

The Infernal Triangle

Needles in Project 2025's Haystack

Both the details and the broad strokes are terrifying.

Uncanny things happen when you read through Project 2025's [Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise](#). You're plowing through the most soporific bureaucratic gobbledygook imaginable, somnolent wave after somnolent wave. This is the chapter on the Pentagon, authored by Christopher C. Miller, the retired Special Forces officer Trump appointed as acting defense secretary after losing the presidency, who held back the National Guard from the Capitol for three hours after it had been breached by rioters on January 6th: "The record-low FMS sales in 2021 were driven partly by the high costs of converting weapon systems on the back end of production rather than emphasizing exportability in initial capability planning ... The contracting timeline for the FMS process is shockingly slow ..."

You want to Google every technical term in every sentence Miller writes, figure out which one might hide some Strangelovian plot, but there's but no time, so you plow on, and on, and on, propping your eyelids up with toothpicks. And then, on the bottom of page 102: "Require completion of the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB)—the military entrance examination—by all students in schools that receive federal funding."

I don't *think* I've seen it reported that MAGA-land's very own General Jack D. Ripper is trying to lubricate every last high schooler's path to the nearest local military entrance processing station at the order of their lunatic commander in chief. That's the thing about Project 2025. The haystack is huge. The needles are so easy to hide.

SOME READERS OF MY [FIRST INSTALLMENT in this series](#) got lost in my nuances. This time, I'll supply less nuance. This will just be the stuff you should be shit-scared about. First off, a few more needles in the haystack—the hypodermic kind, oozing unregulated poison.

They want to get rid of vehicle fuel efficiency standards, a major reason why cars made in the 1970s [got under 20 miles to a gallon](#), but ones made now get over 40. The Heritage Foundation, in a detour to Alice's Wonderland, says fuel efficiency has "negative consequences for air quality."

- They blame the deadly, [underregulation](#)-driven failure of the nation's only independent power grid, in Texas in 2021, on "pressure to use 100 percent renewables," which somehow forces installation of power lines that *can't access electricity from any other source*. The solution? Support diversity by sticking to "coal, nuclear, and natural gas."

- “Eliminate or Reform the Dietary Guidelines,” because those tables we used to read on the sides of cereal boxes when we were kids might become Trojan horses for “objectives unrelated to the nutritional and dietary well-being of Americans” such as “the health of the planet.”
- “Transition the Safer Choice program”—a voluntary perk allowing companies to slap a label on cleaning products indicating they meet EPA safe product standards—“to the private sector.” On the bright side: If industry chooses the standards, many more will volunteer to participate.

SOME CHAPTERS DON’T HIDE THE NEEDLES. The poison is their conceptual foundation. Especially the ones written by apostles of the reactionary wing of—forgive me, Father, for the sin of naming it—the Holy Roman Catholic Church.

Some of my best political friends are Catholics. *Liberal* Catholics. *Socialist* Catholics. Those kinds could not be more different from the Heritage Foundation kind of Catholic, who also couldn’t be more different from most conservatives. Their preternatural intellectual confidence, rooted in an ancient and exquisite scholarly tradition, renders them a kind of higher caste, somehow closer to God, like the Targaryens in *Game of Thrones*, if you switched out High Valyrian for Latin. There’s a reason Catholics [comprise 5.5 out of six](#) conservative Supreme Court justices.

I wasn’t more than a sentence into the Project 2025 chapter on the Department of Labor when I realized that Jonathan Berry, a DOL regulatory lawyer under Trump who wrote the chapter, had to be in their number. “At the heart of *The Conservative Promise* is the resolve to reclaim the role of each American worker as the protagonist in his or her own life and to restore the family as the centerpiece of American life.”

Note how that key word, “American,” stacks up twice inside the sentence. One of the ways Catholicism builds its influence within so many diverse societies around the globe is “syncretism”: emphasizing church teachings that resemble sacred beliefs of its host culture—like enslaved Brazilians being told that Catholic saints were a lot like the [panoply of spirits](#) in the local version of West African religion. Here, Heritage deploys a Catholic version of *our* sacred symbol: individualism. Not the good, liberal kind, where people choose their values from their own experience and self-reflection; that’s a [heresy](#). This kind comes by “reclaiming” a “role.” A role that nests within the proper moral order of the universe.

Berry continues: “The role that labor policy plays in that promise is twofold: Give workers the support they need for rewarding, well-paying, and self-driven careers, and restore the family-supporting job as the centerpiece of the American economy.” That’s another nifty syncretism, one binding the Heritage Foundation, of all things, to the [solidaristic Catholic traditions](#) that helped build the American labor movement itself. A “family-supporting job” sounds great, even *liberal*.

Except that it only makes sense within a bigger picture that is irretrievably reactionary.

Read what comes next, about an administrative state that under Joe Biden has “imposed the most assertive left-wing social-engineering agenda,” in service of the false gods of “human resources bureaucracies, climate-change activists, and union bosses—all against the interest of American workers.” They’re not *explicitly* described as men; chasing women out of the workforce is too radical a notion at this late date, even for these guys. You read the proper family roles in the penumbras and emanations instead.

There is impressive language on promoting “workplace accommodations for mothers”—except that’s under the heading “Pro-Life Measures,” and followed by advice on how the Labor Department can contribute to the cause of forced childbirth. (“ERISA does not preempt states’ power to restrict abortion, surrogacy, or other anti-life ‘benefits.’”) And when the most powerful federal tool for fighting workplace discrimination, Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, is invoked, it’s mostly to affirm that it does not apply to “discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity, transgender status, sex characteristics, etc.” (“*Etc.*”: If you know, you know, I guess.)

Discrimination is singled out as a bad thing, to be sure. Heritage would just render it impossible to fight: “Direct DOJ and EEOC,” one recommendation reads, “to prohibit racial classifications ... Eliminate disparate impact liability.” That means you would not be allowed to evaluate whether discrimination exists in a workplace by counting its employees by identity. To *fight* discrimination, naturally: “Crudely categorizing employees ... fails to recognize the diversity of the American workforce.”

But one category does earn a special solidarity as the most oppressed people in the U.S. Their rights get affirmative action:

Provide robust protections for religious employers ... an executive order protecting religious employers and employees ... make clear via executive order that religious employers are free to run their businesses according to their religious beliefs, general nondiscrimination laws notwithstanding ... reasonable accommodations for an employee’s sincerely held religious beliefs ...

Let us be as clear as possible, because people do not say this enough: Once upon a time, *racism* was a sincerely held religious belief—by millions. Jerry Falwell, in a 1958 sermon, explained how God consigned the descendants of Noah’s son Ham forever to be cursed as “servants of servants.” “Ham was the progenitor of the African, or Ethiopian, or colored race ... If Chief Warren and his associates had known God’s Word and had desired to do the Lord’s will, I am quite confident that the 1954 decision would never have been made.”

This Heritage Foundation guy dresses up this same principle in legalistic raiment. After that, the chapters really start getting scary—scary in a distinctly reactionary Catholic sort of way.

He says labor statistics should be reoriented around “metrics like marriage and fertility rates” and “the share of children living with both biological parents.” (So much for “crudely categorizing employees.”) Workers should always get a day off every week—but only because “God ordained the Sabbath as a day of rest.”

He says families, not the state, should decide whether children can do dangerous jobs: “Current rules forbid many young people, even if their family is running the business, from working in such jobs. This results in worker shortages in dangerous fields and often discourages otherwise interested young workers ...”

And finally, bosses should decide what their unions look like. I’ll leave it to [others](#) to explain the details, but this chapter makes a surreal case against the 1935 National Labor Relations Act’s ban on “company unions.” Supposedly, “most workers report that they prefer a more cooperative model run jointly with management.”

Your attention may be flagging. I’ll move on to the chapter on the Department of Health and Human Services, which won’t take as long. It wears its weirdness on its sleeve.

ROGER SEVERINO RAN THE OFFICE OF CIVIL RIGHTS at HHS under Trump. He was CEO and counsel for the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty, and ran Heritage’s DeVos Center for Religion and Civil Society. His wife heads the [dark-money juggernaut](#) behind many of the right’s creepiest recent successes at the Supreme Court. The Human Rights Campaign calls Mr. Severino a “staunch opponent of access to contraception,” and so it goes: Together, they have six children. Not that there’s anything wrong with that.

He kicks off comparing the Trump-era HHS’s mission statement to serve “all Americans from conception to natural death” to an entirely unrelated [2021 executive order](#), implying that *this* is an HHS mission statement, too, shifting the Cabinet agency to “‘promoting equity in everything we do’ for the sake of ‘populations sharing a particular characteristic.’” (That part is wrenched out of context from the EO’s legal boilerplate defining its terms. This cat ought to reread his [Ten Commandments](#).)

Soon, speaking of groups with particular characteristics, we arrive at a straight-up “great replacement” dog whistle: “As a result of HHS’s having lost its way, U.S. life expectancy, instead of returning to normal after the COVID-19 pandemic, continued to drop precipitously to levels not seen since 1996 with white populations alone losing 7 percent of their expected life span in just one year. Nothing less than America’s long-term survival is at stake.” (The footnoted article, alas, [provides a reason](#): More white people refused vaccination.)

The chapter is full of “[every sperm is sacred](#)” weirdness. HHS’s “Goal #1” notes that “our humanity does not depend on our age, stage of development, race, or abilities.” Read between the lines—“stage of development”—and blastocysts seem certainly to fall under the definition. “Abortion and euthanasia are not health care,” ends the paragraph. The next one begins, “A robust respect for the sacred rights of conscience, both at HHS and among governments and institutions funded by it, increases choices ... and furthers pluralism and tolerance”; HHS thus must “follow the letter and spirit of religious freedom and conscience-protection laws.”

There’s so, so much to parse in that head-snapping passage.

The right of a doctor to follow what is under any other circumstances a *sacred* duty, doing no harm in the practice of medicine—she took an [oath](#)—is “sacred.” But the requirement of everyone else, including a patient dying on the operating table, to respect that *religious* decision is “sacred” too. The federal government’s obligation to honor this *single, idiosyncratic* interpretation of an issue with myriad contending positions is defined as “pluralism” that “increases choices.” But *not* to go along with that as the single acceptable position—even at the expense of the patient’s health—is *intolerant*.

Then comes Goal #2, “Empowering Patient Choices and Provider Autonomy,” which argues, blithely contradicting Goal #1, that “health care reform should be patient-centered and market-based and should empower individuals to control their health care–related dollars and decisions.”

This arrogant jumble has a great deal of important history behind it. It speaks to a political defeat for liberalism that unfolded over decades. When pro-choice advocates first took the Hyde Amendment to federal court, the judge, a practicing Catholic, argued that denying federal funds for this *single* medical procedure violated the First Amendment because it *imposed* a religious view—that fetal life was sacred—on all citizens, no matter what they themselves held sacred. Judge John Dooling’s 642-page ruling argued that the ordinary understanding of religious pluralism meant that the views of some religions could not be written into federal law and used to discriminate against otherwise legal medical choices. The victory of the right over us was to turn the meaning of “religious liberty” around by 180 degrees—as the name of Roger Severino’s organization the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty suggests.

Then comes Goal #3, “Promoting Stable and Flourishing Married Families.”

“Families comprised of a married mother, father, and their children are the foundation of a well-ordered nation and healthy society. Unfortunately, family policies and programs under President Biden’s HHS are fraught with agenda items focusing on ‘LGBTQ+ equity,’ subsidizing single-motherhood, disincentivizing work, and penalizing marriage. These policies should be repealed and replaced by policies that support the formation of stable, married, nuclear families.”

In other words, we need choice and autonomy, but not *those* choices, or *that* autonomy: The up-is-down-ism of conservative conceptions of what they call “freedom” has rarely been better illustrated.

Then comes the loopyest utterance I’ve found in all these 900-odd pages. “Working fathers are essential to the well-being and development of their children ... By contrast, homes with non-related ‘boyfriends’ present are among the most dangerous place for a child to be. HHS should prioritize married father engagement in its messaging, health, and welfare policies.”

That’s conservative “freedom” right there. And a pretty good introduction to a passage you may have run across in the coverage: “In the context of current and emerging reproductive technologies, HHS policies should never place the desires of adults over the right of children to be raised by the biological fathers and mothers who conceive them.”

Current and emerging reproductive technologies: That’s in vitro fertilization he’s talking about. Bottom line: Those clusters of cells pressed under that glass—the “children”—have rights, too. More, maybe, than you and me.

I’ll be returning to this guy, and the over-the-top surrealism of his take on the lessons of COVID, in a future column. But I can’t take my leaving without reminding you of the time Donald Trump stood beside his top public-health officials and recommended, in addition to injecting bleach, another *bright, shining* idea to kill COVID. With that as background, I share with you a passage I keep turning over in my mind.

It begins, “Never again should public health bureaucrats be allowed to hide information, ignore information, or mislead the public ...” Then comes the part I can’t figure out whether is sincere, or the work of a diabolically clever troll:

“The only way to restore public trust in HHS as an institution capable of acting responsibly during a health emergency is through the best of disinfectants—light.”

Uncanny things happen when you read through *Mandate for Leadership*. I mean, Donald Trump *did* say it. So doesn’t it have to be true?

It’s Project 2025 Summer here at The Infernal Triangle! I’m studying the [whole thing](#) for a series of columns. If you want to share your expertise on one of the federal departments the Heritage Foundation wants to weaponize or gut, contact me at infernaltriangle@prospect.org.

~ RICK PERLSTEIN

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