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'Black Panther' Success Says Little About State Of Black Film

By Phillip L. Cunningham

Wake Forest University

When Marvel Studios released "Black Panther" in February 2018, it marked the first Marvel Cinematic Universe film to feature a Black superhero and star a predominantly Black cast.

Its estimated production budget was US\$200 million, making it the first Black film – conventionally defined as a film that is directed by a Black director, features a Black cast, and focuses on some aspect of the Black experience – ever to receive that level of financial support.

As a scholar of media and Black popular culture, I was often asked to respond to the resounding success of that first "Black Panther" film, which had shattered expectations of its box office performance.

Would it lead to more big-budget Black films? Was its popularity an indication that the global marketplace – the real source of trepidation about the film's potential – was finally ready to embrace Black-cast films?

With the release of the massively successful "Black Panther: Wakanda Forever" in November 2022, I expect those questions to reemerge.

Yet as I review the cinematic landscape between the original and its sequel, I am inclined to restate the answer I gave back in 2018: Assumptions should not be made about the state of Black film based on the success of the "Black Panther" franchise.

Prior to its release, the pro-



ducers of "Black Panther" faced questions about whether there was a market for a Black blockbuster film, even one ensconced in the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

After all, since the Wesley Snipes-led "Blade" trilogy, which came out in the late-1990s and early 2000s, Black superhero films had experienced diminishing returns. There was one notable exception: the commercially successful, though heavily

panned "Hancock" (2008), starring Will Smith.

Otherwise, Black superhero films such as "Catwoman" (2004) and "Sleight" (2016) either flopped or had a limited release.

Furthermore, until "Black Panther," no Black film exceeded a \$100 million budget, the average benchmark for modern Hollywood blockbusters.

Nonetheless, despite these early concerns, "Black Panther" earned the highest domestic

gross, \$700 million, of all films released in 2018, while earning \$1.3 billion in worldwide gross, second only to "Avengers: Infinity War."

"Black Panther" emerged at the tail end of what many industry experts considered to be a surprisingly successful run of Black films, which included the biopic "Hidden Figures" (2016) and the raunchy comedy "Girls Trip" (2017). Despite their modest budgets, they earned over

\$100 million apiece at the box office – \$235 million and \$140 million, respectively.

However, both films were mostly reliant on the domestic box office, especially the R-rated "Girls Trip," which was only released in a handful of foreign markets. Conventional wisdom has long held that Black films will fail abroad. International distributors and studios typically ignore them during the presale process or at film festivals and

markets, reasoning that Black films are too culturally specific – not only in terms of their Blackness, but also their Americanness.

Films like "Black Panther" and the Oscar winning "Moonlight" (2016), which earned more on the international market than the domestic market, certainly challenged those assumptions. It has yet to upend them.

What do those Black films released in theaters in the nearly five years between "Black Panther" and "Black Panther: Wakanda Forever" tell us about the former's impact?

The simple answer is that the original "Black Panther" has had no discernible influence on industry practices whatsoever.

Since 2018, no other Black blockbuster has emerged, save for the sequel itself. Granted, Black filmmaker Ava DuVernay's remake of "A Wrinkle in Time" (2018) reportedly cost an estimated \$100 million; however, while Black actors portrayed the protagonist and a few other characters, the film features a multi-cultural ensemble cast – which, as scholars such as Mary Beltran have pointed out, has become the primary strategy for achieving diversity in film.

Even if one were to include "A Wrinkle in Time," the grand total of Black films with budgets exceeding \$100 million is three, with the two "Black Panther" films being the others – all during an era in which there have

(See **BLACK FILM**, P. 2)

Amazon Begins 1st Round Mass Layoffs Of Corporate Staff

By Haleluya Hadero

AP Business Writer

NEW YORK N.Y. (AP)—Amazon has begun mass layoffs in its corporate ranks, becoming the latest tech company to trim its workforce amid rising fears about the wider economic environment.

On Tuesday, the company notified regional authorities in California that it would lay off about 260 workers at various facilities that employ data scientists, software engineers and other corporate workers. Those job cuts would be effective beginning on Jan. 17, 2023.

Amazon would not specify how

many more layoffs may be in the works beyond the ones confirmed through California's Worker Adjustment and Retraining Notification Act, also known as WARN, which requires companies to provide 60 days' notice if they have 75 or more full-time or part-time workers. Amazon employs more than 1.5 million workers globally, primarily made up of hourly workers.

The online retail giant, like other tech and social media giants, saw sizable profits during the COVID-19 pandemic, as homebound shoppers purchased more items online. But revenue growth slowed as the worst of the pandemic eased and consum-

ers relied less on ecommerce.

The Seattle-based company reported two consecutive losses this year, driven mainly by write-downs of the value of its stock investment in electric vehicle start-up Rivian Automotive. The company returned to profitability during the third quarter, but investors were gloomy about its weaker-than-expected revenue and lackluster projections for the current quarter, which is typically good for retailers due to the holiday shopping season.

In an effort to cut back on costs, Amazon has already been axing some of its projects—including subsidiary fabric.com, Amazon Care, and the cooler-size

home delivery robot Scout. It's also been scaling back its physical footprint by delaying—or canceling—plans to occupy some new warehouses across the country. And Amazon Chief Financial Officer Brian Olsavsky has said the company was preparing for what could be a slower growth period and would be careful about hiring in the near future.

Mass layoffs are rare at Amazon, but the company has had rounds of job cuts in 2018 and in 2001 during the dot-com crash. On the warehouse side, the ecommerce giant typically trims its workforce through attrition.

Faced with high costs, the company announced earlier this

month it would pause hiring among its corporate workforce, adding to the freeze it put a few weeks earlier on its retail division. But the layoffs weren't far off. Employees who work in different units, including voice assistant Alexa and cloud gaming platform Amazon Luna, said they were let go on Tuesday, according to LinkedIn posts. Some of them were based in Seattle, where the company has its headquarters.

"As part of our annual operating planning review process, we always look at each of our businesses and what we believe

we should change," Amazon spokesperson Kelly Nantel said in a statement. "As we've gone through this, given the current macro-economic environment (as well as several years of rapid hiring), some teams are making adjustments, which in some cases means certain roles are no longer necessary."

In a note to the devices & services team that Amazon shared on its website, the team's senior vice president David Limp said the company was consolidating some teams and programs.

(See **AMAZON LAYOFFS**, P. 2)

Cuba's Informal Market Finds Space

By Megan Janetsky

Associated Press

HAVANA, Cuba (AP)—In the Telegram group chat, the messages roll in like waves.

"I need liquid ibuprofen and acetaminophen, please," wrote one user. "It's urgent, it's for my 10-month-old baby."

Others offer medicine brought from outside of Cuba, adding, "Write to me in a direct message." Emoji-speckled lists offer antibiotics, pregnancy tests, vitamins, rash creams and more.

The group message, which includes 170,000 people, is just one of many that have flourished in recent years in Cuba alongside an exponential increase in internet usage on the communist-governed island.

The informal sale of everything from eggs to car parts—the country's so-called black market—is a time-honored practice in crisis-stricken Cuba, where access to the most basic items such as milk, chicken, medicine and cleaning products has always been limited. The market is

technically illegal, but the extent of illegality, in official eyes, can vary by the sort of items sold and how they were obtained.

Before the internet, such exchanges took place "through your contacts, your neighbors, your local community," said Ricardo Torres, a Cuban and economics fellow at American University in Washington. "But now, through the internet, you get to reach out to an entire province."

With shortages and economic turmoil at the worst they've been in years, the online marketplace

"has exploded," Torres said.

Bustling WhatsApp groups discuss the informal exchange rate, which provides more pesos per dollar or euro than the official bank rate.

Meanwhile, Cuba's versions of Craigslist—sites such as Revolico, the island's first digital buying-and-selling tool—advertise everything from electric bicycles brought in from other countries to "capitalist apartments" in Havana's wealthy districts.

Many products are sold in pesos, but higher-priced items are often listed in dollars, with payments either handled in cash or through bank transfers outside the country.

While wealthier Cubans—or those with families sending money from abroad—can afford more lavish items, many basic items remain unaffordable for people like Leonardo, a state-employed engineer who asked that his real name not be used because he fears retribution from the government.

Three months ago, Leonardo began buying items such as inhalers, antibiotics and rash creams from friends arriving from other countries, then reselling them for a small profit online. Government authorities are harshly critical of such "revendedores," or resellers, especially those who buy products in Cuban stores then sell them at a higher price.

In late October, President Miguel Díaz-Canel called for a crackdown on the practice, referring to the revendedores as "criminals, swindlers, riffraff,



S. CAROLINA'S US HOUSE MAPS UNDER SCRUTINY BECAUSE OF RACE

A trial to determine whether South Carolina's congressional maps are legal closes Tuesday with arguments over whether the state legislature diluted Black voting power by remaking the boundaries of the only U.S. House district Democrats have flipped in more than 30 years.

The trial also marks the first time the South Carolina maps have been legally scrutinized since the U.S. Supreme Court removed part of a 1965 law that required the state to get federal approval to protect against discriminatory redistricting proposals.

A panel of three federal judges on Tuesday heard closing arguments in the case in Charleston. A ruling is expected later and any appeal will be made directly to the U.S. Supreme Court.

The Republican-dominated General Assembly redrew the maps early this year based on the 2020 U.S. census, and they were used in this month's midterm elections.

According to a lawsuit filed by the NAACP, the new boundaries unconstitutionally split Black voters in the state's 1st, 2nd and 5th Districts and packed them all into the 6th District, which already had a majority of African American voters.

The civil rights group has asserted during months of arguments that the General Assembly's actions not only diluted Black voting strength, but also strengthened the 6-to-1 advantage Republicans have in the state's U.S. House delegation. The last time a Democrat flipped a U.S. House seat was in 2018. Before that Democrats hadn't won a seat from Republican control since 1986.

SHERIFF: VANDALISM CUTS POWER ACROSS NORTH CAROLINA COUNTY

CARTHAGE, N.C. (AP) — Multiple power substations in a North Carolina county were damaged by gunfire in an apparent act of criminal vandalism, leaving tens of thousands of people without electricity, authorities said.

The power outage across Moore County that began just after 7 p.m. Saturday is being investigated as a criminal act, Moore County Sheriff Ronnie Fields said in a Facebook post. More than 40,000 electric customers in the county remained without power on Sunday morning, according to poweroutage.us.

"As utility companies began responding to the different substa-

(See **STATE BRIEFS**, P. 2)



TURNING TO THE INTERNET FOR YOUR NEEDS

(See **CUBA'S MARKET**, P. 2)

STATE BRIEFS

Continued from page 1

tions, evidence was discovered that indicated that intentional vandalism had occurred at multiple sites," the sheriff said.

Southern Pines Fire Chief Mike Cameron said that two substations in the county were damaged by gunfire on Saturday and that a possible motive wasn't clear. Cameron, also the assistant town manager, said that the information about the cause was given to him by Duke Energy. A Duke Energy spokesman didn't immediately respond to an email asking about the gunfire.

Moore County deputies and other law enforcement responded and were providing security at the affected sites, the sheriff's office said.

Duke Energy spokesman Jeff Brooks said in an earlier statement that the company experienced "multiple equipment failures" at substations and the power company was "investigating signs of potential vandalism related to the outages."

NORTH CAROLINA POLICE CHARGE SUSPECT IN DOUBLE HOMICIDE

ROCKY MOUNT, N.C. (AP) — A man has been charged in the fatal shootings of a woman and a man whose bodies were found in a vehicle with two uninjured toddlers in Rocky Mount, North Carolina.

The Rocky Mount Telegram reports that Eric Coley was arrested on Friday. He is charged with two counts of first-degree murder and possession of a firearm by a felon. That's according to police spokesman Cpl. Ricky Jackson.

The 42-year-old is being held without bond in the Nash County Detention Center, county sheriff's records online said.

The bodies of Destiny Wiggins, 24, and Devone Brown, 28, were found with apparent gunshot wounds between approximately 6 a.m. and 6:15 a.m. on Thursday.

Jackson in the first news release on Thursday about the case said the two toddlers were found in the rear seat of the vehicle.

Coley is due at 9 a.m. on Monday in Nash County District Court for a first appearance before the court.

State Public Safety records said Coley was convicted in 2013 in Edgecombe County for possessing stolen goods.

The records also said Coley was convicted in 2004 in Edgecombe County for assault inflicting serious bodily injury and in 1998 in Edgecombe County for attempted breaking and entering.

MEXICO WANTS AMERICAN EXTRADITED ON CHARGES IN TOURIST DEATH

CABO SAN LUCAS, Mexico (AP)—Mexican prosecutors have filed charges against a U.S. woman suspected of killing another American seen being beaten in a viral video.

Prosecutors in the state of Baja California Sur did not name the suspect in the Oct. 29 death of Shanquella Robinson.

But on Thursday, they said they had approached Mexican federal prosecutors and diplomats to try to get the woman extradited to face charges in Mexico.

Robinson's death at a resort development in San Jose del Cabo shocked people in both countries. The video raised suspicions that Robinson may have died at the hands of people she was traveling with.

Local prosecutor Antonio López Rodríguez said the case was being treated as a potential homicide and an arrest warrant had been issued for the suspect. The group Robinson was traveling with, however, left Mexico after she was found dead in a rented villa.

State prosecutor Daniel de la Rosa Anaya said the suspect was also an American, but did not identify her.

News outlets in Charlotte reported that the people Robinson was traveling with gave differing versions of how she died, but that an autopsy revealed she died of a severe spinal cord or neck injury.

A video apparently taped at the luxury villa in San Jose del Cabo shows one woman, apparently an American, beating another woman identified as Robinson.

The video has been reposted many times on social media sites. In it, a man with an American accent can be heard saying, "Can you at least fight back?" The man did not appear to intervene in the beating.

NC HEALTH AGENCY APPEALING RULING ON SERVICES FOR DISABLED

RALEIGH, N.C. (AP) — North Carolina's government is appealing a trial judge's order that demands many more community services by certain dates for people with intellectual and development disabilities who otherwise live at institutions, the top state health official said Wednesday.

Department of Health and Human Services Secretary Kody Kinsley said the formal challenge is needed because he has "grave concerns" about some of the directives issued Nov. 2 by Superior Court Judge Allen Baddour. The group that was the driving force behind a 2017 lawsuit that led to his order said it was discouraged by Kinsley's challenge.

Kinsley pointed in particular to Baddour's directive that new admissions at state-run development centers, privately intermediate care facilities and certain adult care homes must stop as of January 2028 for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

The secretary said that could ultimately lead to closures of small group homes, leaving potentially 1,000 or more clients seeking new accommodations while creating instability for people who are happy in their current situations.

"We cannot have a ruling go into place that's going to bind our hands, that's going to push people into homelessness, essentially," Kinsley told reporters. "We've got to find a different path."

Kinsley also on Wednesday unveiled a policy and funding counterproposal of sorts that he said would promote independence for people with such disabilities and choices for services in a deliberate fashion.

Some formal General Assembly legislation would be needed to ultimately reach the \$150 million in annual federal and state spending starting next July that the proposal envisions. These requests and others should be in Democratic Gov. Roy Cooper's upcoming budget proposal, the secretary said.

State Of Black Film—CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

been hundreds of mainstream films with budgets exceeding \$100 million.

Otherwise, most of the Black films released in theaters between 2018 and 2022 typically were low budget by Hollywood standards — \$3 million to \$20 million in most cases — with only a handful, such as the 2021 Aretha Franklin biopic "Respect," costing \$50 million to 60 million.

Perhaps the most notable change has been the medium. Many Black films now appear on either cable networks that cater to a Black audience — namely Black Entertainment Television

and, more recently, Lifetime — or on streaming services such as Netflix. Tyler Perry, the most popular and prolific Black filmmaker of the modern era, has released his latest films — "A Jazzman's Blues" (2022), "A Ma-dea Homecoming" (2022) and "A Fall from Grace" (2020) — directly to Netflix.

Furthermore, no other Black film has approached the financial success of "Black Panther." Granted, several Black films have fared well at the box office, especially relative to their production costs. Foremost among them is Jordan Peele's "Us" (2019), which cost an estimated

\$20 million, yet earned approximately \$256 million worldwide despite its R rating and the fact that it was never released in China.

Without question, large budgets and commercial success are not the only measures of a film's value and significance.

As has historically been the case, Black film has managed to do more with less. The critical acclaim afforded to films such as "BlackKlansman" (2018), "If Beale Street Could Talk" (2019) and "King Richard" (2021) reflect this fact. All reflect trends in contemporary Black filmmaking — comedies, historical dramas

and biopics abound, for instance — and were made for a fraction of the cost of both "Black Panther" films.

In truth, the zeal with which some cast "Black Panther" as a bellwether for Black films is part of continued haranguing over their viability, particularly after the #OscarsSoWhite movement that drew attention to the lack of diversity at the 2016 Academy Awards.

However, its positioning as a Disney property within Marvel's transmedia storytelling effort makes it so atypical that its success — and that of its sequel — portends little about Black film.

Amazon Begins Layoffs—CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

He said those laid off in the process were notified on Tuesday and the company will work with them to "provide support," including assistance in finding new roles. If an employee cannot find a new role within the company, Limp said Amazon will provide a severance payment, external job placement

support and what he called transitional benefits.

The retail behemoth follows other tech giants that have cut jobs in the past few weeks—a reversal from earlier this year, when tech workers were in high demand. Facebook parent Meta said last week it would lay off 11,000 people, about 13 percent

of its workforce. And Elon Musk, the new Twitter CEO, slashed the company's workforce in half this month.

Going forward, Wedbush Securities analyst Daniel Ives said he believes Amazon will likely sustain its workforce and investments in profitable areas such as the cloud computing unit AWS,

while trimming costs in non-strategic areas like Alexa and other moonshot projects.

"The clock has struck midnight in terms of hyper-growth for Big Tech," Ives said. "These companies hired at such an eye popping rate, it was not sustainable. Now there's some painful steps ahead."

Cuba's Informal Market—CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

the lazy and the corrupt."

"What we can't allow is that those who don't work, don't contribute and break the law earn more and have more opportunities to live well than those who actually contribute," he said during a meeting with government officials. "If we did that... we'd be breaking the concepts of socialism."

But Leonardo said he and others like him are just trying to get by.

"This medicine goes to the people who need it, people who have respiratory issues," he said. "Those who use them are people who really need them... More than anything else, we sell antibiotics."

With the money he's earned from his sales, Leonardo has been able to buy soap and food, as well as antibiotics and vitamins for his elderly parents.

The rise of the new digital marketplaces speaks to a specific brand of creative resilience that Cubans have developed during decades of economic turmoil. Much of the crisis is a result of the U.S. government's six-decade trade embargo on the island, but critics say it's also due to government mismanagement of the economy and reluctance to embrace the private sector.

So people on the island tend to be highly resourceful, working

with whatever they have available to them—think old cars from the 1950s that still roll through the streets, thanks to mechanics using ingenuity and spare parts to address a shortage of new vehicles.

Entrepreneurs have used the same creativity to deal with what was initially very limited internet access. Carlos Javier Peña and Hiram Centelles, Cuban expatriates who live in Spain, created Revolico in 2007 to help "alleviate the hardships of life in Cuba."

They kept the site design simple, similar to Craigslist, to match the island's sluggish internet. But in 2008—the same year the government lifted a ban on sales of personal computers—it blocked access to Revolico. The ban remained in place until 2016. In the meantime, Peña and Centelles used digital tools and different host sites to jump the firewall.

Using the site was still a challenge for many, however, given the lack of cellphone internet.

Heriberto, a university student in 2008, was able to access it through a small monthly internet package given to him by the school. Others asked friends and family to buy items for them while at work, where they sometimes had internet access.

"Here, the markets more often than not don't have the things

you're looking for," said Heriberto, now 33, who asked that only his first name be used because he also feared repercussions from the government. "So you develop this custom of looking first in the store. Then when they don't have it, you look on Revolico."

Sales on WhatsApp, Facebook, and Telegram really took off in 2018, when Cubans gained access to the internet on their phones, something American University fellow Torres described as a "game changer."

Between 2000 and 2021 the number of Cubans using the internet rose from less than 1 percent of the population to 71 percent, International Telecommunications Union data shows. The internet was a lifeline for Heriberto and many other Cubans during the COVID-19 pandemic, they said.

Now, with the island's main economic sector, tourism, still recovering, many have built entire enterprises on the online sale of goods—both basic necessities such as medicine, as well as many higher-priced specialty items. Heriberto recently used the site to sell a mountain bike he priced in dollars.

Revolico co-founder Centelles says the site and similar tools have evolved to adapt to a constantly changing Cuba. For example, as the island suffers crippling blackouts, sales of power

generators and rechargeable batteries have skyrocketed, he said.

Government officials have said the internet is important for the country's economic growth—but have treated it with a "grudging acceptance," said Valerie Wirtschatter, a senior data analyst at the Brookings Institution who tracks internet usage in Cuba.

"They have never really been able to control the internet in many ways," Wirtschatter said.

Perhaps the most visible example came when mass protests erupted in 2021, largely thanks to rapidly spreading communications on social media sites including Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram and Telegram. The government blocked many key social media and messaging sites for a number of days to stop protests from spreading.

While Leonardo said he considers it risky to sell on Telegram, "in the end, you need medicine... so you assume that risk."

Heriberto still uses Revolico, but he said he now prefers sites such as Facebook that offer a level of anonymity. On those sites, he can sell using a fake profile, he said, as opposed to Revolico, which requires you to post your phone number.

"It's a basic necessity now," Heriberto said. "The internet has arrived in Cuba, and now it's fundamental."

Music Educator Is Finalist For Music Award

GOLDSBORO—Rico L. Dawson has been selected as a finalist for a national award in the Male Soloist of the Year category by the 25th Annual Texas Gospel Music Excellence Awards. The award ceremony will be held Feb. 16-19, 2023 in Houston, Texas.

Finalists were selected based on the number of ballots cast. Family, friends, fans and community members had the opportunity to select from the nominees. There were over 20 contestants in the Male Soloist of the Year category.

The musical journey of singer-songwriter Rico L. Dawson began in an improbable setting, the United States Army. While serving in the military, Rico became a member of the amateur R&B group, "Finesse." As a founding member of this group, he not only performed but wrote the single "To Be With You."

His next foray into music provided formal training and experience. He left the army and completed a Bachelor of Science degree in Music Industry Studies with a concentration in Music Business Administration at Elizabeth City State University.

Other musical pursuits include joining an additional group, "Next Episode." During his tenure with this group of performers, he wrote the soulful "A Lonely Night" and co-wrote "You'll Never Find Another Love Like Mine." The latter was recorded by "Next Episode" and featured on a CD compilation project, at his alma mater, entitled *Check the Resume: Vol. 1*.

Later, he worked as an intern for Intersection Records, an independent record label. While there, he continued writing and composing. "Don't Look No Further" is one of his best efforts during his tenure at the company.

Circumstances brought Dawson back to his home state. Upon returning to the Carolinas, Rico began working with a local producer, Lee Tate. This



RICO L. DAWSON

collaboration birthed the songs "Promises" and "Come Back to Me" Soon after, in 1998, he participated in a music seminar sponsored by WNAA-FM radio station. In December of that year, he showcased his demo for the Philadelphia Music Conference in Philadelphia, Pa.

After taking a year away from the music scene, he returned in the spring of 2000 to collaborate on a local compilation CD *Goldsboro 27530*. On that CD, he wrote and recorded three songs, "All I Want to Do," "Do You Wanna Dance," and "Turn Away." These three songs were well received on the underground circuit.

In 2001, he co-wrote and sang background on the single "Take Our Time" on Richard Ashe's debut independent CD, *Anticipation*. The single received positive feedback in the Durham

area. During that time, Rico began to teach music education in the Wayne County Public Schools. He wrote, produced, and arranged numerous original music selections for several schools from 2001-2004.

In 2004, Rico gave his life to Christ, thus putting him on a different path, musically. He no longer produced music for man's glory, but for God's glory. He began to put together gospel music selections, and with God's help, he produced numerous contemporary gospel music selections.

In 2006, Rico wrote and produced his debut contemporary gospel CD, *It's Time*. Unfortunately, financial challenges prohibited the single from garnering commercial success. Dawson was delayed but not deterred. He used this respite

to establish a stronger relationship with Christ. To that end, he has written, produced, and recorded several spiritual and reverent songs. Rico's desire is that through his music that the body of Christ is edified, God is glorified, and the unbeliever is inspired to repent and turn to the Lord. He is currently a choir director at Springfield Middle School in Wilson. While being assigned as a music educator, he has penned lyrics for a jazz composition performed by the De Sayles jazz band in 2015.

In 2020, Rico as a nominee in the Male Soloist of the Year category for the Texas Gospel Music Excellence Awards. In 2021 he was a nominee in several categories of the Season 14 Prayze Factor Awards: Urban (Solo) Artist, Rhythm & Praise (Solo) Artist, Inspirational (Solo) Artist, Contemporary Christian Artist, New Artist of the Year, Song of the Year for the song, "Supposed to Be," and Songwriter of the Year.

About the nomination, Rico shares, "Being named a finalist in this category of gifted artists and musicians is indeed a blessing. I am thankful for the opportunity to share music to inspire God's people."

You can enjoy Rico's music on all digital music platforms including Spotify, iTunes, Amazon and Google Play.

For more information or to follow his journey, follow Rico Dawson Music on Facebook at @RicoDawsonMusic or online at <https://www.reverbnation.com/ricodawson>.

The Texas Gospel Music Excellence Awards recognizes independent gospel artists across the state of Texas as well as nationally and internationally. This four-day gospel experience has been the cornerstone of Gospel Music in Texas and is the longest running independent gospel award celebration in the nation. The popularity of TGMEA has required the need for Ambassadors to serve at the national and international level.

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Business & Finance

Mail, Inc(arcerated): A Private Company Scans All Mail Sent To NC Prisons, Digitizes It, & Gives Prisoners copies.

By Kelan Lyons

NC Policy Watch

Those writing to loved ones in North Carolina prisons must send their letters not to whichever of the more than 50 prisons where their family member is locked up, but to a P.O. Box in Maryland, where their envelope is opened and scanned by a stranger before a copy is delivered to their family member in a North Carolina facility.

That's because of a change last year allowing the private company TextBehind to scan and digitize all mail sent to the incarcerated.

Calling TextBehind "safer, faster and cheaper," the North Carolina Department of Public Safety website says the agency went from dealing with mail in-house to relying on the private company "to reduce the volume of drugs and other contraband entering prisons."

Data provided to Policy Watch suggests the service could be at least partly responsible for a reduction in substance use behind bars.

Across the entire prison system, there were 7,573 infractions issued for substance abuse in Fiscal Year 2019-2020; there were 5,649 in Fiscal Year 2021-2022, a 25% decrease from the last year before TextBehind was implemented across the entire prison system.

That said, there were four deaths by overdose in state prisons in 2019, according to figures provided to Policy Watch and five in 2021, the year TextBehind was implemented system-wide.

"The state prison system works hard to keep drugs out of our facilities. It is a constant battle, fought daily," Brad Deen, a communications officer with the Department of Public Safety, said in an email, praising the practice of digitizing mail. "Because the original contents never enter the prison, we are



confident that the introduction of drugs into N.C. prisons through general offender mail has been all but eliminated. We continue to work on interdiction of contraband through other avenues, whether it's smuggled in by staff or visitors, thrown over the fence, etc."

A report published by the Prison Policy Initiative earlier this month, however, argues that there are collateral consequences to digitizing mail, including harm for the incarcerated, the prioritization of profit over inmate well-being, and ultimately, the failure to make prisons safer. "This practice of mail scan-

ning, either performed at the prison itself or off-site using a third-party vendor, strips away the privacy and the sentimentality of mail, which is often the least expensive and most-used form of communication between incarcerated people and their loved ones," Leah Wang writes in the report.

Wang, a research analyst at the Prison Policy Initiative, surveyed the websites of correctional departments across the country. North Carolina is one of at least 14 states in which prison systems are replacing physical mail with scanned copies.

At least seven states, includ-

ing North Carolina, use private companies for the scanning. West Virginia and Arkansas have been using mail-scanning the longest, since 2017, but four states adopted the practice this year — following the lead of four other states in 2021 — indicating a growing trend.

TextBehind has been processing mail sent to women incarcerated in North Carolina's prisons for females since February 2020, and for its incarcerated males since October 2021.

Mail sent to people incarcerated in North Carolina prisons is first sent to a P.O. Box in Phoenix, Maryland, where it is scanned. Digital copies are then sent to the incarcerated person's prison, where the mailroom prints the approved pages and delivers them.

"Keeping suspect mail out of prison, yet still providing the contents, should reduce the contraband smuggled into prisons," the Department of Public Safety website reads. "The result is a safer and more secure prison environment, reducing drug use and risk of overdose. Violence among offenders fighting over the contraband trade should also decline."

Deen said that the use of TextBehind is part of a broader set of policies in recent years to crack down on drug use behind bars. Those policies include beefing up entry and exit screening processes for visitors and staff and installing motion detectors at

some prisons to prevent outsiders delivering drugs by throwing them over the fence.

"Prisons has a zero tolerance for the introduction of contraband to any prison from any source," Deen said, including staff. "When possible, we support prosecution of those responsible."

One of the issues Wang finds with mail-scanning is it prioritizes profit over the well-being of the incarcerated. Private companies often offer "bundled" services to prison systems, like phone calls and tablet computers — TextBehind also offers electronic messaging and electronic children's drawings — incentivizing the incarcerated to use other means of communication which may be more costly.

"Scanning mail pushes incarcerated people to use other, paid communications services provided by the companies: Compared to mail that's delayed due to scanning procedures, or scanned incorrectly, incarcerated people and their loved ones often understandably switch to electronic messaging (which requires the purchase of digital stamps), phone calls, or video calls," Wang writes.

The DPS website states that mail sent via the company's app is processed faster than if it is sent through the U.S. Postal Service. Anything sent through the app is forwarded by TextBehind to the prison for delivery. That app is free, but it costs at least

49 cents — "less than a stamp," the DPS website reads — to send anything. The company also lists a slew of pay-to-send options on its website.

"NCDPS (and taxpayers) will not pay for anything, not even the paper copies. TextBehind provides the printers and printer maintenance to all 55 prisons," the DPS website reads.

Original letters mailed to the Maryland P.O. Box are shredded in 30 calendar days. Family members can request their letter be returned, but it costs \$2.50.

The North Carolina prison system's use of TextBehind means that the incarcerated do not lay their hands on the letters touched by their loved ones. Artwork sent by their children is scanned by strangers, copied and then delivered to the incarcerated parent, a duplicate of a drawing lovingly rendered to a father or mother separated by miles, concrete and barbed wire.

The DPS website acknowledges this in a list of frequently asked questions: "Why do you have to make copies? A copy of a card or kids' artwork isn't the same."

Prison drug smugglers often coat paper with liquid forms of fentanyl, Suboxone, K2, LSD and other deadly drugs," the website reads. "Mailroom staff can accidentally be exposed to the drugs by touching the paper or breathing the fumes."

The idea that touching fentanyl can lead to an overdose is a persistent narrative in the law enforcement community. It also is disputed regularly by public health experts, one of whom told the Washington Post that secondhand exposure is "complete nonsense."

Asked to elaborate on how often this happens in North Carolina prisons, Deen said DPS did not have any reports of mailroom staff having suffered contact exposure to drugs or fumes.

"We train our mailroom personnel in proper precautions for handling mail and avoiding exposure to dangerous materials," he said.

Wang's report contends that mail screening doesn't even do what it's purported to do: make prisons safer. Officials in Pennsylvania said 0.7% of incoming mail was infected with drugs in 2018, right before they started using mail scanning. Nearly a year into scanning the mail, 0.6% of mail was tainted. Overdoses in Missouri, meanwhile, increased in the first three months after the prison system started digitizing mail.

What's more, security measures like mail scanning or banning in-person visitation ignores the fact that corrections staff are a major source of contraband in the prisons, Wang argues based on a survey from 2018.

FCC Bans Huawei, ZTE Products

WASHINGTON, D.C. (AP) — The U.S. is banning the sale of communications equipment made by Chinese companies Huawei and ZTE and restricting the use of some China-made video surveillance systems, citing an "unacceptable risk" to national security.

The five-member Federal Communications Commission said Friday it has voted unanimously to adopt new rules that will block the importation or sale of certain technology products that pose security risks to U.S. critical infrastructure. It's the latest in a years-long escalation of U.S. restrictions of Chinese technology that began with President Donald

Trump and has continued under President Joe Biden's administration.

"The FCC is committed to protecting our national security by ensuring that untrustworthy communications equipment is not authorized for use within our borders, and we are continuing that work here," said FCC Chairwoman Jessica Rosenworcel, a Democrat, in a prepared statement.

Huawei declined comment Friday. Along with Huawei and ZTE, the order affects products made by companies such as Hikvision and Dahua, makers of widely used video surveillance cameras.

The FCC's order applies to future authorizations of equipment,

though the agency leaves open the possibility it could revoke previous authorizations.

"Our unanimous decision represents the first time in FCC history that we have voted to prohibit the authorization of new equipment based on national security concerns," tweeted Brendan Carr, a Republican FCC commissioner.

Carr added that as "a result of our order, no new Huawei or ZTE equipment can be approved. And no new Dahua, Hikvision, or Hytera gear can be approved unless they assure the FCC that their gear won't be used for public safety, security of government facilities, & other national security purposes."

Foxconn Apologizes For Pay Dispute At Its China Factory

By Joe McDonald

AP Business Writer

BEIJING, China (AP)—The company that assembles Apple Inc.'s iPhones apologized Thursday for a pay dispute that triggered employee protests at a factory where anti-virus controls have slowed production.

Employees complained Foxconn Technology Group changed the terms of wages offered to attract them to the factory in

the central city of Zhengzhou. Foxconn is trying to rebuild the workforce after employees walked out last month over complaints about unsafe conditions.

Videos on social media showed police in white protective suits kicking and clubbing workers during the protest that erupted Tuesday and lasted into the next day.

Foxconn, the biggest contract assembler of smartphones and other electronics for Apple and

other global brands, blamed a "technical error" in the process of adding new employees and said they would be paid what they were promised.

"We apologize for an input error in the computer system and guarantee that the actual pay is the same as agreed and the official recruitment posters," said a company statement. It promised to "try its best to actively solve the concerns and reasonable demands of employees."

Late Wednesday, Apple said it had people on the ground at Foxconn's Zhengzhou facility.

"We are reviewing the situation and working closely with Foxconn to ensure their employees' concerns are addressed," the company based in Cupertino, Calif., said.

The dispute comes as the ruling Communist Party tries to contain a surge in coronavirus cases without shutting down factories, as it did in 2020 at the start of the pandemic. Its tactics include "closed-loop management," or having employees live at their workplaces without outside contact.

Authorities promised last month to reduce economic disruption by cutting quarantine times and making other changes to China's "zero-COVID" strategy, which aims to isolate every case. Despite that, the infection surge has prompted authorities to suspend access to neighborhoods and factories and to close office buildings, shops and restaurants in parts of many cities.

On Thursday, people in eight districts of Zhengzhou with a total of 6.6 million residents were told to stay home for five days. Daily mass testing was ordered for a "war of annihilation" against the virus.

Apple earlier warned iPhone 14 deliveries would be delayed after employees walked out of the Zhengzhou factory and access to the industrial zone around the facility was suspend-

ed following outbreaks.

To attract new workers, Foxconn offered 25,000 yuan (\$3,500) for two months of work, according to employees, or almost 50 percent more than news reports say its highest wages usually are.

Employees complained that after they arrived, they were told they had to work an additional two months at lower pay to receive the higher wage, according to an employee, Li Sanshan.

Foxconn offered up to 10,000 yuan (\$1,400) to new hires who choose to leave, the finance news outlet Cailianshe reported, citing unidentified recruiting agents.

Foxconn's statement Thurs-

day said employees who leave will receive unspecified "care subsidies" but gave no details. It promised "comprehensive support" for those who stay.

The protests in Zhengzhou come amid public frustration over restrictions that have confined millions of people to their homes. Videos on social media show residents in some areas tearing down barricades set up to enforce neighborhood closures.

Foxconn, headquartered in New Taipei City, Taiwan, earlier denied what it said were comments online that employees with the virus lived in factory dormitories.



WE'RE SORRY—After prolonged problems with COVID lockdowns at its China factory, Foxconn apologized Thursday for a pay "misunderstanding" led to riots and brought production to a standstill.

Classifieds



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The North Carolina Department of Public Safety has the following contract in Anson County out for bid: C- C11524 SCOID 21-22979-01A Anson CI-Roof Repairs. The bid opening is scheduled for: Thursday, 12/15/2022. To obtain the Notice to Bidders, any Pre-Bid Requirements, and any Addenda visit: <https://www.ips.state.nc.us/ips/AGENCY/PDF/151246000.pdf>

Opinion



How We Can Influence the Courts That Influence Our Lives?

By Ben Jealous

People for the American Way

As I write this, the final few races are being called in the midterm elections that were held weeks ago. It's clear that the House will be closely divided, with Republicans holding a very small majority. History shows that in midterm elections, the party that doesn't hold the presidency typically gains a lot of seats in Congress—oftentimes in a wipeout of the party in power. Republicans' gains were comparatively tiny this year—but they probably should have been even tinier.

The reason is the far-right Supreme Court, and two rulings that hurt Black voters this cycle.

Two Deep South states, Alabama and Louisiana, redrew congressional maps months before the midterms. Incredibly, given the high proportion of Black voters in those states, the maps allowed for only one majority-Black congressional district in each state. That is almost certainly a violation of the Voting Rights Act, which prohibits states from packing minority voters into fewer districts in a way that reduces their power. And you don't have to take my word for it; federal courts said the same thing and ordered both states to redraw their maps.

But state officials opposed to Black voting power fought back. And in both instances, the Supreme Court allowed them to go ahead with this year's midterm elections with maps that just happened to preserve "safe" Republican seats.

It's infuriating. And those are only two of the infuriating decisions that have come out of this Court since Donald Trump and Mitch McConnell succeeded in stacking it with enough ultraconservative justices to make a supermajority.

I know that the inner workings of the courts, especially the Supreme Court, can seem really remote in our day-to-day lives. Most people don't know any judges, and if they meet one in court it's probably happening on a very unpleasant day. In fact, my guess is that a lot of people would rather not think much about the courts at all. But we have to.

We need to pay attention to who sits on our courts and how they get there, because there is such an enormous impact on our lives whether we realize it or not. The Supreme Court's impact on the House majority is just one example. Those actions by the Court will affect what business gets done in Congress and what laws get passed—or not passed—that impact how we live and what rights we have.

Judges get their seats in different ways, especially at the state level. If you live in a place where state-level judges are elected, it's critically important to get informed and vote in those judicial elections. When it comes to federal judges, the Senate decides who will be confirmed. So every time you cast a vote for a senator, it should be for the candidate who will vote to confirm fair-minded judges with a commitment to civil rights. The Biden administration has been doing a very good job nominating diverse, highly qualified judges who have this commitment. I believe in supporting senators who have voted to confirm these judges and withholding support from those who haven't.

The same goes for the presidential election, which we will face again in less than two years. In 2016, Donald Trump ran on a platform to name far-right judges to the Supreme Court who would ultimately overturn *Roe v. Wade*. That's exactly what happened when he won, and now the Court is moving on to do other damage, too—like denying Black voters fair representation in Congress.

So what do we do? We get informed, we organize, and we vote in the next election—the same thing we do to confront so many issues this country faces. Next election seems too far away? There is something you can do in the meantime. Call your senators and tell them to confirm the federal judicial nominees that are still waiting for a Senate vote between now and the end of the year. There are literally dozens of nominees picked by President Biden, including many people of color and nominees with strong civil rights backgrounds, just waiting for Senate action to take their seats on the courts. We can show we care by calling our senators and telling them to confirm these nominees now.

Courts are going to keep showing us how much of an impact they have on our lives. We need to exercise every option we have to impact who sits on them.

Ben Jealous serves as president of People For the American Way and Professor of the Practice at the University of Pennsylvania. A New York Times best-selling author, his next book *Never Forget Our People Were Always Free* will be published by Harper Collins in January 2023.



Ubuntu Or Collective Suicide

By Robert C. Koehler

PeaceVoice

I stroke the killer's hatred and certainty, knowing the answer we all ache for—why?—will not be forthcoming.

Yes, there was another mass shooting the other day, at Club Q in Colorado Springs. A young man clothed in body armor entered the nightclub carrying an assault rifle and started shooting as a drag queen danced. In maybe two minutes he killed five people and wounded, according to some accounts, 18. Then a patron risked his life, tackled the shooter, held him immobile till police arrived.

Five people killed, a few more critically injured. This time the minority group targeted—"the enemy"—was the LGBTQ community. Hatred, guns, "permission."

In that sense, yes, America is the land of the free: free to imagine

an enemy... free to project your own self-hatred outward, onto a specifically defined group of people and sculpt them into the enemy, perhaps with the help of others, especially via social media. We are also free, for the most part, to purchase guns, including assault rifles, and lots of ammo, and plan an attack—at a church, a school, a grocery store, a nightclub, whatever.

To actually carry out that attack, well, that's illegal, maybe even illegal plus. It could be both murder and a hate crime. The mayor of Colorado Springs, according to the *New York Times*, "said the shooting 'has all the appearances of being a hate crime,' but he said that investigators were still combing through the gunman's social media history and doing interviews to determine a motive."

Somehow that matters. Why it matters is beyond me, as though killing someone with prejudice is worse than just killing someone. And it's not as though there's a serious national interest in eliminating hatred of particular groups. My God, there's political gold in many forms of hatred, LGBTQ people being one such easily targeted group.

Colorado Rep. Lauren Boebert, for instance, who tweeted remorse about the Club Q shooting and said the victims and their families "are in my thoughts and prayers," had, until then, been a notorious tweeter of anti-LGBTQ blather, making the fact-free case that they were "sick, demented" people bent on "grooming" innocent children to become gay—kind of in the same way, it seems, that refugees, according to Donald Trump, not only take our jobs but are often rapists and murderers. Create an enemy, get a following! (And guns are just for self-defense.)

This is the context in which we live. And the context is getting increasingly volatile, according to the Gun Violence Archive. This year so far, there have been 601 mass shootings (a "mass shooting" defined as at least four people being shot or killed) "in nearly every corner of the nation." In 2021, there were 690 of them. In 2019, the total was a mere 417.

There's something happening here. What it is ain't exactly clear....

And the U.S. justice system is in well over its head. Order is created from the bottom up, not enforced from the top down. But how? If nothing else, it's time to start becoming aware of what we already know. Just ask Joe Biden.

In the wake of the Club Q shooting, he made this official statement: "Places that are supposed to be safe spaces of acceptance and celebration should never be turned into places of terror and violence."

He added: "We cannot and must not tolerate hate."

OK, fine. Yada, yada. The developed, militarized world has no idea what this means, except in some imaginary way. In essence, "how do we stop tolerating hate?" is the very question the shooter himself, and all those who came before him, posed, in a totally personalized way. How do we, how do I, truly value life—my life as well as yours?

Excuse me, Mr. President, maybe we should ask South Africa about this. We can't stop tolerating hate until we realign ourselves with what it means to be alive, for which South Africans have a term: ubuntu: "I am because you are."

Or as Desmond Tutu put it: "My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in what is yours."

And now we need a national stopping point, as we let this truth transform us. What it took for South Africa to awaken were the horrors of apartheid—the brutal, legal devaluing of the lives of most of the country's population—which, after decades of protest, much of it met with violence, was finally dismantled in the early 1990s. A national holiday commemorating the end of apartheid, Human Rights Day, is celebrated every March 21. This is the date, in 1960, when the Sharpeville Massacre occurred, when police in an area south of Johannesburg opened fire on 4,000 protesters, killing 69 of them, including women and children. Many of the victims were shot in the back.

"The Sharpeville Massacre that killed 69 people is central to this public holiday as it reminds us of the cost to enforce human rights," writes Bongilewe Beja:

"Understanding how humans ought to be treated becomes imperative in ensuring that such events never happen again. Ubuntu shows us a way of acting humanely toward each other and can be a pivotal guide for society as we celebrate and enforce (our) human rights."

She then states a stunning truth, declaring that all manner of social hell, including hate-spurred violence, needs to be "countered with a positive response from civil society—guided by Ubuntu."

This will never be a perfect world. This will never be a world without conflict. But let's pause in this moment, calm ourselves, set down our hatred and look each other in the eyes. I am because you are.

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*.



Lula Da Silva's Election Is A Victory For The World

By Derek Royden

Guest Commentary

On October 30th, Brazilians voted in a presidential runoff election that was won by Luiz "Lula" Ignacio Da Silva. It was a victory by the narrowest of margins, although in fairness, the president elect's opponent had the clear support of the federal highway patrol, which reportedly set hundreds of roadblocks in areas of the country that had supported the former president in the first round of voting.

It was an election with massive stakes, perhaps the most important of 2022 in any country, a vote that, in the best-case scenario, will impact not only Brazil but the whole world, especially in terms of the unfolding climate emergency.

As Brazil controls the largest part of the Amazon region, the fate of the region is in its government's hands. Under the far-right reactionary Jair Bolsonaro, who has ruled Brazil since 2018, the meager protections in place to protect it were removed, leading to an orgy of both legal and illegal mining and logging and the subsequent encroachment of large agribusiness interests that threaten to transform the region from a forest into a savannah.

A side effect of this activity that the soon to be former president seemed gleeful about was the suffering being visited on what's left of the country's indigenous peoples, some of them uncontacted and living in isolation in their territories for centuries.

When climate scientists talk about "tipping points" that could precipitate greater natural disasters in the short term and force average temperatures higher over time, the loss of the Amazon is one of their chief concerns. Preserving it becomes doubly important considering other tipping points are already being reached in terms of glacier melt, the loss of the world's coral reefs, and other major forests like those in the Congo Basin that are being ravaged out of the view of most media.

President-elect Da Silva, who will take office on January 1st, 2023, will have his work cut out for him and will need global support to

protect this natural treasure, with the World Wildlife Fund having just released a report on the dire situation the Amazon faces at the COP27 summit that just ended in Egypt.

As the report's authors wrote:

"The situation has begun to show signs of nearing a point of no return: seasons are changing, surface water is being lost, rivers are becoming increasingly disconnected and polluted, and forests are under immense pressure from increasingly devastating waves of deforestation and fire."

During an appearance at the same conference, Lula reminded the leaders of wealthy nations of a 2009 pledge to provide \$100 billion a year to help poorer countries deal with the impacts of climate change that has not been followed through on, saying, "I don't know how many representatives of rich countries are here; I want to say that my return here is also to collect on what was promised."

We should start by ensuring that the money is there to help Lula achieve his promise to Brazilians to end deforestation in his country and defend the Amazon. It is in the whole world's interest to make sure he succeeds.

Derek Royden is a Canadian journalist.



China, Russia, And The Bomb

By Lawrence S. Wittner

SUNY/Albany

Even international alliances can unravel when nations confront the insanity of a nuclear holocaust.

An illustration of this point occurred recently, after Vladimir Putin once again threatened Ukraine and other nations with nuclear war. "To defend Russia and our people, we doubtless will use all weapons resources at our disposal," the Russian president said. "This is not a bluff."

In response to this statement and to sharp UN condemnation of Russian nuclear threats, Chinese president Xi Jinping issued a public statement early this November, assailing "the use of, or threats to use nuclear weapons." To "prevent a nuclear crisis" in Europe or Asia, he insisted, the world should "advocate that nuclear weapons cannot be used" and "a nuclear war cannot be waged."

Aren't these two nuclear-armed nations currently aligned in their resistance to U.S. foreign policy? Yes, they are, and when it came to Putin's war upon Ukraine, Xi refrained from suggesting a Russian withdrawal. But nuclear war, as the Chinese leader made clear, was simply not acceptable.

This was not the first time a Russian-Chinese alliance was ruffled by a dispute over the use of nuclear weapons. An even deeper conflict occurred during the late 1950s and early 1960s when, ironically, the roles of the two nations were exactly the reverse.

At that time, the Chinese government, led by Mao Zedong, was embarked on a crash program to develop nuclear weapons. In October 1957, China's weapons program secured a major gain when the Russian and Chinese governments signed the New Defense Technical Accord, in which the Russians agreed to supplementing the nuclear assistance they had already provided to the Chinese by supplying them with a prototype atomic bomb, missiles, and useful technical data.

But Russian officials soon had reason to doubt the wisdom of assisting China's nuclear weapons development program. As Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev recalled, the following month, at a Moscow conclave of Communist party leaders from around the world, Mao gave a speech on nuclear war that startled those in attendance.

According to the Soviet leader, the "gist" of Mao's speech was: "We shouldn't fear war. We shouldn't be afraid of atomic bombs and missiles. No matter what kind of war breaks out—conventional or thermonuclear—we'll win." When it came to China, Mao reportedly said, "we may lose more than three hundred million people. So what? War is war. The years will pass, and we'll get to work producing more babies than ever before."

Khrushchev found Mao's remarks "deeply disturbing," and recalled with irritation: "Everybody except Mao was thinking about how to avoid war. Our principal slogan was 'On with the Struggle for Peace and Peaceful Coexistence.' Yet here came Mao... saying we shouldn't be afraid of war." In early 1958, as Soviet doubts increased about the reliability of China's leadership in dealing with nuclear weapons, Khrushchev decided to postpone shipment of the prototype atomic bomb to China.

Eventually, the Soviet government not only withdrew its assistance to the Chinese nuclear weapons program in 1960, but took steps that placed the Soviet Union at loggerheads with the Chinese leadership. Key among these steps was working out an agreement on a nuclear test ban treaty with the governments of the United States and Britain—an agreement that, in part, was designed to block the ability of China to become a nuclear power.

This Soviet shift toward a nuclear arms control and disarmament treaty with the West was bitterly opposed by China's rulers, who were determined to develop nuclear weapons and, by 1964, succeeded in doing so. Meanwhile, the Sino-Soviet rift grew ever more heated, with the Chinese pulling out of the Soviet-dominated World Peace Council and ferociously competing with the Russians for leadership of the world Communist movement.

There are some lessons that can be learned from these incidents, in which major powers displayed signs of veering toward nuclear war. The obvious one is that even military allies might balk, at times, when they see an international confrontation slipping toward a nuclear disaster.

Another, less evident, is that nations with access to nuclear weapons are not necessarily restrained from threatening or waging nuclear war by the prospect of nuclear retaliation from other nuclear powers. Or, to put it another way, nuclear deterrence is unreliable. Above all, these events and others underscore the fact that, while nuclear weapons exist, the world remains in peril.

Fortunately, abolishing nuclear weapons before they destroy the world is not an utterly utopian prospect. Thanks to popular pressure and disarmament treaties, the number of nuclear weapons around the globe has been reduced since 1986 from about 70,000 to 12,700. Moreover, a UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, crafted and approved by an overwhelming majority of the world's nations, went into effect in January 2021.

Unfortunately, none of the world's nine nuclear powers has signed or ratified this nuclear weapons abolition treaty. Until they do so and, therefore, stop producing, stockpiling, and distributing nuclear weapons to other countries, the world will continue to live in a state of nuclear peril, subject only to occasional flashes of sanity by these same nuclear-armed nations.

Surely, people around the world deserve a better future.

Dr. Lawrence Wittner, syndicated by PeaceVoice, is Professor of History emeritus at SUNY/Albany and the author of *Confronting the Bomb* (Stanford University Press).