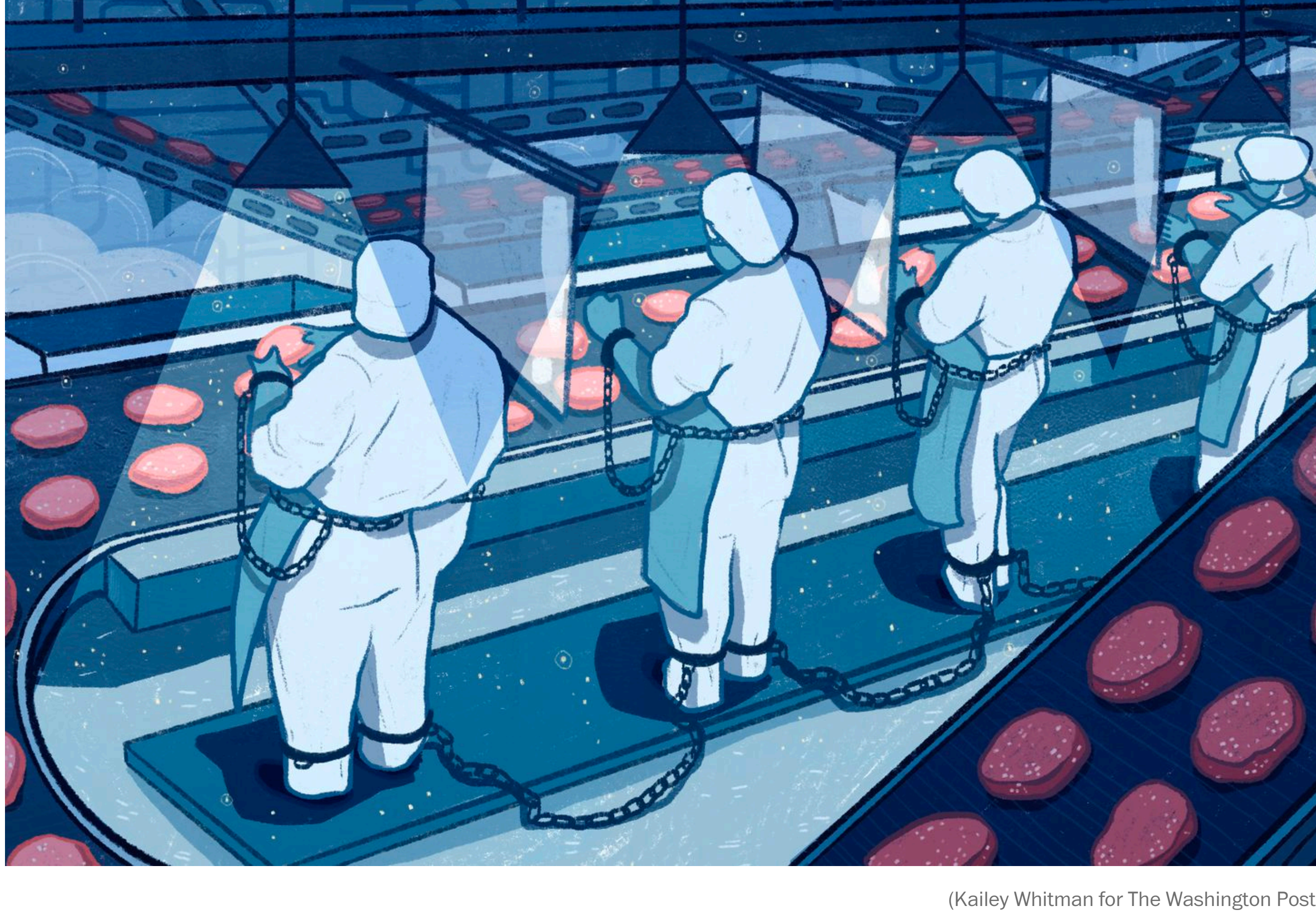


Opinions

Meat is not essential. Why are we killing for it?



(Kailey Whitman for The Washington Post)

By **Jonathan Safran Foer**

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Jonathan Safran Foer is the best-selling author of “[Everything Is Illuminated](#)” and “[Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close](#).” His nonfiction works include “[Eating Animals](#),” an examination of vegetarianism and the food we eat.

President Trump’s recent use of the Defense Production Act to order slaughterhouses and meatpacking plants [to stay open](#) is misunderstood if viewed only as the next tragic misstep in his handling of the [coronavirus pandemic](#). It marks the nadir of the increasingly broken meat industry. For years, we have knowingly destroyed our planet for the sake of a protein preference. Now, we are sending humans to their deaths.

Trump’s “order” was, in fact, the result of meat industry executives [requesting his relief from legal liability for worker deaths](#). The number of slaughterhouse workers [who have already died this year](#) is on par with the number of U.S. servicemembers who have [died annually fighting in Afghanistan](#) over the last five years. Military personnel risking their lives to fight terrorism is one thing. How did the president arrive at the absurdity of requiring civilians to risk their lives for the sake of a particular food?

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CAREGIVERS

The answer lies in how we have let agribusiness effectively normalize worker exploitation, and the mercenary skill we sometimes employ to deny or forget our support for that industry’s actions. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, [meatpacking has long been the nation’s most dangerous occupation](#). It is not just the nature of the job; there is systemic disregard for the safety and dignity of the people working in the meat industry. An [in-depth report](#) by [Oxfam](#) documents that, for years, workers in U.S. poultry slaughter plants — including those operated by Tyson Foods, Sanderson Farms, Perdue and Pilgrim’s Pride — commonly wear adult diapers or simply urinate on themselves because bathroom breaks are routinely denied by supervisors under threats of retribution.

The industry has continued such cruel practices with relative impunity, because workers are too dependent on their jobs to effectively resist unscrupulous managers, and the public has continued to underwrite the abuse. But manslaughter is a new level of depravity. The magical thinking that imagines calling meat “essential” in a time when schools, bypass surgeries and funerals are not, amounts to a sort of state-sponsored witchcraft.

In the past months, we have relied upon the bravery of essential workers. Most of us, including myself, have also bent language to our preferences. It is not “brave” for a delivery person to continue to work when he has no way to feed his family otherwise. Calling it brave is both condescending, and a method of masking our own guilt about people forced into those situations.

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NURSES

Thank you for your incredible sacrifice.

Perhaps what we’re really talking about when we use the word “essential” isn’t the necessity of the service, but the presumed disposability of the person performing it. In my hometown, black New Yorkers have died from covid-19 [at twice the rate of white New Yorkers](#). Across the country, people of color comprise a grossly disproportionate share of “essential” service workers such as bus drivers, postal workers, food deliverers and, of course, slaughterhouse workers. These jobs rarely offer paid sick leave and never allow for remote working.

We often hear that people of color are putting themselves at greater personal risk during this pandemic, but the truth is they are being put at greater risk. White people generate 97 percent of all income from the operation of farms. Yet Latinx farmers alone comprise more than 80 percent of farm laborers. The fact that the overwhelming majority of people who will suffer from Trump’s slaughter order are black and brown, and that the overwhelming majority of the executives who pleaded with him to do it are white, cannot be ignored.

As if to offer a balm to our conscience, Tyson Foods published [full-page newspaper ads](#) making the strange case that a reduction in meat supply amounts to the entire food-supply system “breaking.” The food-supply system is indeed badly broken, but the coronavirus did not create the problem.

Companies such as Tyson Foods did it by inventing a business model that requires environmental destruction, worker exploitation, animal cruelty and conditions that create “novel” viruses. (Of the 16 strains of novel influenza viruses that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has identified as being of highest concern, all but two converted to human viruses in commercial poultry farms.) Letting the monstrous factory farm system fail would allow safer, more just and sustainable models of agriculture to gain a foothold. Yes, meat supplies would be lower, but food supplies would not be. We would have more than enough protein.

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Meat is not essential and slaughterhouse workers in diapers are not brave. They are being oppressed and, in a free society, each of us who continues to underwrite that abuse bears some of the responsibility. Nor is this problem limited to the time of covid-19. This pandemic is like a lightning strike that has, for a brief moment, illuminated for all of us the values that guide factory farm corporations. Are these also to be the values that determine what we feed ourselves and our families? If not, what can one person hope to do?

It would be arrogant to think our personal buying decisions alone are sufficient to end decades of normalized exploitation, but it is more arrogant to think our decisions mean nothing. We can begin by ceasing to pretend that public-health measures are “breaking” the food supply chain, and by holding the corporations that have hijacked it responsible. Your next meal is the moment to withdraw your support from the most cruel and destructive industry in America.

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