



OUR VIEW

Avian flu outbreak warrants watchful eyes

Will turkey be on your menu for Easter dinner?

If so, you're in good company. According to the National Turkey Federation, Americans will devour 19 million turkeys next weekend – and the bird you serve your family likely was raised in Minnesota, which produces more turkeys than any other state.

But perhaps you prefer ham for Easter. Fair enough. Will you serve a frittata for brunch? Or perhaps some scrambled eggs for breakfast? Or, setting Easter aside, is there a chicken sandwich in your near future?

Chances are fairly good that you answered “yes” to one or more of the above questions, which means you have some reason to pay attention to the news that avian influenza has found its way into Minnesota, including outbreaks in Dodge County and Mower County.

If this news sounds familiar – well, it should. In March 2015, an outbreak of “bird flu” type H5N2 was detected in Minnesota. By May 30, poultry producers in 15 states had been forced to destroy more than 40 million domestic fowl, including 30 million in Iowa and 9 million in Minnesota. At the time, Nebraska was home to 9.5 million egg-laying hens, and 7 million of them died or had to be euthanized.

Government agencies spent nearly \$1 billion to safely dispose of infected birds and reimburse producers whose flocks were euthanized, making the 2015 bird flu outbreak the most expensive animal health disaster in U.S. history

Will Minnesota (and the entire poultry-producing and poultry-consuming public) manage to avoid a recurrence of this disaster?

It's too early to tell. The 2015 outbreak spurred a new focus on biosecurity at Minnesota's poultry farms, and while these measures didn't prevent a new outbreak of bird flu, we're about to find out whether they will limit the scope of the outbreak and mitigate its economic impact.

But before we look at that system, some background is in order.

The current outbreak of avian influenza isn't some scary, new, COVID-like virus that baffles scientists. It's a familiar strain of bird flu that was first detected in China in 1996.

While some variants of this virus have been linked to a few hundred human deaths (mostly in Southeast Asia) since 2003, the current strain is not one of those variants. It has been detected in exactly one person, in England, whose backyard flock was infected. This person had no symptoms.

But if COVID-19 has taught us anything, it's that viruses can mutate. Every bird that contracts avian flu presents an opportunity for such a mutation. Not to be alarmist, but the 1918 so-called “Spanish flu” pandemic, which killed an estimated 50 million people worldwide, began as a bird flu

mutation.

Clearly, the goal should be to stamp out the current outbreak as quickly as possible.

The Minnesota Board of Animal Health, whose five members are veterinarians or livestock producers, is on the front lines of this effort. The BAH's website lays out the biosecurity protocols that poultry farmers are expected to follow. It's a fairly daunting set of procedures that covers everything from feed deliveries to insect control, and the overriding goal is to prevent exposure of domestic fowl to diseases carried by wild birds or by domestic birds on another farm.

It's a big challenge. Wild waterfowl are common carriers of avian flu, which means that during migration season, one careless step into a mud puddle containing goose feces could bring the virus into a turkey barn or a backyard chicken coop.

That's why no responsible farmer would allow a visitor to casually walk into a poultry building. The BAH suggests that no farm machinery should move from one farm site to another without being cleaned and disinfected. All visitors should be informed of all biosecurity protocols and be required to wear farm-furnished boots, masks and protective clothing. Employees should start each shift wearing clean clothing that is worn exclusively for work. All feed should be stored in places inaccessible to wild birds. The list of biosecurity measures goes on and on.

So, while it's a bit of an exaggeration to compare a poultry barn to a “clean room” at a biochemistry lab, the analogy has validity.

Of course, the reality is that the Board of Animal Health has limited investigative and enforcement resources. State regulators can't be on hand to make sure every farmer and employee follows all biosecurity protocols before entering a hen house. It's in the farmers' best interests to protect their animals, and given what happened in 2015, we'd like to believe that most operators are making every effort to comply with at least the spirit of BAH guidance.

We will soon know whether that optimism is misplaced. To date, 21 sites in 11 Minnesota counties have avian flu outbreaks, with more than 1 million birds lost. Those numbers pale in comparison to the totals from 2015, but avian flu typically peaks in the spring as waterfowl migrate north, so those numbers could grow dramatically in the next six weeks.

Meanwhile, the best advice we can offer consumers is this: Don't let fear change your Easter brunch or dinner plans. You can't get bird flu by eating chicken, turkey or eggs, and Minnesota's poultry farmers need our support as they deal with soaring feed prices, higher labor costs and nature's latest viral assault.

Getting America to do right by Americans of color

Two hundred times, they failed to get it done.

They failed after 1899.

That was the year an African-American man named Sam Hose was massacred by a white mob near Newnan, Georgia, that castrated him, skinned his face, then cooked him alive over a fire and parceled out pieces of his body; his knuckles were offered for sale by a grocer in Atlanta.

They failed after 1904, too. That was the year an African-American man named Luther Holbert and a woman who was never identified were put to death by a white mob in Doddsville, Mississippi, who used a large corkscrew to drill into the pair's flesh and yank out raw chunks of them as spectators dined on deviled eggs and lemonade.

And they failed after 1934. That was the year an African-American man named Claude Neal was butchered by a white mob in Marianna, Florida, that castrated, burned and shot him, dragged his ruined body through the streets behind a car and then left it hanging from a tree that still stands in front of the Jackson County Courthouse.

This sort of thing was the opposite of uncommon. As documented by Tuskegee University, it happened 4,743 times between 1882 and 1968, the vast majority of the victims African Americans. Their killers were virtually never tried and even less often punished. And approximately 200 times since 1900, legislation has been introduced in Congress to make lynching a federal crime. Each time, Congress has failed to pass it.

So it's hard to know what to make of last week's signing of the Emmett Till Antilynching Act. The bill, named for the 14-year-old Black boy from Chicago who was murdered in Mississippi in 1955 for supposedly getting fresh with a white woman, at last achieves the old goal. And the response has been celebratory, as of a mountain finally scaled. You can't begrudge anyone who feels a sense of triumph, particularly Rep. Bobby Rush, the soon-to-retire Chicago Democrat who sponsored the bill.

He said in a statement that



LEONARD PITTS

the new law corrects a “historic and abhorrent injustice.” And he invoked Martin Luther King: “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”

You'll get no argument here. But you will get some mixed emotions.

Two hundred times, Congress failed the likes of Sam Hose, Luther Holbert and Claude Neal. It failed Mary Turner and Rubin Stacy, failed Thomas Shipp, Abram Smith, Laura Nelson, Bennie Simmons, Emmett Till and 4,733 more. Two hundred times, it had the chance to declare on behalf of the nation that these Black lives mattered – and it did not. And if Rep. Rush is inspired by what King said about the arc of the moral universe, well, it is apropos that he also said this: “We must come to see, with one our distinguished jurists, that ‘justice too long delayed is justice denied.’ “

Amen. And no one can give justice to the 4,743 men and women Congress failed. Any meaningful chance to do so long ago turned to dust. Yes, people of color still suffer racially motivated killings, and this bill provides a new tool to hold perpetrators accountable. That's an undeniably good thing.

But it's a good thing wrapped in the frustration that getting America to do right by Americans of color is always such an ordeal. As Gil Scott-Heron once said: “I have become a special amendment for what included me all along: ‘All men are created equal.’” The bitterness of that truth shades the sweetness of any joy.

Two hundred times, they failed to get it done.

Apparently, the 201st was the charm.

Leonard Pitts Jr. is a columnist for the Miami Herald. Readers may contact him via e-mail at lpitts@miamiherald.com. © 2021 Miami Herald. Distributed by Tribune Content Agency LLC.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Use state surplus for the public good

I want to believe my state government works for me, a citizen.

Every person who lives in Minnesota, regardless of their background, skin color, and socioeconomic status, should be able to benefit from legislation.

My faith tells me we have the resources needed for all to thrive and underscored by Minnesota's projected \$9 billion-plus surplus.

Social Security is a benefit awarded to those qualified and also true a portion is taxed. However, there are some legislators advocating for the wealthy to get a bigger break.

The proposal for unlimited subtraction of Social Security income from taxable income has been framed as a tax cut that would benefit all our elders, but the heart of this proposal is most beneficial to the wealthiest Minnesotans. Those with lower incomes would see no relief, and most of the benefit would accrue to households making over six-figures.

Instead of giving already wealthy people another tax break, there are investments we need to prioritize. Our massive state budget surplus is due to chronic underfunding of the public goods and resources that our communities need. It is irresponsible for elected leaders to prioritize tax cuts before addressing the acute needs of our communities.

Here's what could be funded instead: fully funding public schools to support mental health, English learner, and special education programming; an accessible health care system for everyone regardless of their socioeconomic status, background, or skin color; and investing in 100% clean energy and farming practices so every human can have clean air and clean water.

Vicki Lambert, Red Wing

Is this world leadership?

Is the Untied States of America a great world leader or are we a declining, self-absorbed country on the wane?

You can not Make America Great Again by playing tortoise or worse yet supporting the aggressors. America was built and thrived on our values and morals; we were birthed through help from others and became a world respected leader by aiding those in need.

Ukraine has not asked us to put our sons and daughters in harm's way, they just want a fair chance to defend their homeland. Repeatedly history shows that if the aggressor is allowed to think they will go unpunished, they will continue to use military aggression to get what they want.

Instead of being the self-absorbed giant with no will, we need to cut through the bureaucratic crap and step up with resources for Ukraine to defend itself. We waste more money in a month than we have provided in total to Ukraine for its defense. Worse yet we discourage/interfere with our allies who want to send more from doing more.

Will we look back and bemoan how we let our “statesmen” negotiate a false “Peace in our Time” with Russia or will we step up and show all aggressors of the world we will not stand by while a country is destroyed.

If not us, then who?

Ken Schneider, Rochester

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grammar, clarity and conciseness.

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Opinion

In defense of public defenders and their vital work

Upon the conclusion of another bruising Supreme Court nomination battle in the U.S. Senate, it's not too early to begin reflecting on the latest costs and casualties of this latest partisan skirmish.

President Biden's nomination of now-Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson to the U.S. Supreme Court marked several notable firsts, including making her the first Black woman as well as the first former public defender to sit on the highest court in this country. While the absence of Black women on the Court over our history was well known and understood, the latter first is certainly more surprising.

Despite the foundational role of public defenders in our criminal justice system and in upholding the values of the Constitution, we have never had a U.S. Supreme Court justice with a background in public defense. But unfortunately, the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee confirmation hearings featured frequent attacks on then-Judge Jackson's important work as a public defender. These attacks not only diminish current and future public defenders, they diminish us all.

Public defenders safeguard the constitutional rights of all people regardless of their backgrounds and have the benefit of understanding criminal justice from all sides. When it comes to the U.S. Supreme Court, we need justices who understand our complex and intricate criminal



GARRY W. JENKINS

justice system from multiple perspectives, including those who have real-life experience defending individuals and ensuring that constitutionally required due process rights are upheld and respected. Indeed, the Bill of Rights extends a number of constitutional protections to those accused of crimes precisely because of the fundamental liberty interests at stake. Nationally, public defenders represent roughly 80% of people charged with a crime; they provide an essential resource to citizens of Minnesota.

Although the familiar opening of the long-running television show "Law & Order" refers to people being represented by "two separate yet equally important groups: the police who investigate crime, and the district attorneys who prosecute the offenders," there is also a third, equally important group: public defenders. This group, the state and federal public defenders in this country, represents individuals to ensure that all people have equal access to justice—not just those who can afford legal representation. The confirmation of Justice Jackson brings a voice from this foundational third group, public defenders, to the highest court and to our justice system.

As a former public defender, Justice



Yuri Gripas / Abaca Press / TNS

Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson testifies on the third day of her Senate nomination hearings on March 23. She will be the first former public defender to serve on the U.S. Supreme Court.

Jackson, the 116th person to sit on the Court, also understands the access to justice crisis faced by our legal system. Millions of Americans cannot afford necessary legal assistance when faced with life-changing situations, leaving a gap in our justice system where public interest lawyers—including public defenders—step in to represent those who otherwise would be denied equal access to justice.

During this critical time in our nation's history, a jurist with firsthand experience in working within this justice gap will bring a unique and necessary perspective to the U.S. Supreme Court.

As the dean of one

of our great public law schools and a board member of Equal Justice Works, the nation's largest nonprofit organization focused on launching careers in public service for lawyers, I know there is immense value in the work of public defenders. They are truly heroes in our justice system, upholding the foundational values of our country and our rule of law.

Rather than denigrating that important work, Justice Jackson's career experience as a public defender should serve as an inspiration for all who care about the value of equal access to justice. She is—and will be—an exceptional role

model for law students and lawyers committed to public service and pursuing careers in which they can make a positive difference. I hope that a generation of law students, from both sides of the political aisle, who were listening to the confirmation process will not dissuaded from pursuing this vital work.

Day in and day out, public interest lawyers are on the front lines working for equal justice—laying the groundwork for sustainable solutions in our communities, in our country, and in our justice system. Some prosecute crimes, while others defend those charged with them. Both are important. Two separate, yet equally important, functions.

Perhaps the confirmation of Justice Jackson—which I strongly supported—will be enough to inspire the next generation of public interest lawyers to follow in her footsteps.

But, just in case, we should still rebuke the attacks on her public defense work and ensure that when we look back on this confirmation that the esteem of public defenders has not become collateral damage in the latest round of political wars. Because without public defenders, there is no justice.

Garry W. Jenkins is the dean and William S. Pattee Professor of Law at the University of Minnesota Law School and a member of the Equal Justice Works Board of Directors.

Here is why people of color often prefer remote work

BY EUGENE S. ROBINSON
Los Angeles Times

Let's suppose for a second that offices, microcosms of the real world, have always been less-than-neutral spaces for people of color: Spaces that, over the course of time, could sometimes feel like living too close to radiation. Which is to say, sooner or later it was going to exact a toll.

But in 2019 we started to see some interesting movement. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, about 6% of employed people before the COVID-19 pandemic worked primarily from home: 26% of those were white people, 18% were African Americans and 13% were Latinos. By May 2020, 48.7 million people, about 35% of the employed workforce, reported that they had worked from home in the prior four weeks because of COVID-19.

I was one of the new remote workers, and the experience revealed an unexpected and until now unvoiced joy: Working, free from daily office interactions, let the focus stay on work. Absent any other interpersonal weirdness.

My first formative personal experience with remote work took place long before the pandemic. I was working on several projects for a major international advertising firm, punching up the tone and approach of a global ad campaign for a large telecom company.

The copywriting job entailed months of phone meetings and emails. It went well. What I had written made the telecom folks forget for a second that they were telecom folks and made them feel instead like rock and roll. So, a win all around—and ultimately, I was invited to a meeting with the CEO to talk about next steps and future projects.

When he walked into the conference room, though, he was ... surprised. Visibly. A contact there later confided to me: The CEO hadn't expected me to be Black. He told her my race made no difference. I also never worked for that firm again. Its call. Not mine. I suspect that it was the irreducibility of my physical presence—the up-close reminder of my race—that lost me the job.

But during the pandemic, when working at home became the default, physical presence stopped being a factor. In November 2021, I got hired as an assistant vice president at a marketing firm. Six months earlier I had left a senior staff editing job at a digital news and entertainment media platform called Ozy Media, where the worst boss I ever had—also an African American man—crashed the company, triggering a welter of lawsuits and federal fraud investigations.

I had imagined I was professionally toxic by association. During the interview process and

in Zoom call after Zoom call, my soon-to-be new colleagues reassured me this was not so. They told me "a guy like me" needed to be in a place where I was, dare we use the word, loved?

This is always a good, if rare, sensation—but it hints at something more fundamental. There had been change. Telework came to the rescue. In real life I am 6-foot-1 and 220 pounds. On a Zoom call, I am about an inch tall and just as wide across. Physicality: gone. Beyond that, I imagine virtual work negated many of the other, unspoken barriers associated with cultural bias, too. What I'd call the "othering factor."

Is this what a meritocratic work experience feels like?

I asked around. Sherman Wellons, the African American owner of Inertiart Studio, an animation shop in Los Angeles, told me—over Zoom—that his primary reason for preferring to work from home is that he is more productive. His secondary reason? Working online frees him. That is, not having to be in the office where his presence cannot be reduced, is just easier.

Projecting the right image for remote work is easily managed with props, he said. First, off comes his beanie, he told me, and he waved at the Black Panther pajama top he was wearing. "Yeah. I'd swap this for a shirt," he said and smiled. And for the piece de resistance, he added

a pair of horn-rimmed glasses. Non-prescription, Clark Kent-style.

Then he waved. A flourish and a "Ta-da!" "This is my 'make-people-comfortable outfit,'" Wellons said.

Face-to-face encounters in offices always hammered home the immutable reality that the marketing industry, according to a 2020 Marketing Week survey, is 88% white and just 2% Black. Wellons always had the feeling that his physical presence was something to which his mostly white colleagues had to "adjust."

Online, with a bit of dress up, he had more control of the adjusting.

Shanda Wilson, a 41-year-old African American founder and CEO of a Washington, D.C.-based digital services firm called INSHIFT, said she prefers remote work for similar reasons. Online she's more productive. And she's an introvert, for whom "the office may not be really helpful," she told me. "For lots of different reasons. With remote work I've seen

some people really soar though."

What type of people? "People," she said.

While I'm sure she means "people" in general, it's also a nicety. I'm also sure she means "people" who look like she does; like I do. "People" who could spend their whole workday in high tech and the only Black face they see is in a mirror.

"People," who, in a November survey of 10,737 knowledge workers conducted by the workplace research consortium Future Forum, indicated they preferred remote work over office work.

"In the U.S., 86% of Hispanic/Latinx knowledge workers and 81% of Asian/Asian American and Black knowledge workers would prefer a hybrid or fully remote arrangement, as compared to 75% of white knowledge workers," the survey found. Future Forum also reported that between May and November 2021, the sense of belonging at work increased 24% for Black respondents and

32% for Hispanic/Latinx respondents, compared with 5% for white respondents.

Since white male knowledge workers are most likely to be present in offices today, and less likely to work virtually, the poll also evokes the double-edged nature of remote work. Working from home helps people of color avoid certain pitfalls, but it also excludes them from proximity's benefits.

With some of us now returning to office work by choice, physicality—and its disparities—are things we are still dealing with, directly or indirectly.

Here's hoping for more meritocratic American workplaces. Until then? I'll catch you on Zoom.

Eugene S. Robinson is a writer and assistant vice president of marketing content at Wong-Doody, a marketing firm. This article was produced in partnership with Zócalo Public Square. © 2022 Los Angeles Times. Distributed by Tribune Content Agency LLC.

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