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An Unappetizing Argument for Meatless Mondays

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In the two weeks since Meatless Mondays started, there has been a smorgasbord of arguments for and against: It was an executive decision that in no way represents student preferences. But it can really help to reduce the campus's environmental footprint. Meat is an important part of a healthy diet. No, meat increases your risk of chronic diseases. Supporting small, local livestock farms is a good thing. But animals have rights too. And so on and so forth.

Here is an unappealing argument that is rarely offered: perhaps we don't even have a *right* to eat meat. As distasteful as the conclusion seems, the case is stronger than you might think.

The planet is home to 7.7 billion people. Almost 80 percent of the population lives on less than ten dollars a day, and nearly half lives on less than two dollars and fifty cents a day. Eventually they hope to attain the standard

of living that we enjoy in the developed world. Except they can't. If everyone had the same lifestyle Americans have, we would need *five earths* to provide for humanity's food and energy needs. The planet could not handle our waste production, much less the damage caused by climate change, environmental toxification, species extinction, and ocean acidification, to name a few of the most daunting problems.

The uncomfortable fact is that we in America and we on this campus are taking more than our fair share of the planet's resources. Some environmentalists have called on us to reduce our consumption by roughly *80 percent* in order to achieve an equitable, fair level of consumption by Americans relative to Earth's capacity. Here is where meat comes in. Scientists tell us that cutting out meat and dairy products is probably the single biggest thing we can do to lower our ecological footprints. The main

problem with our current lifestyles is the overall level of consumption, of which meat is just a part. But the point remains that if we have to reduce our consumption by *80 percent*, eliminating meat consumption is a positive first step. Easier, at least, than giving up our phones and heating.

This particular ethical argument is, quite frankly, pretty depressing, and the most common response to it is simply avoidance. But when critics do engage with it directly, they typically make two standard replies: the environmental crisis is so huge that a) our individual actions won't make much of a difference overall; and b) we will have to rely on new technology to solve the environmental crisis anyway, so individual actions will not matter much. Unfortunately, neither reply is very convincing after a little thought.

It's perfectly true that our individual efforts are going to make almost no difference in the grand scheme of things -- although added up over a lifetime, they may have a larger effect than you might think. But that doesn't absolve our responsibility to reduce consumption. Your individual vote makes effectively no difference to the outcome of an election, but that doesn't mean you don't have a duty to vote. The fact that your individual effort isn't, by itself, enough to bring about the solution doesn't change the fact that it's still the right thing to do.

It may also be true that the environmental crisis is so huge that we will need advanced technology to deal with it. But the fact is that there isn't such technology available, and there's no warranted reason to expect it will exist in the near future. In the meantime, our consumption is only making the problem worse. The question is, in the absence of such technology what is the right thing to do *now*? The answer is not too difficult.

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Trump's Last Gasp for a Wall

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On December 22, the government underwent what turned out to be a 35-day shutdown, the longest in American history. At the center of the problem was a dispute over funding for a border wall. Eager to keep his promises in the 2016 primaries, and doubtful that the incoming Democratic majority in the House of Representatives would support his goals, President Trump insisted that Congress include \$5.7 billion in funding for a wall in the new spending bill. Democrats refused

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to grant any money for the project and Trump refused to sign any bill without such funds, leading to a stalemate. Although a stopgap bill passed on January 25 reopened the government for three weeks, it merely bought time for negotiations and did nothing to resolve the fundamental impasse. With a new shutdown looming, Congress crafted a new compromise bill that would keep the government open, grant \$1.3 billion for fencing on the border, and limit the number of people the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency (ICE) can detain. Although he was reluctant to support legislation that gave him only a fraction of what he wanted, Trump ultimately decided on February 14 that he would sign the bill. Simultaneously, he revealed his intent to declare a national emergency so he could try to use his executive powers in order to build the wall.

In some ways, this choice may seem to have been Trump's best option. The shutdown was terrible for his image. PBS reported that 54 percent of Americans blamed him for it, compared with just 31 percent who held the congressional Democrats responsible. Additionally,

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It is important to understand that nobody is perfect, and issuing blame is neither helpful nor fair. But it is also important to understand that there are serious moral reasons for giving up meat, and they are worth considering. At the very least, you'll find some food for thought.

TRUMP'S LAST GASP cont.

Trump's net "unfavorable" rating increased from 10.6 to 16.7 points during the 35 days the government was closed, according to FiveThirtyEight.com's approval rating tracker. On the other hand, if he had simply accepted the bill without taking any further steps to build the wall, he would have risked looking weak to his base. In fact, Trump was already facing strong pressure from his right to refuse the deal. Conservative pundit and staunch Trump supporter Sean Hannity described the bill as a "garbage compromise" and claimed that "any Republican who supports it will have to explain." Mark Krikorian of the restrictionist Center for Immigration Studies called the deal a "not half-full but quarter or eighth-full glass." Ann Coulter, who often attacks

Trump as being too soft on immigration, was harshest of them all, tweeting that "Trump has just agreed to fully open borders" and that he "has just destroyed the U.S.A." By signing a declaration of national emergency, Trump understandably hopes he can stave off more such criticism while (by signing the compromise bill) placating the independents who turned against him due to the shutdown.

Despite their political merits, however, Trump's current actions are seriously flawed and reveal how little leverage he has remaining.

First, they lack popular backing. Support for the wall has risen to between 42 and 47 percent in recent months, but only 31 to 34 percent want him to declare a national emergency to construct it. Trump may have about one-third of the county committed to his aims, but at this point he lacks the broader base needed to win re-election.

The president's second problem is that the judicial branch is likely to prevent him from successfully implementing this national emergency declaration. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi has already announced that

she is considering taking it to the courts, and at least one moderate Republican, Senator Susan Collins, admits she thinks it is "of dubious constitutionality."

And finally, the declaration of emergency sets dangerous precedents which the Democrats can take advantage of in future presidencies. As politicians on both the left and the right have pointed out, if Trump can declare a national emergency over illegal immigration, another president could do so over guns or climate change, and expand the government's powers in ways most conservatives would despise. If he wanted to pass his immigration agenda, including its most famous plank, Trump had to find a way to win over moderates from both parties, help Republicans succeed in the midterm elections, and use his political capital to intelligently lobby Congress. Instead, he wasted his first term promoting conventional and unpopular conservative legislation on taxes and health care, lost control of the House last November, and now has to grope with less effective means to keep his promises.

The Future of Syria in the Wake of U.S. Withdrawal

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The United States has had a long, varied approach to the crisis in Syria. Red lines have been drawn and ignored, missile strikes became commonplace, troops entered the region. Now it appears that we are leaving Syria. Contradictions and failed promises marked our time there. But even with the country's chaotic recent past, it is unwise for the U.S. to leave Syria under Russian influence and the leadership of Bashar al-Assad.

In the spring of 2011, protests erupted in Syria. Many people

called for Assad to step down. President Obama echoed the protesters' message and many Western leaders followed suit. But he promised no U.S. military intervention in Syria, unless the Assad regime used chemical weapons. In August of 2013, Assad carried out a chemical attack in Damascus. Accordingly, Obama asked Congress to approve a military intervention, but it was denied. Russia saw an opening and stepped in, promising to help remove all chemical weapons from Syria.

As the war continued, the U.S. began supplying Syrian rebels with weapons while beginning targeted airstrikes. To complicate matters further, ISIS joined the fight in an attempt to expand its territorial control.

U.S. airstrikes targeted both Assad's forces and ISIS fighters. In 2016, U.S. troops began training and fighting alongside Syrian rebels against ISIS forces (Politico, April 7, 2017). Currently, over 2,000 American military personnel remain in Syria.

Soon after President Trump came into office, another chemical attack took place. Trump responded by carrying out a missile strike on the Syrian military base where the attack originated. More troops were sent to advise Syrian rebel and Kurdish fighters. Among the key allies in the conflict are the Kurdish forces in northern Syria. In fact, these soldiers account for many of the U.S.-trained and -armed rebels in the country (Washington Post, Jan. 11, 2019).

In December 2018, Trump announced the withdrawal of all American forces from Syria. He claimed ISIS had been defeated, and that we had therefore accomplished our mission.

This withdrawal is a mistake for two reasons. First, we are leaving our allies behind to fend for themselves. Second, we are allowing Russia to become an even greater player in the region. Both issues were addressed in Secretary of Defense Mattis's resignation letter. Mattis stated that America's strength in

the world comes from strong partnerships, ones like those our troops forged with the Kurds. With the U.S. withdrawal, we are leaving them helpless against attacks from all sides—particularly from Turkey. Turkey views the Kurds as a terrorist force and has vowed to fight them now that the U.S. is leaving. We promised to help the Kurds. Now, we are abandoning them.

The second issue that Mattis raised in his resignation letter was the danger of leaving Russia unchecked. He argued that Russia seeks to shape the world through authoritarian means. An example is its backing of Assad. Russia has made it clear that Assad will remain in power. Whatever hope the Syrian people had for deposing him has died with the U.S. withdrawal. Because of it, the U.S. no longer has bargaining power. The future of Syria is in the hands of Vladimir Putin.

No matter your thoughts on U.S. intervention in Syria, our strategy since 2011 has been weak and ineffective. Neither President Obama nor President Trump has devised a successful plan for our involvement. Now, after millions of dollars have been spent and seven U.S. service members have lost their lives, we are withdrawing from the conflict claiming "mission accomplished"—leaving Syria to be shaped by Russia, and our allies there to fend for themselves. It is hard to ask the U.S. public to support continued involvement in the Syrian conflict or to ask service members to risk their lives in a situation Americans know little about, but simply withdrawing from the region is not the answer either. The United States must revisit its strategy and come up with a more sustainable solution. This new strategy needs to be one that protects the Kurds and does not allow Russia to have free rein in Syria.

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CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION

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#FutureOfSyria