Va., to conduct a nighttime vigil outside the Greensville Correctional Center where the Death House is located.

After I left VADP to work for the Capital Punishment Project of the ACLU, I would drive back to Jarratt to vigil at the executions. The Commonwealth has executed 1,390 men, women and children since 1608, including 113 since 1977. I lived in Virginia for 112 of those executions.

I have watched as the number of states that no

longer have capital punishment has grown over the last two decades, from 15 to 22. In the next few weeks, the Commonwealth of Virginia will make that 23. The historic significance of Virginia abolishing the death penalty is that she will become the first member of the former Confederate States of America to do so. Of all places for a state legislature to kill the death penalty, Richmond, Va., the capital of the Confederacy, is a monumental move.

My home in Richmond was one block from the boulevard of Monument Avenue. Statues of Jefferson Davis, Robert E Lee, Jeb Stuart, and Matthew Fontaine Maury all celebrated the "late great unpleasantness," or the "War of Northern Aggression," as some here in the South still refer to the Civil War.

Is it just a coincidence that these monuments to enslavement are being removed at the same time that a jurisdiction that has executed more people than any other state in the na-

tion is ending the death penalty? I don't believe so.

We are living in a time of great upheaval. "Change is always painful, being as it is a goodbye," is one of my favorite lines of poetry. Virginia may be the first state in the South to abolish capital punishment, but she will not be the last. The era of executions is coming to an end and we should celebrate the end of legalized lynching known as the death penalty, not only in Virginia, but throughout this nation.

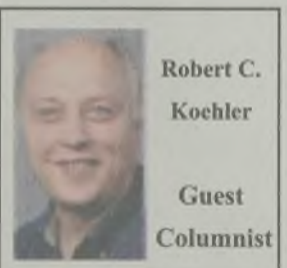
As I relocated to Winston-Salem three years ago to live near my grandchildren, I am aware that Confederate monuments to slavery's Lost Cause are also coming down in the Tar Heel state. Let us commit ourselves to ending capital punishment across this country.

My friend, Tim Kaine, is now a United States senator from Virginia and co-sponsor of the Federal Death Penalty Prohibition Act of 2021. In announcing his sponsorship of this bicameral legislation, he said: "I have long

been morally opposed to the death penalty and believe murder of any sort is wrong. Capital punishment in the United States is disproportionately applied to people of color. We cannot continue to make claims for a more perfect union while condoning outdated, inhumane, and unjust practices. As a former civil rights lawyer, I am proud to reintroduce this bill to eliminate the use of capital punishment at the federal level once and for all."

Jack Payden-Travers lives in Winston-Salem where he and his wife have held a daily Black Lives Matter vigil at a South Main Street intersection since June 4, 2020. Since his college days he has been active in movements for social change and has worked as a college professor, middle school teacher, daycare provider, and director of a nonprofit. For five years he directed Virginians for Alternatives to the Death Penalty and subsequently became the Public

Taking war personally



Robert C. Koehler
Guest Columnist

"For Washington, it seems that whatever the problem is, the answer is bombing."

In the wake of Joe Biden's first act of murder as president ... excuse me, his first act of defensive military action, bombing a border post in Syria last week, killing 22 of our enemies. This action, of course, will quickly be forgotten. "The United States has bombed Syria more than 20,000 times over the past eight years," Zunes notes, adding: "The United States began bombing these ancient lands 30 years ago, at the start of the Gulf War. The U.S. has continued bombing Iraq and neighboring countries on and off ever since. Each time, we have been told that doing so would protect American interests and help bring peace and stability to the region. Yet each period of airstrikes has brought more suffering, more violence, less security and greater insta-

bility."

It's called — usually with a shrug — endless war. When I ponder this phenomenon as an American citizen, for God's sake, I'm endlessly stunned and instantly immobilized. I have no say in this matter and neither do you.

This is just how it is. We devote a trillion or so dollars a year to militarism. The God of War is our ruler, and the job of the guy we elect as president is to slather our every act of war in sophisticated justification, a.k.a., public relations. George W. Bush gave us citizens our marching orders two decades ago: Go shopping. For most Americans, war has simply been converted into a quiet abstraction, with the deaths of civilians conveniently shunted aside as collateral damage. War has nothing to do with us. Except, of course, it does, at least in one way. The nature of war is to beget war: to magnify trouble, to make matters worse. War always comes home.

And suddenly I find myself thinking of Sgt. Timothy McVeigh, an American soldier who served with distinction in the initial Gulf War, launched by George H.W. Bush in 1991. Four years

later, outraged over various governmental actions, McVeigh went to war against his home country, blowing up the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City with a fertilizer-and-racing-fuel bomb. He and his accomplices killed 168 people, including 19 children. But he famously was able to protect himself from any remorse over these deaths by describing them in military terms. They were collateral damage.

How dare I bring up McVeigh's horrific legacy!

I do so in anguish, feeling that the only way to interrupt the psychological and (of course) financial grip the God of War has on the American government and much of its population is to shatter war's protective abstractions. Good violence is no better than bad violence. Our violence is no better than theirs. Murder is murder.

Before we can talk about peace — release it from its simplistic abstraction ("can't we all just get along?") and begin envisioning it, both individually and collectively, in all its overwhelming complexity — I believe we have to see acts of war for what they are, which is to say, see them the way the victims

see them. We have to take them personally.

This is not the normal way of our media. So I reach beyond the normal, quoting friend and longtime peace activist Kathy Kelly, who bleeds from the heart as she writes about 30 years of America-inflicted hell in the Middle East, from the Highway of Death to the shock-and-awe bombing of Iraq to ...

Reflecting on the fact that Pope Francis visited Iraq this month — the first-ever papal visit to Iraq — she writes: "But knowing of his eloquent and authentic plea to end wars and stop the pernicious weapons trade, I wish he could kneel and kiss the ground at the Amiriyyah shelter in Baghdad."

Oh my God, Amiriyyah — another act of collateral damage, transcending McVeigh, conducted not by loner terrorists but by the U.S. military on Valentine's Day 1991, during the first Gulf War. Amiriyyah was a Baghdad bunker to which hundreds of people had fled for safety during a U.S. bombing raid. What happened was, two of our smart bombs went through a ventilation shaft in the bunker, destroying it and killing more than 400 people, mostly women and

children. Many of them suffocated or burned to death as the temperature in the bunker became unimaginable.

Not to worry, though. Thirty years on, a U.S. general, discussing the bombing with Aljazeera said the bunker was thought to be a military command center, explaining: "Civilian casualties happened, this was a legitimate military target, it was hit precisely, it was destroyed and put out of business — and there was very little collateral damage."

You know, only 400-plus civilians.

Kelly wrote: "I wish President Joe Biden could meet the Pope there and ask him to hear his confession."

This would be the beginning of peace, that is to say, the dawn of national awareness. We, by which I mean all of humanity, face enormous dangers in the coming years, particularly related to climate change; they must be addressed. But no, we should not start nuking hurricanes. Our real threats will not be solved, but they will certainly be amplified, by militarism.

However, lacking Kathy Kelly's imagined scenario in Baghdad, how do we begin transcending

the nation's military mindset ... and the cash-flow loop that makes it continually profitable to those in power?

As Lindsay Koshgarian writes: "The U.S. military reaches around the globe, with approximately 800 foreign military installations in nearly half the world's countries, and takes up more than half the discretionary budget that Congress allocates each year. Every decade or two, there is a new rationale for all this, with a new threat."

Is Biden the president with the will and courage to begin standing up to this? We, the people, must challenge him to be that president, channeling the voices of those who would do so if they could — the ones who died, at Amiriyyah and countless other targeted sites, including the Murrah Federal Building.

Robert Koehler (koehlercw@gmail.com), syndicated by PeaceVoice, is a Chicago award-winning journalist and editor. He is the author of "Courage Grows Strong at the Wound."