EMPTYWHEEL'S PRO FOOTBALL TURKEY DAY TRASH TALK

Well, here it is Turkey Day time and there is a big day of football scheduled to go with the bird and fixins. First off, all of us here, me. Marcy, Jim, Rayne and Roving Reporter Rosalind are thankful for your willingness to join us, help us work through difficult issues and support our work. Thank you. Okay, turkey trash talking time!

First game out of the chute is the Pack 'O Cheese at the Kitties in Detroit. Marcy wants me to talk about how Matt Flynn isn't worth squat except for in games like this and that he has gotten rich off of just a couple of them. Nope, not gonna do it; won't jinx Flynn like that. I WANT to say the Packers have a great chance of winning this game, but I can't. Lions are better at QB, at least as good at RB with Reggie Bush and have Megatron. Oh, and a killer (sometimes more than figuratively) defensive line. If Aaron rodgers were back, it is a whole different story, but he is not. The one weakness of Detroit is the secondary; if Flynn can get some time, he may make some hay there. Still, unless Matt Flynn pulls another miracle out of his butt, edge to the Lions.

Second game is Raiders at Cowboys. This is just L-tryptophan time filler. Seriously, the Raiders suck. They were almost starting to gel with Terrelle Pryor, he of the Sweatervest criminal Ohio State fame, at QB, but he is down and Matt McGloin is up. McGloin has actually not been horrible so far, but Dallas at home for Thanksgiving day is a tall order. Tony Romo and Dez Bryant are starting to click. Heck, there has even been a Demarco Murray siting the last couple of weeks. Dallas needs a win, because the Eagles are also gelling behind Nick Foles and the NFC East is down to those two. How bout them Cowboys!

The night game is on NBC this year, not NFL Network like it was for so long, and features the Steelers at the Defending Champ Ravens. This could be a pretty decent game. Both teams a little spotty this year, but coming together in the second half of the season, especially the Stillers. Both teams are 5-6 and trail the slumping Bengals in the AFC North. The winner of this game has a shot at the playoff; the loser is in trouble. I think Big Ben is just playing better than Flacco right now and that is the difference. But the home field will help the Ravens. A pick em, with a slight edge to the Stillers for an upset in the Ravens home nest.

As you can tell, the tunes this time are supplied by the great John Cash. A superb version of Ghost Riders in the Sky. And here is an absolutely fantastic long form article by Roseanne Cash on her and her father. It is really wonderful, comes with beautiful pictures and is a highly recommended read.

Happy Thanksgiving folks!

FAST FOOD WORKERS: RECLAIMING MLK’S LEGACY BY STRIKING

I had realized NYC’s fast food workers were striking today, in what may end up being the biggest fast food worker strike. And I always mark the anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr’s assassination, since the tragedy came just a week after I was born.

But I just copped onto the link between the two.

As Sarah Jaffe notes, the strikers not only picked the day for the anniversary, but also met with some of the Memphis Sanitation workers who were striking 45 years ago.

> Today is the second citywide day of strikes in New York's fast food industry. On November 29, 2012, some 200 workers at McDonald's, Burger King, Wendy's, KFC, Taco Bell, and Domino's Pizza locations across multiple boroughs struck in what Jonathan Westin, executive director of NYCC, called "their coming out party." Before that, Westin explained, the workers had been organizing behind the scenes, keeping their plans quiet. Now, he said, even in the face of intimidation from their bosses, the workers have been able to grow their movement.
>
> "We'll have double the number of strikers, four or five hundred workers on strike, and double the locations too," Westin said. "We will have several stores where it will not just be minority strikes like it was last time, we will have the majority of workers at several stores out on strikes, making it hard for them to do business on this day."
>
> The date, April 4, holds special meaning for the workers and many of their supporters in the community. **It is the anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination in Memphis, Tennessee. King was in Memphis to support the strike of the city's sanitation workers, whose "I Am a Man" signs made clear that their labor struggle was part of the larger civil rights fight**. Last week, two of those strikers, Alvin Turner and Baxter Leach, met with some of the fast food workers to share advice and inspiration. [my emphasis]

As Ned Resnikoff writes, the plight of the workers are similar: wages so low that it requires welfare support to survive.

> Fast food workers and Memphis sanitation workers have had “similar struggles,” said Chad Tall, a strike leader and Taco Bell employee. “The thing that set [the sanitation workers] apart from everyone else is they made a decision to change it.”
>
> Tall is part of a group of fast food workers who met with two surviving members of the 1968 strike in late March. “That’s what they told us,” he said. “Make the decision, then do it.”
>
> Fast food workers are in a similar position to sanitation workers in 1968, said labor and civil rights historian Michael K. Honey, author of a book about the Memphis sanitation strike.
>
> “In the case of sanitation workers, 40% of them were actually getting welfare benefits while they were working full-time jobs because they were so poorly paid,” he told MSNBC. Today, the fast food industry provides an annual mean wage of $18,600, lower than any other industry in the United States.

Fast food unionization is a nascent movement, fighting a lot of structural challenges. But the recent paid work day legislation in NYC made clear, it’s a fight that is a no-brainer, even for outsiders.

Plus, if the mobbed fast food restaurants I saw on my recent drive through very poor rural areas are any indication, it’s a movement that could grow to encompass all parts of the country.

BANGLADESHI GARMENT FIRE: DOWNSTREAM EFFECT OF A WALMART ECONOMY?

One of the things hot on the nets yesterday was Peter Suderman's pushback against the anti-WalMart action that has been progressing over the last week, culminating in organized protests at numerous stores across the country on Black Friday. Even Alan Grayson got in on the WalMart Thanksgiving protest mix.

But Suderman, loosing followup thoughts after an appearance regarding the subject on Up With Chris Hayes caused a storm. Here is a Storify with all 17 of Suderman's Tweet thoughts. Suderman, who is a Libertarian and certainly no progressive, nevertheless makes some pretty cogent arguments, and the real gist can be summed up in just a few of the Tweets:

> So the benefits of Walmart's substantially lower prices to the lowest earning cohort are huge, especially on food.
> **********
> Obama adviser Jason Furman has estimated the welfare boost of Walmart's low food prices alone is about $50b a year.
> **********
> Paying Walmart's workers more would mean the money has to come from somewhere. But where?
> **********
> Raise prices to pay for increased wages and you cut into the store's huge low-price benefits for the poor. It's regressive.

Suderman goes on to note that WalMart workers are effectively within the norm for their business sector as to pay and benefits.

My purpose here is not to get into a who is right and who is wrong, the protesters or Suderman, I actually think there is relative merit to both sides and will leave resolution of that discussion for others.

My point is that the discussion is bigger than than simply the plight of the WalMart retail workers in the US. WalMart is such a huge buyer and seller that it is the avatar of modern low cost retailing and what it does has reverberations not just in the US life and economy, but that of the world. Ezra Klein came close to going there in a reponse piece to Suderman's take:

> But Wal-Mart's effect on its own employees pales in comparison to its effect on its supply chain's workers, and its competitors' workers. As Barry Lynn argued in his Harper's essay "Breaking the Chain," and as Charles Fishman demonstrated in his book "The Wal-Mart Effect," the often unacknowledged consequence of Wal-Mart is that it has reshaped a huge swath of the American, and perhaps even the global, economy.

Not "perhaps" the global economy Ezra, definitively the global economy. WalMart sets the tone for high volume mass merchandizers in the US market. Their cut throat and efficient management of the supply chain laid the ground, and still does, for much of the market – Target, Costco, Kohls, the latest JC Penney, The GAP, etc. What WalMart innovated has become the dominant model and gives the lead to the rest of the segment. And one of the prime ways WalMart is able to sell so low is mass purchasing from dirt cheap overseas producers, and that makes WalMart a driver of foreign economies as well, and in some of the poorest and most fragile areas.

The pervasive effects of this giant WalMart global market effect were driven home in a particularly gruesome way last night. A garment factory in Bangladesh burned, and consumed over 112 lives in the process, with the death toll clearly expected to rise:

> At least 112 people were killed in a fire that raced through a multi-story garment factory just outside of Bangladesh's capital, an official said Sunday.
>
> The blaze broke out at the seven-story factory operated by Tazreen Fashions late Saturday. By Sunday morning, firefighters had recovered 100 bodies, fire department Operations Director Maj. Mohammad Mahbub told The Associated Press.
> ….
> He said the fire broke out on the ground floor, which was used as a warehouse, and spread quickly to the upper floors.
>
> "The factory had three staircases, and all of them were down through the ground floor," Mahbub said. "So the workers could not come out when the fire engulfed the building."
>
> "Had there been at least one emergency exit through outside the factory, the casualties would have been much lower," he said.

And what type of garments does Tazreen make you ask? WalMart garments it seems. While the Washington Post AP report linked and cited above notes that the local factories make garments for "Wal-Mart, JC Penney, H&M, Marks & Spencer, Carrefour and Tesco", further research seems to indicate a direct relationship between Tazreen and WalMart. Now, let's be clear, the report at the link is from 2010 and does not necessarily mean that there was current production for WalMart at Tazreen, and even if there was, it certainly does not mean WalMart has any direct responsibility. It should be noted that it appears WalMart was more than aware of the safety problems at Tazreen Fashions and did nothing more than issue a cover your ass meaningless safety notice, but did not stop placing production orders.

Further, it should be noted that there are a lot of garment factories in Bangladesh, up to 4,000 according to the Post article above. And there is a long and tragic history of deadly fires in them. Here is one from 2010; here is another from 2006. Here is a 2001 report in the New York Times delineating the intersection of the Bangladeshi garment industry, fire and throw away treatment of workers' lives.

What happened last night is not a one off exception in the Bangladeshi garment business, it is closer to the rule. And it is fueled by the demand for cheap at all human cost product by the WalMart led business sector. Again, to be fair, just as there are competing arguments in the Suderman/protesters views as to US WalMart retail employees, there is another side of the Bangladeshi garment coin. As deplorable as the manufacturing conditions in Bangladesh are, because of it Bangladesh actually has an economy. It may not be first world, but it is a marked improvement over the life depicted in decades past.

And here is where Suderman's arguments run smack into the Bangladeshi plight. Suderman noted that the marginal extra dollar may not do much for the average American WalMart retail worker:

> Erase the Walmart CEO's entire salary, and you can raise average hourly wages by just a penny or so.
> *********
> Erase the entire Walton family fortune and you get an average $1/hour boost to Walmart workers.

For the sake of argument, let's assume Suderman is right that the marginal boost won't make that huge a difference for the average worker (and leave aside for the moment the benefit from all that extra money in the economy). Even if you assume the extra marginal dollar may not do that much here, think what it would do in Bangladesh where garment workers live, and die at alarming rates, on incomes as low as $37 per month? The labor is so cheap in Bangladesh that China is starting to outsource work there! That extra bit of money in the hands of the workers in Bangladesh could make a world of difference in their safety and quality of life.

These conditions are perpetuated by the low cost penny pinching WalMart business model:

> Ready-made garments account for 80 per cent of the country’s $24bn annual exports.
>
> Haque said that labour groups he spoke to claimed that factories “are simply not equipped to the safety standards that are required to meet the demands of Western brands”.
>
> “If you speak to garment managers, they say that they are under pressure to produce as much clothes as possible with the least amount of money,” he said. “And so they say in these circumstances, safety isn’t always the priority.”
>
> “The priority here is to produce as much clothes as possible.”

I have no idea what the fix or answer to these problems and incongruities are. Maybe there isn’t one. But I do think the equation is a lot more complex than people like Suderman and Ezra Klein let on. The effects of the WalMart economy go a lot further downstream than US retail employees. The Triangle Shirtwaist Fire of 1911, where 146 souls perished, served as a wake up call for these types of labor practices in the US. The Tazreen Fashions garment fire may well match or eclipse that death toll by the time it is all said and done. Perhaps it, too, should serve as a wake up call as to the human cost of the WalMart business model.

THANKS TO MICHIGAN'S FARMERS FOR THE BOUNTY

Every year on this day, I thank the great Michigan producers—and for some years, I've been cooking Thanksgiving using only Michigan producers, with just a few ingredient exceptions—who bring us our meal.

Our food was brought to use by many of the same farmers and artisans as last year, though I made my pie crust with whole wheat pasty flour from the Jennings Brothers, and we'll be drinking Bells and Bowers Harbor this year instead of Founders and Brys Estate.

But I want to focus on the eggs that will go into our pumpkin pie.

You see, it's been a really tough year for eggs in MI. Many chickens died in the heat wave in June. Then, with the drought, pastured chickens had to work harder to eat and weren't producing much as a result. And naturally raised chickens are going to be laying almost no eggs this time a year: Mother Nature gives her chickens more time off than Wal-Mart gives its workers?

Mind you, I've still been able to get eggs. But eggs—along with stone fruit, particularly tart cherries and peaches, which were devastated by our spring heat wave followed by frost—eggs are one of the things that made an urban girl like me realize how devastating the weather was.

If I had to work hard to remember to ask for eggs ahead of time, think how hard the farmers were working to keep their chickens healthy?

So it was mighty humbling the other day when our farmer handed me eggs. Humbling, because I didn't think there'd be eggs for purchase in any case. Particularly humbling because she just gave them to me. "Here, don't tell anyone." (So I'm telling all of you, just "protecting my sources"!)

Something as prosaic as eggs, become a precious gift due to the rhythm of nature but also the very unnatural thing weather has become.

The food we share on this holiday is always precious, whether it comes from a local farmer or a big supermarket. It's the sharing, after all, that makes it precious. We're probably going to need a lot more of that sharing in the years to come.

Thanks to all of you for sharing with us here—may that gracious sharing continue through the next year!

MITT'S DIRTY TOMATOES WILL GET CLEANED UP

The other day I pointed out that Mitt had chosen to eat lunch at a place that had not yet agreed to pay $.01 a pound more for tomatoes to ensure basic standards for tomato workers.

As of today, Mitt and the rest of us can enjoy Chipotle burritos in good conscience; the chain just signed onto the Coalition of Immokalee

Workers Fair Food Program.

From the press release (h/t Elliott):

> Chipotle Mexican Grill and the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW), a farmworker-based human rights organization, have reached an agreement that brings Chipotle's commitment to sustainable food to the CIW's Fair Food Program. The agreement, which will improve wages and working conditions for farmworkers in Florida who pick tomatoes for Chipotle, comes in advance of the winter tomato-growing season, when most of the nation's tomatoes come from growers in Florida.
>
> The Fair Food Program provides a bonus for tomato pickers to improve wages and binds growers to protocols and a code of conduct that explicitly include a voice for workers in health and safety issues, worker-to-worker education on the new protections under the code, and a complaint resolution procedure which workers can use without fear of retaliation. The Program also provides for independent third party audits to ensure compliance.
>
> "With this agreement, we are laying down a foundation upon which we all – workers, growers, and Chipotle – can build a stronger Florida tomato industry for the future," said Gerardo Reyes of the CIW. "But more than this, today's news marks a turning point in the sustainable food movement as a whole, whereby, thanks to Chipotle's leadership, farmworkers are finally recognized as true partners – every bit as vital as farmers, chefs, and restaurants – in bringing 'good food' to our tables."
>
> "Chipotle has an unmatched track record driving positive change in the nation's

> food supply and is continuously working to find better, more sustainable sources for all of the ingredients we use — sources that produce food in ways that demonstrate respect for the land, farm animals, and the people involved," said Chris Arnold, communications director at Chipotle. "We believe that this agreement underscores our long-standing commitment to the people who produce the food we serve in our restaurants."

THAT PICO DE GALLO MITT HAD FOR LUNCH?

It may have been made from dirty tomatoes.

The Denver press made a big deal out of the fact that Mitt chose to eat lunch at Chipotle today.

> Mitt Romney, in Denver to prepare for Wednesday's debate, stopped in at a Chipotle on Tuesday. He was joined by Sen. Rob Portman (R-Ohio), who is playing President Barack Obama in Romney's debate prep.
>
> Romney ordered a burrito with with black beans, pork, guacamole and pico de gallo, according to a pool report.

Now, I'm actually a big fan of Chipotle burritos. But the've been stalling on adopting the Coalition for Immokalee Workers' Fair Food Agreement that provides slightly higher wages and better working conditions for workers with a whole bunch of silly excuses.

> Chipotle however, has remained indifferent to the deplorable conditions faced by workers in its tomato supply chain. Nearly two years have passed

> since Chipotle launched its "investigation" and many questions now beg to be answered. Where are the results of Chipotle's inquiry into Florida's farm labor conditions? Where has Chipotle been purchasing tomatoes in the meantime, and how do workers fare in those fields? Is Chipotle actually supplying its East Coast restaurants with tomatoes from Mexico (the only other viable option to Florida tomatoes during nearly half the year), despite the immense increase in the cost and carbon footprint of Chipotle's food that would result from such a decision? Or is Chipotle still in fact purchasing Florida tomatoes, despite its claims to have suspended purchases from Florida? Are transparency and human rights not a part of Chipotle's definition of "Integrity"?

This makes Chipotle—in spite of its shiny image and yummier food—stingier than McDonalds, Burger King, and Taco Bell.

Perhaps the press should ask Mitt whether he thinks the people enslaved by Immokalee tomato growers are takers, just like all the other 47% he loathes?

IS OBAMA WORRIED THAT FAT AL GORE'S DROUGHT WILL THREATEN HIS REELECTION?

I’m beginning to wonder whether Obama is worried the drought–particularly in the Midwest–could imperil his reelection campaign. I say that because he seems to be avoiding addressing it on the campaign trail. (Compare that to the way he has addressed other tragedies, such as his well-received conversations with the victims of the Aurora shooting.)

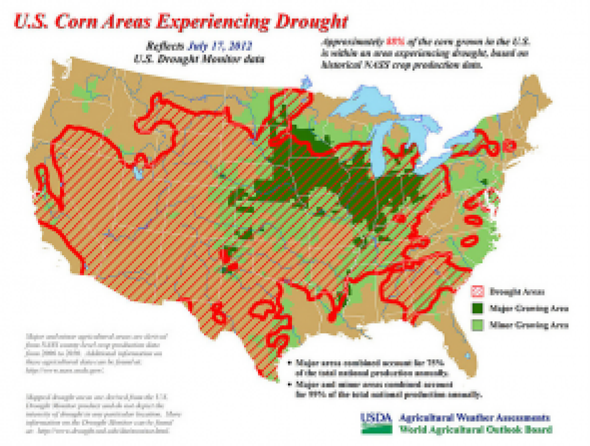
To the best of my knowledge, this July 18 photo is as close as Obama has gotten to publicly expressing concern about the drought. And in a press briefing on the drought the same day, both participants–Tom Vilsack and Jay Carney–avoided addressing questions about whether Obama would visit drought affected areas.

> Q Secretary, should we be expecting that you and the President will be heading to a drought-stricken area soon? That’s normally a path that you take when you’re trying to show something is a priority.
>
> SECRETARY VILSACK: Well, I can’t speak obviously for the President’s schedule, but I can tell you that actually I was in Pennsylvania yesterday. We do have the Deputy Secretary going to Georgia tomorrow. We’ve got the Under Secretary of the Farm Service Association traveling to several states that are drought-impacted and affected.
>
> [snip]
>
> Q Is the President going, Jay, to go anywhere –

> MR. CARNEY: I don't have any scheduling updates for the President to provide to you today. If and when I do, I'll provide them.

Now, I'm not trying to concern troll about the President's schedule, in the way Republicans are criticizing Obama for not meeting with his Jobs Council. Nor am I saying Obama's not responding to the drought; the USDA has been making low-cost loans available to those in areas declared a disaster, as well as certain other things that may provide immediate if not long-term relief.

Rather, I'm raising it because I really do think it might affect the election. Consider how many swing states are affected by the drought (conditions have gotten better in MI of late).



And while IA has not been included among the counties in which Vilsack has declared a disaster, its corn harvest has been affected (with 40% deemed poor or very poor on July 22). And their livestock will be affected as well.

All that's before food prices go up in time for the election. Vilsack seemed to try to insulate the Administration from responsibility for that in the same July 18 press conference.

> The question that a lot of folks are asking is what will the impact be on food prices. Because livestock producers will begin the process of potentially reducing their herds in light of higher feed costs, we would anticipate in the

> short term actually food prices for beef, poultry, pork may go down a bit, but over time they will rise. We will probably see those higher prices later this year, first part of next year. Processed foods obviously impacted by crop yields, and we will likely see the increase of that also in 2013.
>
> It's important to note that farmers only receive 14 cents of every food dollar that goes through the grocery store, so even though prices on commodities increase significantly, it doesn't necessarily translate into large increases for food prices. And if, in fact, people are beginning to see food price increases now, it is not in any way, shape, or form, related to the drought. And we should be very careful to keep an eye on that to make sure that people do not take advantage of a very difficult and painful situation.

Though he didn't address speculation–which drove up prices in 2008 and which the Administration has not done enough to fix.

The whole thing reminds me how a year ago the President wouldn't brag about the auto bailout (because it did not yet poll well; though predictably it now polls better) nor the energy jobs his Administration supported (presumably because of the Solyndra faux scandal).

While leads me to wonder whether he's afraid to open up the question of climate change. Vilsack, at least, refused to address it in that press conference, effectively saying that Monsanto would save us all.

> Q Could you talk a little bit about the drought itself? Is it very unusual? Did anyone see it coming? Is it from climate change? Is there anything you can do to prepare?
>
> SECRETARY VILSACK: I'm not a scientist

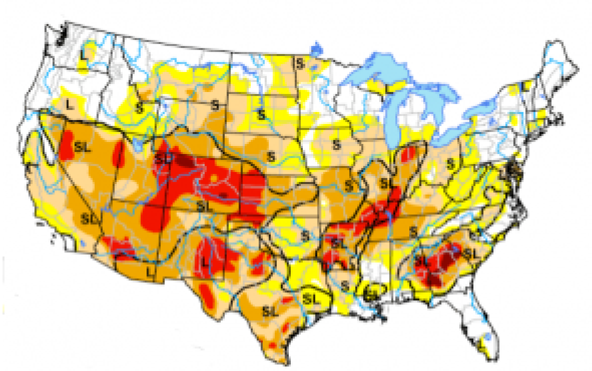
> so I’m not going to opine as to the cause of this. All we know is that right now there are a lot of farmers and ranchers who are struggling. And it’s important and necessary for them to know, rather than trying to focus on what’s causing this, what can we do to help them. And what we can do to help them is lower interest rates, expand access to grazing and haying opportunities, lower the penalties associated with that, and encourage Congress to help and work with us to provide additional assistance. And that’s where our focus is.
>
> Long term, we will continue to look at weather patterns, and we’ll continue to do research and to make sure that we work with our seed companies to create the kinds of seeds that will be more effective in dealing with adverse weather conditions.
>
> It’s one of the reasons — because they have done that, it’s one of the reasons why we’re still uncertain as to the impact of this drought in terms of its bottom line because some seeds are drought-resistant and drought-tolerant, and it may be that the yields in some cases are better than we’d expected because of the seed technology. [snip]
>
> Q Mr. Secretary, I want to follow through on the climate change question. Is there any long-range thinking at the Department that — you had the wildfires and the heat wave and the rise in sea levels, and now this drought — that there’s something more going on here than just one year of a bad crop, and you need more than better seeds, maybe do something about climate change?
>
> SECRETARY VILSACK: Our focus, to be honest with you, in a situation like this is on the near term and the

> immediate, because there's a lot of pressure on these producers. You take the dairy industry, for example. We've lost nearly half of our dairy producers in the last 10 years. They were just getting back to a place where there was profitability and now they're faced with some serious issues and, again, no assistance in terms of disaster assistance.
>
> So that's our near-term focus. Long term, we obviously are engaged in research projects; we're obviously working with seed companies. Don't discount the capacity of the seed companies. These technologies do make a difference. And it's one of the reasons why, at least based on the yields today, we're looking at potentially the third largest corn crop in our history. Now, that may be adjusted downward, it may be adjusted upward — depends on the rain, depends on circumstances. But even with the difficulties we're experiencing, we're still looking at a pretty good crop as of today. Tomorrow it could change, obviously.

Now maybe my instinct is incorrect and this won't affect the campaign, either directly or indirectly. Maybe the Administration is gambling they can offer sufficient short term relief in IA and other must-win states to stave off the political effect of this drought until after the election. Maybe the Administration is just waiting a few weeks to get a better sense whether the dire predictions about the drought come true.

But for the moment, let me just register surprise that the campaign has been as silent about the drought as it has.

FAT AL GORE COLLUDES WITH BANKSTERS IN THE MIDWEST



There's an ominous storm brewing in flyover country that may amount to little more than higher food and fuel prices, or may amount to something else.

First there's the drought. Last week's heat wave and the last month's dry weather hit just as much of America's corn crop was set to pollinate. And if the corn doesn't pollinate, it never grows kernels. Even as I've been writing this post, USDA sharply cut forecasts for the corn harvest.

As a result, corn prices (soy prices too) are rising sharply. Which will, for better and worse, have repercussions on all the aspects of our super-processed life that relies on corn.

> "The drought of 2012 will be one for the records," said Peter Meyer, the senior director for agricultural commodities at PIRA Energy Group in New York, who forecasts a drop in output to 11 billion bushels if the hot, dry spell lasts another three weeks. "Whether it's ethanol or livestock, no one is immune from this impending disaster. The ramifications will be widespread, affecting everything from your food to

> your gasoline."

And all that's before any follow-on effects, if the drought continues. Even in Grand Rapids, we've had some unusual fires. Rivers that were experiencing historic floods last year are approaching record lows this year; traffic on the Mississippi has already slowed.

Yet all that—even with our country's industrialized reliance on corn—might be no more concerning than other droughts, such last year's drought in Texas.

Meanwhile, banksters keep stealing farmers' money—first via MF Global and now with Peregrine.

> The U.S. futures industry reeled as regulators accused Iowa-based PFGBest of misappropriating more than $200 million in customer funds for more than two years, a new blow to trader trust just months after MF Global's collapse.
>
> Centered in the heart of farm belt, the firm handled agricultural futures accounts for a number of clients who grow corn, soybeans and cotton.
>
> "For the farmers who are directly affected it can be a very severe financial blow," said Dave Miller, director of research for the Iowa Farm Bureau.
>
> [snip]
>
> Doug McClelland, who runs Plains Commodities, a one-man brokerage in Lincoln, Nebraska, with about $500,000 in accounts at PFGBest, said three of his farmer customers had already sworn off futures trading after first losing money to MF Global.
>
> Initially, the customers said, "We'll give it one more shot," McClelland said. Traders and exchange officials have said

> the collapse of MF Global does not seem to cast a lasting chill over market activity. Now, says McClelland, they feel that "somehow the public's money is becoming a depository for a CEO."

I'm sure the percentage of farmers affected by these two scandals is relatively small. But farmers are one of the groups for whom futures really do serve an important purpose, but trust is likely to crumble quickly after these two scandals.

Note, this article quotes Debbie Stabenow talking tough about fixing this problem; having Stabenow Chair the Ag Committee is far better than the alternative on a number of fronts, but getting tough with banksters–particularly in an election year–is not one of them.

Then there's this. While the rest of the real estate market was in doldrums in the last few years, the Midwest has had a farmland bubble based in part on banksters' need to invest somewhere but also on farmers' revised assumptions about the profitability of farms based on the same crops being affected by the drought.

> Part of what has economists and rural bankers on edge is that Midwest farm prices are climbing at rates last seen in the go-go 1970s, the period that set the stage for the farmland bust of the 1980s, when prices sank by half. The bust ignited a rural crisis that pushed many farmers out of business and hundreds of their banks to the brink of collapse.
>
> "Land prices are too high. Things are getting out of whack" said Michael Swanson, an economist at banking giant Wells Fargo & Co. He figures that Midwest farmers have historically bought an acre of land for the value of corn it can produce over four years. Now, an

> acre of land easily fetches six years of crop production—at a time when crop prices are well above historical averages.
>
> The Federal Reserve issued a memo to farm bankers in late October warning that the market for cropland "may reflect overly optimistic long-term expectations" and that land values would fall if interest rates increase abruptly and farm profits shrink.
>
> Land values are soaring again because prices for crops such as corn and soybeans are more than double what they were before mid-2006. That is thanks in large part to a surge in demand for food from China's expanding middle class and the rapid emergence of a corn-to-ethanol industry, which now gobbles up 40% of the nation's corn crop and supplies about 10% of the nation's gasoline. The Department of Agriculture estimates that net farm income, a widely used measure of profitability, will jump 28% this year from 2010, to $100.9 billion.

I, frankly, have no fucking clue how the drought and futures crisis will affect the bubble (which really continued until early this year). But you need crops to make farmland—particularly expensive farmland—pay off. And a lot of farmers aren't going to have their expected crops this year.

As I said, all this may amount to no more than another big spike in food prices, with all the detrimental effects that will have on those struggling in this terrible economy.

But a lot of the states where this storm is brewing also happen to be the swing states where the Presidential election will be decided (to say nothing of the western drought-affected states like CO where this has manifested as massive wildfires). So it may well have repercussions beyond just the farmers who stand to lose their farms and the poor people who will struggle to pay for food.

AMERICA'S POWER COUPLE: SAMANTHA POWER FIGHTS ATROCITIES, CASS SUNSTEIN DEFENDS CHILD LABOR

These two things happened in the same week.

On Monday, Obama rolled out his Atrocities Prevention Board. While in reality, this appears an excuse to sanction Israel's enemies, in theory at least, it's an initiative to find alternative tools to prevent the massacres of women and … children.

Obama put Samantha Power in charge of this effort.

On Thursday, Obama's Labor Department withdrew rules designed to prevent kids under the age of 16 from being paid to perform dangerous farm jobs.

Obama's equivocations regarding imposing limits on businesses are usually attributed to Samantha Power's husband, Cass Sunstein.

It must take a lot of effort for this power couple, working so hard to help and hurt kids all in one week.

THE MAGICAL SCIENCE OF BEANS

We already know the pink slime issue has been engaged in a full court press (even while the pink slime company itself declared bankruptcy). So it's not surprising to see even the science press parroting the talking points being pushed by the pink slime industry. Sure, it concedes that pink slime might be unappetizing, but it hews to countering the straw man argument that the ammonia–rather than the underlying conditions that require the ammonia–makes the pink slime unsafe.

> If you've eaten a hamburger in the last 50 years, you've eaten pink slime. And if you've eaten breakfast cereals, cheeses, custard, mustard, macaroni salad, potato salad or a whole host of other products that Americans eat each and every day, there's a good chance that ammonia was added. That knowledge may not make our food very appetizing to the newly informed American consumer, but it doesn't make the food less safe.

The rest of the column, though, spins the pink slime industry as a rational response to the challenge of feeding an expanding population.

> The patent, which was eventually granted to Armour and Company in 1962, is a rather unappetizing read for modern eyes, describing the "finely divided meat slurry" which is "mechanically separated by centrifugation." But the problem that this patent was trying to solve was a serious and urgent one: how do we feed as many people as possible, as nutritiously as possible, while producing less waste?
>
> Thanks to America's baby boom following World War II, one of the most daunting challenges of the 1950s and '60s was

> figuring out how to feed millions of new mouths. Even the most optimistic futurist thinkers knew that America’s rapidly growing population would require much more efficient methods of production if there was to be enough food to go around.

Note, it’s Science Digest writer Matt Novak who calls this a daunting challenge, not the scientists and capitalists of the day. And he does so even while hinting at a very simple solution to this “daunting” challenge.

> The realization that beef is a terribly inefficient way to provide Americans with protein was recognized even before the 1970s. The 1957 book “The Next Hundred Years,” written by Harrison Brown, James Bonner and John Weir, includes a graph which lays out the different protein returns one can expect from raising beef or milk or soybeans. Spoiler alert: Beef is the least efficient.

Stop. End of article. You’ve solved your daunting problem!

Beans.

Now, frankly, I love beef—and love eating it when I can vouch for the conditions in which it was raised and slaughtered.

But I don’t kid myself. At times when tight budgets have forced me to find more economical ways of eating, I did what billions on the planet do: choose plant-based proteins over the very extravagant (both in terms of real and environmental cost) beef. It doesn’t take a science degree to understand this (though it does take the ability to read through meat industry propaganda).

Now, Science Digest may—in the interest of earning enough money to pay for their extravagant beef—be willing to spin in such shameless fashion. But all the meat pills and pink slime and other invented technological fixes for a very simple problem have not been able to compete with the wonderful magical bean, either in health benefits or safety.

Next up? While calling for a Congressional investigation into the nefarious plot that exposed how gross pink slime is, IA Governor Terry Branstad also offered pink slime as a solution for obesity.