IN RETROSPECT: CAN REAGAN BE INDICTED FOR BETRAYING THE AMERICAN PEOPLE IN RESPECT TO HEALTHCARE AND PUBLIC HEALTH AFTER DECADES?

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Why is it that so-called ‘Third World’ leaders, particularly in the ‘Third World’ are indicted for atrocities, as concerns political and other issues, as seen by the Western eye and interpretation of events, whilst leaders in the West, get away with ‘murder’ in respect of the fragrant violation of international, and national law? Why are these leaders, not brought to book, by the international community? Who sets the standards and who has the moral right to set such standards? The world was hoodwinked into believing that Thatcherism and Reaganomics was manna from heaven. In fact it was economics of the worst kind, and we are seeing the ramifications of this economic policy in Great Britain and the USA, in fact the entire world. Why are these people or leaders not indicted for their atrocities, including George Bush, Tony Blair, Rumsfeld, Colin Powell and others for the crimes against humanity and for crimes against many countries in the so-called ‘Third World’. Is this a case of selective Western justice and morality? Is this the case of Western superiority, overt capitalism, greed and all that goes with it? Is it the case of dominating the masses throughout the world and even in their countries? These are some of the issues that deserve reflection, on the part of thinking human beings.

Nearly three decades ago the abstract of the Green, Wilson, and Bauer paper began with a bizarre assertion: “The Reagan Administration had adopted the policy guidelines developed over the previous few years in the disease prevention and health promotion initiative of the Carter Administration.” As President Carter’s Surgeon General, Dr Julius Richmond set fifteen priorities in health promotion, health protection and preventive health services. Two hundred and twenty-six specific objectives were spelled out and grouped under each of the priorities. The paper by Dr Green and his colleagues describes a laudable effort to assess the ability of federal data systems current at that time to measure the achievement of these objectives. The Reagan Administration’s attack on each one of Dr Richmond’s priorities were so bold, however one must reluctantly conclude that the issue of good data systems is not the proper one for these and those times. Events, at that time over two years suggested that Dr Green’s focus on data, however well intentioned was somewhat beside the point. What President Reagan was doing to these priorities was the real test of this President’s public health and healthcare policies. Quite apart from what was being done to weaken the major data systems themselves, let us examine what had happened to the fifteen priorities.
HEALTH PROMOTION

Reducing Smoking: Assistant Secretary for Health Edward Brandt said that he can no longer support more and stronger warning labels on cigarettes – Why?

Reducing Misuse of Alcohol and Drugs: The President’s 1983 budget proposed to spend 35 percent less for alcohol and drug programmes than was spent in 1981. At the Administration’s insistence, the Alcohol, drug Abuse and Mental Health Services Block Grant had no data gathering requirements.

Improved Nutrition: The WIC (Women, Infants and Children, school lunches, and other child nutrition efforts were cut by one – third, and, if Congress had followed the Administration’s proposals, would have been done another third with school children eating ketchup (tomato sauce) and relish as vegetables.

Exercise and Physical Fitness: There was no effort to cut back in this area, but can any health department be initiating an exercise and physical fitness programme while faced with cutbacks in venereal disease, tuberculosis and immunization funds?

Stress and Violence Control: The Administration had made progress on drunken driving. On April 14, 1982, the President announced the creation of a special commission to combat drunken driving and representative Michael Barnes had responded with legislation providing incentives for state programmes and a national driver registry. Violent crime and family stress, on the other hand, were not helped because of record high unemployment created by the President’s economic policies. And, as if to rub salt into these wounds, the Administration had tried to repeal the programmes for battered women, battered children, and rape victims, and vigorously opposed gun control legislation. (This is a vexing issue that has surfaced menacingly under President Barak Obama in 2012 /2013).

HEALTH PROTECTION

Toxic Agent Control: The Administration had made a determined effort to reverse the progress of the initial decade of ten years. It had rejected a protective carcinogen policy. It had decided against protective action on formaldehyde, despite the evidence from valid animal tests, and the knowledge that there was widespread human exposure. It had relied on voluntary compliance by industry to protect the public. It had also weakened the warning and cut back efforts to identify schools in which building materials exposed children to asbestos (This is also a reality in South Africa).
Occupational Safety and Health

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) delayed the cotton and lead standards. It proposed to weaken the generic carcinogen policy, the labeling standard and the access to medical and exposure records standard. Mine fatalities were rising, but the Mine Safety and Health Administration and OSHA enforcement were cut back. Research on occupational safety and health had been slashed more than any other research programme in the Department of Health and Human Services. The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health funding in real dollars was lower in 1983 than at any time in the twelve year history of the institute, at that time. Reporting and data requirements had been devastated.

Accident Prevention and Injury Control: This important public health concern remained a void, filled only by the Administration’s wishful thinking that it would have been handled by the private sector.

Fluoridation and Dental Health: The fluoridation grant programme at the Centres for Disease Control (CDC) ended in 1982, leaving only technical support, and the President proposed its total elimination in 1983. Fluoridation was always a small programme, but one that carried a very high benefit – to cost ratio.

Infectious Disease: Washington’s half – hearted response to acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS), a far larger problem than Legionnaire’s disease, did not bode well for infectious disease control. Hospital infection control, which could have saved over $1 Billion dollars annually, was targeted for elimination in the President’s budget.

PREVENTIVE HEALTH SERVICES

High Blood Pressure Control: Once a national public health programme with remarkable achievements, high blood pressure control had been reduced to a ‘declining set – aside by Reagan’s policy makers. Again there were no data requirements.

Family Planning: The President tried to repeal Title X of the Public Health Service Act and, when this failed, tried to cut its funding by almost 50 percent. When Congress prevented the repeal and some of the cuts, the Administration resorted to parental notification rules to discourage use of family planning services by teenagers.

Pregnancy and Infant Care: Long the mainstay of public health, with strong professional leadership, maternal and child health programmes were relegated to a block grant with funding that was reduced by over 25 percent. Medical eligibility, an important adjunct, was also trimmed.

Immunizations: President Reagan was so intent on budget cutting that the first immunization proposals from his Office of Management and Budget (OMB) would have meant that a smaller and smaller fraction of American children would be immunized. Congressional persistence and cries from the public health community forced Health and
Human services Secretary Schweiker to retreat from this position. Nevertheless, OMB had rejected his plea for a supplemental appropriation.

Sexually Transmitted Disease: the national epidemic of genital herpes received more attention from the media than any other public health problem, but according to the CDC, the Administration had not committed adequate resources to the problem.

In 1980, achievement of slightly less than half of the 226 objectives of the disease prevention and health promotion initiative of the Carter Administration could be measured on a national basis by then current federal data systems. About one – third more could have been measured by adding on to these systems, something that was out of the question. Most of the needs for new data gathering were in the field of surveys, yet in the words of Green et al. even the survey systems of 1980 “have seen no mercy in the budget cuts.”

Given the above scenario, there is ample evidence that President Reagan should be indicted in retrospect for crimes against the American people. This must be a salutary warning to governments and political leaders, irrespective of who they are and irrespective of the power of their governments, that they can, could and must be brought to justice, even in retrospect and during their terms of office. The rule of law of a specific country, and International law must be stringently applied to any leader that flouts these laws and ushers in misery to his people and to humanity, as a whole.

This brief review of the impact of Reaganomics on the priority areas highlighted above leaves little doubt that good data collection would strengthen the indictment. And good data are an important part of doing a good job in healthcare and public health management. Yet, even without data collection, how can anyone believe that the Reagan Administration wished to prevent disease or promote health or preserve health in America. It was a case of crimes committed against the people of America, and all of humanity. Irrespective whether it is the ‘First or ‘Third World’ governments must at all times serve the interests of the people, who by virtue of their vote, put governments in office. The primary aim of government must be to uphold the rule of law, use tax payer’s money in proper directions and promote the general welfare. What is your opinion?

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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