

By Carol Miller

New Mexico has been my home for nearly a half century. I've left it only for several stints working in Washington, D.C. Every time I moved to D.C., whether on the way there or coming home, I heard the same comments: "How can you work there?" "They all say one thing to get elected and another once they get there." "They are all crooks." "The only time we see them in town is when they want our vote." No matter what level of government, people ask the same questions, make the same comments, and show the same distrust of government.

Most schools in the United States stopped teaching civics years ago, which has led to a very large and dangerous civics deficit. As a result, many people have no idea which office many officials hold. Even if they recognize the names—and possibly even voted for or against a candidate—surveys and personal observation have shown voters often don't know if the politician is in the U.S. House, U.S. Senate, or state government. New Mexicans are most highly engaged in local politics, the place they see as having the most impact on their daily lives.

People from outside the state might have heard that New Mexico is unique. New Mexicans know that we live in a complex state of widely scattered communities containing many different bioregions and languages, each with its own micro-local history, recent past, and current reality.

Thirty-four percent of the state's land area is federal and the state controls an additional 22 million acres. New Mexicans have an exceptionally high level of respect for land and water. As a result, all New Mexico politicians—no matter which party or independent—campaign as pro-environment. They may be varying degrees of "green," but 100 percent of candidates run as strongly pro-environment, pro-agriculture, and pro-ranching. But how pro-environment is someone who once elected spends their political capital expanding the nuclear bomb enterprise?

The nuclear bomb complex in New Mexico shows the accuracy of the common belief held by New Mexicans: "They all say one thing to get elected and another once they get there." The unique factor about Los Alamos is that it is a stand-alone nuclear bomb

Letter from New Mexico: Nuclear bombs are US

"They all say one thing to get elected and another once they get there"



Senator Tom Udall (D-New Mexico) hosts Energy Secretary Ernest Moniz in Albuquerque in 2014

economy, and therefore easy to analyze and compare with other counties in New Mexico and other states. Many other war manufacturing operations are within large cities or more populous regions. Larger economies make teasing out the economic impacts of a primary industry more difficult. For example, Sandia National Laboratories at Kirtland Air Force Base is inside the city of Albuquerque, which has a large population and a more diverse economy. The same difficulty exists for breaking out data regarding the nuclear lab in Livermore, California.

During World War II, the federal government established a secret city for the sole purpose of developing the nuclear bomb on the plateau that has become Los Alamos County. It was a closed, gated military installation. Due to the constant efforts of the New Mexico congressional delegation since World War

II, Los Alamos has been bloated into an island of affluence surrounded by a sea of poverty. The affluence is funded nearly completely by the federal government, making Los Alamos County one of the best funded federal welfare programs in the U.S.

The sea of poverty primarily consists of Rio Arriba County, where I live, below the Los Alamos plateau. The contrast is striking. While high-end federal welfare poured into Los Alamos, making it one of the wealthiest counties in the U.S., its non-scientific workforce lives in much poorer Rio Arriba County. Los Alamos County is where promises made by candidates to protect the environment go to die. It's where the needs of the people of Rio Arriba and other high poverty areas of New Mexico are not met because the nuclear beast must be fed first.

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This area of the state has been represented primarily by Democrats since the 1980s, with the exception of Pete V. Domenici, the Republican U.S. senator who retired in 2008 and was replaced by Democrat Tom Udall.

At one time, there was hope that the U.S. would continue on the path of nuclear bomb reductions that had been initiated by the Reagan Administration. However, the New Mexico congressional delegation worked overtime to see that the nuclear bomb economy would stay strong. They rose to chair important committees where they made the nuclear bomb enterprise their first priority for regular appropriations and earmarks, a.k.a. "pork."

Most citizens do not realize the extent to which a congressional consensus places militarism over all other parts of federal spending. The U.S. is addicted to war, and, like any addiction, it is based on lies, denial, excess, corruption, and lack of self-control.

Recently the language of militarism has changed. Military bases and military research entities are now called enterprises. Public-private partnerships are now the norm. Many bases are now rented for training by other countries. The German Air Force trained its pilots within Holloman Air Force Base in Alamogordo, New Mexico, for many years before moving back to Germany in 2019. The facilities at Holloman are still used to train pilots from other foreign countries, including Saudi Arabia, which is waging war on Yemen, where millions face death from famine. New Mexico's congressional delegation lobbies for foreign military training, while New Mex-

ico communities suffer the pollution and harmful health effects of expanded training.

For generations, joining the military, whether as an enlistee or draftee, meant a person became known as a "service member." The Department of Defense now uses the term "war fighter," an admission that the U.S. military is for the purpose of waging foreign wars and supplying arms to proxy wars. The overwhelming, annual, bipartisan consensus for the passage of National Defense Authorization Acts (NDAA) proves that no matter how much money a president requests Congress will still increase the funding with tens of billions of additional dollars.

A question has haunted me for years. How do these elected "representatives" sleep at night? They see the extreme hardship in the sea of poverty. Why has lifting up New Mexico children never been a higher priority than bombs? Kids Count, a project of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, for years has ranked the well-being of New Mexico children as the worst, or second worst, among all of the fifty states. The Kids Count update released in August 2022 reported that New Mexico children had again fallen to 50th, the worst place in the U.S. for child wellbeing.

As a grant writer in Rio Arriba County for more than forty years, most of the sad data has not changed. The county has had one of the highest rates of drug overdoses and alcohol abuse in the U.S. for more than thirty years. There are obscene levels of total poverty, child poverty, poor access to child-care, etc. Meanwhile, public and private programs in Rio Arriba struggle to provide even essential services to neglected



Senator Tom Udall (D-New Mexico) tours Los Alamos National Laboratory in 2013

and underserved areas.

The New Mexico congressional delegation has always claimed that they support the bomb factory in Los Alamos because of the trickle-down economic benefits to adjoining communities. Economic analysis has exploded this myth of trickle-down. In 2020, *Rio Grande Sun* reporter Molly Montgomery exposed that Los Alamos censored a University of New Mexico Bureau of Business and Economic Research report by leaving out data that had found negative impacts on adjacent counties. The costs of services local governments provide for Los Alamos employees residing in these counties is greater than the revenues the counties receive because of Los Alamos. For the study year of 2017, the cost associated with being adjacent to Los Alamos for Rio Arriba County was \$3.2 million, the cost to Santa Fe County was \$1.4 million, and the cost was more than \$800,000 for Taos County.

The question of how self-identified progressive members of Congress so consistently vote for and enable militarism over the life and death needs of their constituents led me to a deeper dive into how and why good people do bad things. I learned about the work of the Norwegian philosopher Einar Øverenget.

He has developed a seven-factor analysis of moral dissonance, which begins with moral neutralization. In people who consider themselves to be “good” people, this is a slow, barely noticeable, erosion of principles over time that becomes a new norm.

All of us have experienced some of Øverenget’s steps to moral neutralization, but a few seem to be extremely common in the realm of politics. Moral erosion explains why “they all say one thing to get elected and another once they get there.” One of the ways that moral erosion starts is with denial of responsibility. Even elected officials who begin with good intentions accept actions they don’t like, such as negative campaigning, spin, accepting corporate and dark money campaign contributions, and endless fundraising. They absolve themselves of responsibility and accept that that’s just how politics works. A frequently heard excuse is that everyone else does it, or that not accepting dirty

money is “unilateral disarmament.”

Another way to justify moral erosion is called “balancing the ledger.” People convince themselves that they have done so many good things that one questionable action won’t matter just this one time. However, then there is the next time, and the next time.

Two of Øverenget’s patterns of moral neutralization are currently front and center in the U.S. First, the justification that any action is acceptable because other people do things that are worse. Second, the justification that it is always possible to find someone who has done something worse. For example, a lot of bad things have been done since World War II, but many have been justified by comparisons to Adolph Hitler.

What Øverenget calls “postponement” is when people know what they have done is wrong but choose not to think about it. However, some people will fall into self-reflection after they retire or leave the job. Former Secretary of Defense Robert S. Mc-

Namara realized the mistakes he made mismanaging the war in Southeast Asia during the 1960s, trying to explain away the murders and ecosystem destruction that rained down on Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. The current flood of *mea culpa* books from people who worked in the Trump Administration is a clear demonstration of postponement of morality instead of doing the right thing when it could have changed the bad outcomes.

Circling back to a New Mexico example of postponement is the transformation of former member of Congress and Secretary of the Interior Stewart L. Udall. After retirement, he looked back at his role in the development of the nuclear industry for both bombs and power. He sought to rebalance the ledger by dedicating himself to helping some Navajo and other tribal members receive compensation for the cancers and physical and emotional harm he had helped bring to them.

In 1995, Stewart Udall published *The Myths of August: A Personal Exploration of Our Tragic Cold War Affair with the Atom*. He received a lot of acclaim for the book, his change of attitude, and his recognition of what happens when a person of responsibil-

ity just goes with the flow, using moral neutralization until retirement.

In 1998, Stewart’s son Tom was elected to Congress to represent New Mexico’s third congressional district, which contains Los Alamos and its surrounding seas of poverty. (Disclaimer: I was a Green Party candidate running against Udall in 1998.)

Early on there was hope that Tom, a self-proclaimed environmentalist who campaigned against nuclear waste storage in New Mexico, would stand up to the nuclear bomb cheerleaders. New Mexicans hoped that he would recognize the environmental and human harm caused by the nuclear bomb industry in New Mexico and help diversify the economy into programs beneficial to society.

Sadly, Tom took the easy route and became an outspoken defender of the nuclear industry, directing huge appropriations to the nuclear enterprise and military bases in New Mexico. Tom Udall retired from Congress in 2020 and was rewarded for being a team player of the Democratic Party with an appointment by President Joseph R. Biden to become the ambassador to New Zealand. Members of the Los Alamos Study Group, an anti-nuclear watchdog group, do not expect Udall will apologize for the harm he brought to the state, and especially its third congressional district. Hopefully, he will learn from New Zealand, which became one of the world’s only nuclear-free zones in 1984. Maybe he will want to rebalance his ledger and write his apology later.

The current New Mexico congressional delegation is fully committed to continuing to bloat the nuclear bomb enterprise over the other programs needed to lift all New Mexicans, especially the state’s children, who for years the Casey Foundation have ranked in last or second to last place in the nation.

Lip service support for equity is not the same as assuring social and economic justice. As a counterpoint to the nuclear bomb-focused economy in New Mexico, the U.S. should ratify the United Nations Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, which was adopted in 2017 and has been ratified by sixty-six foreign nations to date.

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