

Editorials are the institutional voice of The Free Press and independent of the newsroom reporting staff

## OUR VIEW: BUDGET

# Democrats' plan speaks to fairness

Some details of the Democrats' \$3.5 trillion federal budget plan remain under the radar but have significant implications comparable to President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal.

For years Democrats and Republicans have said the federal government should be able to negotiate prescription drug prices for Medicare. That's been thwarted by the drug companies and their own members in some cases. The Democrats' plan calls to make negotiating part of the law, saving an estimated \$435 billion or 12 percent of the cost of the bill.

### Why it matters:

A \$3.5 trillion budget plan by Democrats in Congress raises "New Deal" type issues that should compel discussion of economic fairness.

That's pretty good for starters.

The bill would provide free pre-K child care, free two years of community college and provide green cards to millions of immigrants so they could work and pay taxes.

That would solve some of the most pressing problems working families have faced for decades: seeing more and more of their shrinking earnings going to rising child care and college tuition costs.

It would extend tax credits, not to corporations, but to families with children, something the Republicans famously supported for years. It would extend the two-year increase in subsidies through the COVID relief bill for people who buy health insurance through the Affordable Care Act that has reduced premiums for some by 50 to 80 percent.

Since the Affordable Care Act was passed in 2010, some 31 million Americans now have health care they can afford, and insurance companies can longer deny care for pre-existing conditions, another provision widely supported by Republicans. Expanding care and reducing the cost of health insurance should be a no brainer.

And while the Democrats' plan does subsidize some corporations, the tax credits would go to investors in clean energy, reducing use of fossil fuels and reducing a hidden external "tax" that polluting industries pass along to consumers and those who want to breathe clean air.

Republicans are claim tax cuts to corporations will fuel the economy and provide more jobs for everyone, including the middle class. But there's scant evidence that occurs, even though it has been widely believed since Ronald Reagan pulled his Keynesian economics slight-of-hand when he disguised his buildup of military spending as trickle-down economics.

Subsidies and tax credits are as American as apple pie, and corporations have long been at the trough. The annual federal government "tax expenditure" report, for example, shows a \$27 billion annual tax credit to foreign corporations in the U.S., a \$140 billion annual tax credit for folks who play the stock market, and a \$32 billion credit for writing off equipment faster than the law previously allowed.

Compare that to tax credits for lower income families at \$2.6 billion, low and moderate income savers credit at \$1.2 billion, and student loan interest tax credit at \$2.1 billion, and one can see the disparity Democrats are trying to correct.

There remain hurdles for the Democrats to approve their plan. They need every Democrat in the 50-50 Senate to vote for the plan, and two have already said they are not comfortable with the price tag. A lower price tag seems likely to be negotiated.

Still, the fairness quotient of the plan is undeniable. For the middle class, the plan could bring back the Roosevelt first election theme of "Happy days are here again."



# Mental health series to raise awareness

The Free Press today kicks off an in-depth project on the growing crisis in mental health.

It's a social problem affecting wide swaths of the population at a time when the pandemic has only exacerbated an already challenged system of treatment and care.

With the aim of raising awareness, reducing the stigma and suggesting solutions, Free Press reporters and editors will be researching and reporting for the next several months the landscape of the mental health problem.

Like the homeless project The Free Press completed during the last couple of years, the mental health occasional series fits well with our public service mission. News organizations have a duty to highlight community problems, offer positive solutions and rally the people to take action. So our coverage will not only include objective, fact-based reporting but include advocacy through our opinion pages.

The homeless series that began in November 2019 and was completed by the end of 2020 shed light on the homeless problem and brought attention to the needs for more homeless shelters, especially in the winter. Part of that project involved developing a Christmas CD produced by local musicians that was sold as a fundraiser to help support Connections Ministry's efforts to combat homelessness. The CD sold out several times and we had to order additional supplies. The project provided \$3,500 to Connections.

This project began, like others, with The Free Press staff meeting with experts in the field for an initial discussion about how the mental health system works, the scope of the problem and key influencers able to make changes to improve the system. In that initial meeting, we discovered, not surprisingly perhaps, a growing need for mental health services.

Caseloads and mental health queries in the Mankato region nearly doubled from 2018 to 2019, and that was pre-pandemic.

And while suicides were actually down during the pandemic compared to previous years, mental health experts say it may have been due in part to more people checking on each other because of the pandemic and the growth of telemedicine, which often made visiting therapists easier as it didn't involve leaving home.

However, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, anxiety disorders were three times as high in June 2020 compared to pre-pandemic 2019 (25% vs. 8%). Depressive disorders were up four times (25% vs. 6.5%), and 10 percent of people thought of suicide in 2020 compared to 4 percent in a 2018 survey.

In talking with our experts, they pointed to the stigma of mental health still being a significant barrier to getting help and treatment. But in a ray of hope, they said that young adults are doing much better not feeling the stigma as much as older adults.

We have connected with some

people who suffer from mental health who are bravely willing to tell their story, if only to help others see that it's OK to say you're not OK.

We'll also be exploring the extreme shortage in mental health care and the long waiting times to see therapists. Some families have to take their loved ones as far away as Fargo to get a mental health bed.

The number of providers is extremely low for reasons that range from college students not going into the profession to reimbursement rates that are too low to make it feasible for medical practices to add mental health care. The so-called "parity" of insurance companies covering mental health services we thought we achieved decades ago is not really working.

We will be exploring all these questions as we go, and we'll need your help to tell these stories. So if as you read our coverage, you see a significant issue or impact we're missing, we would love to hear from you.

We aim to make a difference with this series in helping people get the mental health care they need, point policymakers to solutions on how to make the system better, advocate for fair reimbursement rates, and offer incentives for young people to go into the profession.

Everyone has probably known someone or has a family member who needed mental health help. This series is our way of trying to help.

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## OTHER VIEW

# Biden wrong about Taliban

New York Daily News

"The Taliban is not the south — the North Vietnamese army," said President Biden on July 8, correcting himself and continuing. "They're not — they're not remotely comparable in terms of capability. There's going to be no circumstance where you see people being lifted off the roof of an embassy in the — of the United States from Afghanistan. It is not at all comparable."

We do not here question

the geopolitical wisdom of leaving Afghanistan.

But either because Biden got bad intelligence or failed to absorb good intelligence with an open mind, there is now no doubt he was wrong, very wrong, about the strength of the Afghan government's forces and the Taliban, and he was wrong, very wrong, about the near-term consequences of American withdrawal.

That is on the commander-in-chief as our nation scrambles to rescue its people.

# Barbie at 62: Life lessons from a doll

Though never her biggest fan, I've been fascinated by Barbie ever since her birth as a full-blown hottie on March 9, 1959, through decades of reincarnations.

Today's new "it" girl is a British scientist of global renown — one Sarah Gilbert, who co-created the Oxford/AstraZeneca coronavirus vaccine. Gilbert's resume is chock-full of accolades, including having been knighted by the Queen, but being a Barbie shouldn't get lost in the footnotes.

Barbie Gilbert is no Pamela Anderson look-alike or a celebrity fashion plate, as earlier Barbie iterations usually were. She's a redhead with shoulder-length hair who wears black glasses and a navy pantsuit. All very sensible and thoroughly modern. A female scientist certainly isn't as rare today as it was during Barbie's early life, but men still dominate the top echelons in science and Gilbert is keen to change that. Embracing her new place in Mattel history, she has said: "I hope it will be part of making it more normal for girls to think about careers in science."

Barbie's creators Ruth and Elliot Handler, who also founded Mattel Inc. in 1945, always intended that their doll be a way for girls to imagine the future. As a child who owned the first swimsuit-clad Barbie, I'm not sure how I was supposed to envision my future. As a swimsuit model? A suntan lotion rep? I do remember wondering whether my future curves would resemble Barbie's. But for my tender age, I might have guessed the answer given the raucous laughter as my mother and her friends examined the impossible body of this new, strange plaything.

Over time, Barbie became many other things, though I had long lost interest by the time she became an

astronaut in 1965 and flew to the moon — four years before Neil Armstrong. The first celebrity Barbie was supermodel Twiggy in 1967. The first Barbie of color was Barbie's friend Christie, but an official African American Barbie didn't come along until 1980, along with a Latina Barbie.

You get the idea that Barbie grew up to become a Democrat. She ran for president in 1992, which was true even if his name was Bill Clinton. (I kid.) She became a drag queen. (True.) But she was also a cancer patient to help little girls through a tough time. One version used a wheelchair. Mattel's motto for its Barbie line might have been: Hey girl, you be you.

And sales, which just five years ago were in a steep decline, are booming again. Frankly, few would have projected her longevity. But for the past 62 years, Mattel has proved that evolutionary adaptation is essential to survival. Today, as our lives are circumscribed by a pandemic and a variant that has begun targeting children and teens, how should girls imagine their future?

Mattel's answer has been to pay homage to front-line nurses, doctors, activists and, yes, Gilbert. Instead of playing sick, hoping for Dr. Ken to make her well, Barbie is helping to cure others. She's a Canadian psychiatry resident who battled systemic racism in health care and a Brazilian biomedical researcher who led sequencing of the genome of a COVID-19 variant in Brazil. She's an Australian doctor who pioneered a

surgical gown that can be washed and reused by front-line workers. She's the New York doctor who treated the first COVID-19 patient and a front-line doctor in Las Vegas who fought discrimination.

Not only are these women impressively accomplished, but some have performed herculean tasks while also fighting obstacles that shouldn't exist. The message, not just to girls, is that women are leaders now and into the future — and we are grateful for that. Mattel will have to crank up its production given the plethora of role models all around us these days. From gymnast Simone Biles, who had the courage and strength of character to forgo some of the Olympics in deference to her mental health, to the United States' most decorated track-and-field Olympian, Allyson Felix — Mattel's elves are likely busy preparing Olympic Barbies in time for Christmas.

To their list, they might add soon-to-be New York Gov. Kathy Hochul, set to replace Andrew M. Cuomo following his resignation amid a sexual harassment scandal. One thing that girls might infer, indirectly, from the existence of a Gov. Hochul doll is that they don't have to put up with sexual harassment — anytime, anywhere.

From Biles and Felix, they could learn that success is preceded by hard work, commitment and discipline — and there are other things that are more important than winning.

Same as any 60-plus woman, Barbie has accumulated some wisdom, despite her refusal to grow older. As a doll with purpose, she proffers lessons worth learning early in life and suggests futures worthy of imagination. They sure beat obsessing over how you look in a bathing suit.

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