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First Brexit . . . Now Trump! WHATEVER NEXT?

CONTRIBUTORS: DIANA JOHNSTONE PETER CERTO JONATHAN COOK BETSIAN PRIDMORE TONY SUTTON V. STEPHEN GILBERT MARK HURWITZ JOHN FEFFER THOMAS S. HARRINGTON

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BLOOD AND FIRE AND SLAUGHTER

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Cover Illustration:
Anthony Jenkins
www.jenkinsdraws.com

ColdType

7 Lewis Street
Georgetown
Ontario
Canada L6G 1E3

Telephone
905-702-8526

Contact ColdType
Write to Tony Sutton,
the Editor, at

editor@coldtype.net

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Rehabilitating George W. Bush

David Edwards shows how the media constructs an illusion of corporate dissent

The aping of the US system began with “primaries” held by the two main governing parties which obviously aspire to establish themselves as the equivalent of American Democrats and Republicans in a two-party system

The title of the editorial said it all: The Guardian View On George W. Bush: A Welcome Return. In a tongue-in-cheek, almost jovial, piece the Guardian newspaper unsubtly rehabilitated a man responsible for crimes that are among the most egregious in all history. Bush was responsible for the destruction of an entire country, the killing of a million Iraqis, the wounding and displacement of countless millions more. Car bombs, suicide bombs, mass executions, dead-of-night disappearances, blow torch and electric drill tortures, bombs in London and Madrid, rise of Islamic State, and much, much more – they all began with George W. Bush.

But the Guardian japed: “During his time in the White House, George W Bush was regarded as a warmonger and hardline conservative. As president he did an awful lot to polarise the country and was viewed as such a threat to world peace that when he left office the Nobel committee handed his successor the peace prize – for not being him.”

The piece continued: “It says a lot about the United States that Mr Bush can be seen now as a paragon of virtue. He sounds a lot better out of office than in it.” And so “the 43rd US president should be applauded.”

Not a single syllable was uttered about his literally millions of victims.

It is unthinkable, of course, that the

Guardian would “welcome” the return of an Assad, or a Putin, or any Official Enemy, in this way. But it is “normal” for a newspaper that tirelessly attempts to rehabilitate Bush’s great partner in war crime, Tony Blair. One of the foundations of the mainstream’s Grand Propaganda Narrative is that some people are simply, somehow, permanent members of the Club – respectable, well-intentioned, fundamentally decent – while others are beyond the pale, to be reviled, abused, hunted and killed, if possible.

Defined by a headline

Historian Mark Curtis tweeted a link to the editorial: “Perhaps a single article can define a newspaper. The Sun: Gotcha. The Mail: Migrant Scroungers. The Guardian: this . . .”

So how did the Guardian’s progressive journalists respond?

George Monbiot was asked if he had a view on an editorial “trying to normalise” Bush “and not mentioning the 100,000s deaths he caused?” Monbiot replied blankly: “I don’t agree with it.”

In June 2011, Monbiot was rather more forthright in using his Guardian column to identify and damn a “malign intellectual subculture that seeks to excuse savagery by denying the facts” of the genocides in Bosnia and Rwanda.

To a global audience, Monbiot named

and shamed Noam Chomsky, Edward Herman, David Peterson, John Pilger, and my organisation, Media Lens, as political commentators who “take the unwarranted step of belittling . . . acts of genocide.”

In a stirring conclusion, Monbiot wrote: “The rest of us should stand up for the victims, whoever they are, and confront those trying to make them disappear.”

We asked Monbiot about the need to “confront” the Guardian now as it disappeared the victims of George Bush. He replied: “You plainly believe there’s no difference between not mentioning something and actively airbrushing it, as Herman/Peterson did.”

But, in 2011, Monbiot of course made no such specious distinction when he insisted on the need to “confront those trying to make’ victims ‘disappear.” As former Guardian journalist Jonathan Cook commented on Twitter: “Man of principle @GeorgeMonbiot suddenly lost for words as @guardian – his employer – glosses over Bush’s crimes against humanity in Iraq.”

Train carriage tweet

A prime example of the kind of activist Monbiot was urging to “confront” injustice and denial is his colleague at the Guardian, Owen Jones. In a rousing series of tweets in November 2014, Jones reported from a train carriage on what it means to walk the talk: “Just told man to take his racism + get out of (packed) carriage after he threatened to ‘end’ Indian bloke for disrespecting in “my” country.”

How did the perp respond to the Guardian columnist’s order to vacate the carriage?

“He legged it to the toilet. When he emerged he yelled ‘I’m not a racist by the way,’ and the carriage laughed.”

What a fool! And what a contrast Jones paints to his own heroic ac-

tions. How did fellow passengers react? “Murmurs of ‘well said’ to be fair. Wasn’t bowled over though.”

Alas, only the author came out of the incident with real credit – according to the author. Jones responded with comparable vigour last year to obviously cynical claims, driven by Israeli lobby propaganda, that Jeremy Corbyn’s Labour party was infested with anti-Semitism. Jones tweeted: “John McDonnell [Shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer] was right to swiftly force Naz Shah’s resignation – but now the party has to suspend her.”

One day later, Jones added: “Ken Livingstone has to be suspended from the Labour Party. Preferably before I pass out from punching myself in the face.”

Jones’s response to the Guardian’s reha-

*The semi-satirical weekly **Le Canard Enchaîné** fired the opening shots of an ongoing media campaign designed to undo the image of Mister Clean*

Illustration:

Anthony Jenkins

www.jenkinsdraws.com



Cover Story

The idea of giving every citizen an equal handout can sound appealing to young people having trouble finding a job. But this idea, which originated with Milton Friedman and other apostles of unleashed financial capitalism, is actually a trap

bilitation of George Bush was rather different: “The Trump calamity doesn’t mean rehabilitating George W. Bush, a man chiefly responsible for hundreds of thousands of deaths and other horror.”

There were no calls for the comment editor to be suspended, or for the editor to resign. In fact, Jones made no mention of his employer and did not link to the editorial. Happily for the Guardian, many of his Twitter followers will have had no idea what he was on about.

The truth is that Guardian, Independent, and BBC regulars never criticise their employers. But they do celebrate and defend them. Last December, former Guardian journalist Jonathan Cook challenged Monbiot on Twitter: “Guardian, your employer, is precisely part of media problem. Why this argument is far from waste of energy. It’s vital.”

Monbiot replied: “That’s your view. I don’t share it. Most of my work exposing corporate power has been through or with the Guardian.”

In March 2015, Jones tweeted: “Incredible news that @KathViner is new Guardian editor! Nearly whooped in the quiet carriage. That’s how excited I am.”

Spare a thought for Jones’s fellow passengers. He certainly spared a thought for his outgoing boss: “Like so many others, owe so much to Alan Rusbridger. The Guardian is a global force, and that’s so much down to him. Surreal he’s gone.” And: “Surreal he’s going, that is. He’s still the boss!”

After 18 months of turning a blind eye to the Guardian’s relentless attack on Corbyn, both Jones and Monbiot have publicly dumped him. Jones told the Evening Standard last month: “The Left has failed badly. I’d find it hard to vote for Corbyn.”

Having completely ignored the media’s anti-Corbyn campaign, Monbiot commented on Twitter: “I was thrilled when Jeremy Corbyn became leader of the Labour Party, but it has been one fiasco after another. I have now lost all faith.”

Monbiot added: “I hoped Corbyn would be effective in fighting the government and articulating a positive alternative vision. Neither hope has materialised.”

Conclusion - status from silence

The truth is that the ‘free press’ does not tolerate authentic dissent. In the final analysis, high-profile dissidents are salaried corporate employees. They can speak no more honestly about their employers, other potential employers, or the industry in general, than someone selling cars, computers or mobile phones.

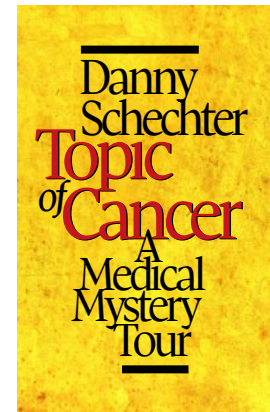
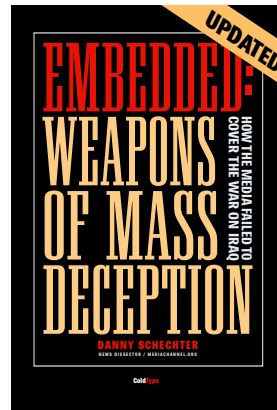
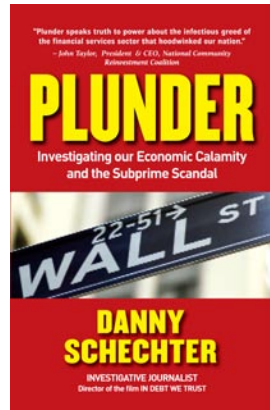
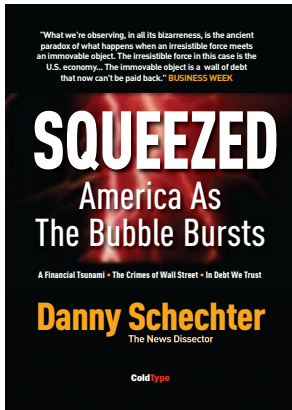
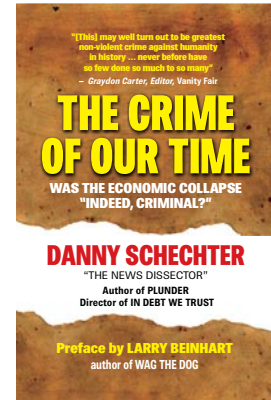
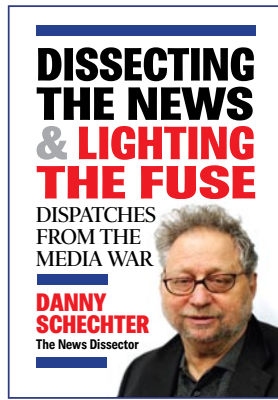
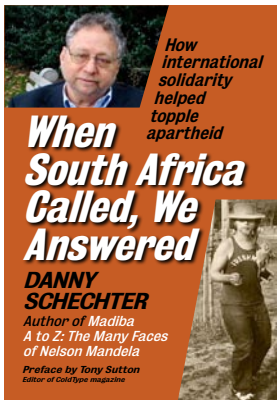
The exalted status of our most famous “left-leaning” media corporations is based on de facto censorship rather than truth-telling. After all, why would the public doubt the honesty of the Guardian or the Independent when they are essentially never subject to serious criticism? This matters because the role of the corporate media is not just one issue among many – it is the key issue determining how all other issues are communicated to a mass audience.

The result is devastating: Empowered by their ill-deserved reputations, “left-leaning” media in fact relentlessly agitate for wars in countries like Libya and Syria, relentlessly attack progressive voices challenging power and, worst of all, literally sell the high-tech, climate killing, corporate-led status quo as “normal.”

Am I suggesting that writers of principle should resign from corporate media? Yes, it is time to stop pretending anything will ever be achieved by publishing radical journalism that will be used to draw readers into a moral and intellectual killing zone serving big business. There are other alternatives now – it’s time to boycott the corporate media, dump them in the dustbin of history, and build alternatives that will allow democracy and people to breathe. **CT**

David Edwards is co-editor of *Media Lens*, the UK media watchdog – www.medialens.org

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The liberal elites are Trump's greatest allies

They destroyed the lives of hundreds of thousands of poor and working-class families, and are responsible for the mounds of corpses in the Middle East. Yet they speak as if they are champions of racial and economic justice, writes **Chris Hedges**

What the liberal elites do now is not moral. It is self-exaltation disguised as piety. It is part of the carnival act

The US liberal elites, who bear significant responsibility for the death of democracy, now hold themselves up as the saviours of the republic. They have embarked, despite their own corruption and their complicity in neoliberalism and the crimes of empire, on a self-righteous moral crusade to topple Donald Trump. It is quite a show. They attack Trump's "lies," denounce executive orders such as his travel ban as un-American and blame his election on Russia or FBI Director James Comey rather than the failed neoliberal policies they themselves advanced.

Where was this moral outrage when our privacy was taken from us by the security and surveillance state, the criminals on Wall Street were bailed out, we were stripped of our civil liberties and 2.3-million men and women were packed into our prisons, most of them poor people of colour? Why did they not thunder with indignation as money replaced the vote, and elected officials and corporate lobbyists instituted our system of legalised bribery? Where were the impassioned critiques of the absurd idea of allowing a nation to be governed by the dictates of corporations, banks and hedge fund managers? Why did they cater to the foibles and utterings of fellow elites, all the while blacklisting critics of the corporate state and ignoring the misery of the poor and the working class? Where was their moral right-

eousness when the United States committed war crimes in the Middle East and our militarised police carried out murderous rampages? What the liberal elites do now is not moral. It is self-exaltation disguised as piety. It is part of the carnival act.

Crosshead

The liberal class, ranging from Hollywood and the Democratic leadership to the New York Times and CNN, refuses to acknowledge that it sold the Democratic Party to corporate bidders; collaborated in the evisceration of our civil liberties; helped destroy programmes such as welfare, orchestrated the job-killing North American Free Trade Agreement and Trans-Pacific Partnership deal, waged endless war, debased our public institutions including the press and built the world's largest prison system.

"The truth is hard to find. The truth is hard to know. The truth is more important than ever," reads a television ad for the New York Times. What the paper fails to add is that the hardest place to find the truth about the forces affecting the life of the average American and the truth about empire is in the New York Times itself. News organisations, from the Times to the tawdry forms of entertainment masquerading as news on television, have rendered most people and their concerns invisible. Liberal institutions, especially the press, function, as the jour-

nalist and author Matt Taibbi says, as “the guardians” of the neoliberal and imperial orthodoxy.

It is the job of the guardians of orthodoxy to plaster over the brutal reality and cruelty of neoliberalism and empire with a patina of civility or entertainment. They pay homage to a nonexistent democracy and nonexistent American virtues. The elites, who live in enclaves of privilege in cities such as New York, Washington and San Francisco, scold an enraged population. They tell those they dismiss as inferiors to calm down, be reasonable and patient and trust in the goodness of the old ruling class and the American system. African-Americans have heard this kind of cant preached by the white ruling class for a couple of centuries.

Because the system works for the elites, and because the elites interact only with other elites, they are mystified about the revolt rising up from the decayed cities they fly over in the middle of the country. They think they can stuff this inexplicable rage back in the box. They continue to offer up absurd solutions to deindustrialisation and despair, such as Thomas Friedman’s endorsement of “a culture of entrepreneurship” and “an ethic of pluralism.” These kinds of bromides are advertising jingles. They bear no more connection to reality than Trump promising to make America great again.

I walked into the Harvard Club in New York City after midnight on election night. The well-heeled New York elites stood, their mouths agape, looking up at the television screens in the oak-panelled bar while wearing their Clinton campaign straw hats. They could not speak. They were in shock. The system they funded to prevent anyone from outside their circle, Republican or Democrat, from achieving the presidency had inexplicably collapsed.

Crosshead

Taibbi, when I interviewed him in New York, said political power in our corporate

state is controlled by “a tripartite system.” “You have to have the assent of the press, the donor class, and one of the two [major] political parties to get in,” said Taibbi, author of *Insane Clown President: Dispatches From the 2016 Circus*. “It’s an exclusive club. It’s like a membership system. They all have to agree and confer their blessing on the candidate. Trump somehow managed to get past all three of those obstacles. And he did it essentially by putting all of them on trial. He put the press on trial and villainised them with the public. I think it was a brilliant masterstroke that nobody saw coming. But it wouldn’t have been possible if their unpopularity hadn’t been building for years and years and years.”

“It’s a kind of Stockholm syndrome,” he said of the press. “The reporters, candidates, and candidates’ aides are all thrown together. They’re stuck in the same environment with each other day after day, month after month. After a while, they start to unconsciously adopt each other’s values. Then they start to live in the same neighbourhoods. They go to the same parties. Then it becomes a year-after-year kind of thing. Then after that, they’re the same people. It’s a total perversion of what’s supposed to happen. We’re [the press] supposed to be on the outside, not identifying with these people. But now, it’s a club. Journalists enjoy the experience of being close to power.”

At first the press, especially the television press, could not get enough of Trump. He received 23 times the coverage of Sen. Bernie Sanders, who spoke about things that do not make for great television – inequality and corporate corruption. Trump brought in the advertising dollars. 2016 was CNN’s most profitable year. Then, alarmed at Trump’s ascendancy, the press set out to destroy him. The press applied its Darth Vader Force choke. It did not work. They tried it again and again. The Force had deserted them.

“When a candidate makes a mistake and steps in it – [2004 presidential hopeful]

Because the system works for the elites, and because the elites interact only with other elites, they are mystified about the revolt rising up from the decayed cities they fly over in the middle of the country. They think they can stuff this inexplicable rage back in the box

Saints Or Sinners?

Alarmed at Trump's ascendancy, the press set out to destroy him. The press applied its Darth Vader Force choke. It did not work. They tried it again and again. The Force had deserted them

Howard Dean is the classic example, the scream – then they [TV news shows] replay it every hour, 100 times a day,” Taibbi said. “The critical part is that Dean was already in violation leading up to that moment. He was not the right person because he was anti-war. He got his donations from the wrong people. He makes the mistake. The press pig-piles on the person just instinctively. All this negative attention. The candidate freaks out and apologises. He disappears for a while. He tries to soldier on. The next thing you know, there’s a Page 16 story: Candidate exits the race. It’s a script. But it didn’t work with Trump.”

The press, like the Democratic Party, is an appendage of the consumer society. These institutions are not about politics or news. They are about imparting an experience. They create political personalities, marketed as celebrities, to make us feel good about candidates. These manufactured emotions, the product of the dark arts of the public relations industry, determine how we vote. Issues and policies are irrelevant. It is marketing and entertainment. Trump is a skillful marketer of his fictitious self.

“When you work in that environment long enough you unconsciously become an agent for whatever that commercial strategy is,” Taibbi said of the press in our corporate-run political theatre.

“What we call right-wing and liberal media in this country are really just two different strategies of the same kind of nihilistic lizard-brain sensationalism,” Taibbi wrote in *Insane Clown President*. “The ideal CNN story is a baby down a well, while the ideal Fox story is probably a baby thrown down a well by a Muslim terrorist or an ACORN activist. Both companies offer the same service, it’s just that the Fox version is a little kinkier.”

Distorted perception of the truth

The pseudo-events on television displace reality. This is how a reality star becomes president. Sixty-million people think

Trump’s manufactured persona – the pre-dominate tycoon – on *The Apprentice* is real. Our perception of the truth is determined by what appears on the screen. If an event is never broadcast, it somehow never happened. The electronic image is the word of God. The corporate state controls most of what is seen and heard on television, what ideas and events can be discussed in the mainstream media and what orthodoxies, including neoliberalism and the war industry, must never be questioned. We suffer an intellectual tyranny as pervasive as that imposed by fascism and communism. Trump, who is as gullible as the most habitual television viewer, exemplifies our cultural and political death. He is no more “authentic” than Hillary Clinton. But he appears on our screens as more authentic because he is more deeply embedded in the medium that controls our thoughts. He is what is vomited up from the perverted zeitgeist of a nation entranced and dominated by electronic hallucinations.

“People have this idea that Trump has no connection with the ‘common man,’ but he does,” Taibbi said. “He has exactly the same media habits that ordinary people have. He believes the stuff that he reads on the internet and watches on television implicitly and unquestioningly. That is what gives him that connection with people. He thinks like they do. He has the same habits they have. A classic example is the thing with the so-called three-million illegal . . . voters. He reads that, probably in an Infowars story, it’s policy like two minutes later. He doesn’t go through the process of asking himself if it’s untrue. He’s a perfect consumer in that respect. That’s what makes him so dangerous.”

“[George W.] Bush was child’s play compared to what we’re dealing with now,” Taibbi said. “Bush was a puppet. He was a vehicle for a very familiar form of right-wing capitalist politics. This Trump thing is totally different. Trump really is the actual engine behind this phenomenon during the

entire campaign. There were no people behind the man, I don't think. The presidential campaign has no relation to the issue of whether or not you can govern effectively. The campaign is a television show. The values that decide whether a person becomes a candidate or can't become a candidate are more or less arbitrary. It has a lot to do with the commercial value of the candidate. You can't have an unentertaining candidate because the press needs to make money. They will unconsciously gravitate towards someone who does what Trump does, which is get [website] hits and eyeballs and ratings."

Trump's popularity increased the more the establishment condemned him. This would have sent a profound and disturbing message to anyone not as clueless as our liberal elites. They did not get it. They thought they could trot out Bill Clinton, Barack Obama and Hollywood celebrities and get the rubes to fall for their routine one more time. They thought the country would again obey.

The liberal class, by embracing neoliberalism and refusing to challenge the imperial wars, empowered the economic and political structures that destroyed our democracy and gave rise to Trump. Multiculturalism, when it means, to use the words of Cornel West, nothing more than having a president who is a "black mascot for Wall Street," betrays the disenfranchised and endows the ruling elites with a false progressivism, a false humanism and a false inclusiveness.

Hillary and Bill Clinton, Joe Biden and the current Democratic Party leadership designed and built the massive system of imprisonment, essentially ended welfare, expanded our wars and pushed through NAFTA. They destroyed the lives of hundreds of thousands of poor and working-class families and are responsible for the mounds of corpses in the Middle East. Yet these liberal elites speak as if they are champions of racial and economic justice. They appear in choreographed pseudo-events to

demonstrate a faux compassion. Now they have been exposed as fakes.

Populism and power

A genuine populism, one defined and often articulated by Bernie Sanders, could sweep the Democratic Party back into power. Regulating Wall Street, publicly financing campaigns, forgiving student debt, demanding universal health care, bailing out homeowners victimised by the banks, ending the wars in the Middle East, instituting a jobs program to repair our decaying infrastructure, dismantling the prison system, restoring the rule of law on the streets of our cities, making college education free and protecting programs such as Social Security would see election victory after election victory.

But this will never happen within the Democratic Party. It refuses to prohibit corporate money. The party elites know that if corporate money disappears, so do they. The party's hierarchy, pressured by Obama and the Clintons, elevated Tom Perez over Keith Ellison – whom a major donor to the party, Haim Saban, condemns as an "anti-Semite" because of Ellison's criticism of the Israeli government – to head the Democratic National Committee. They will press forward repeating the same silly slogans and trying to use the now ineffective Force choke on their political enemies. They may have lost control of the Congress and the White House and hold only 16 governorships and majorities in only 31 of the states' 99 legislative chambers, but they are incapable of offering any meaningful alternative to neoliberalism and empire. They are devoid of a vision. They can only moralise. They will continue to atrophy and enable the consolidation of an American fascism.

Fyodor Dostoevsky excoriated Russia's bankrupt liberal class at the end of the 19th-century. Russian liberals mouthed values they did not defend. Their stated ideals bore no relationship to their actions. They were filled with a suffocating narcissism.

In Notes From Underground, Dostoevsky

Our perception of the truth is determined by what appears on the screen. If an event is never broadcast, it somehow never happened

Saints Or Sinners?

The party's leaders are devoid of a vision. They can only moralise. They will continue to atrophy and enable the consolidation of an American fascism

lampooned the defeated dreamers of the liberal class, those who preached goodness but lived in moral squalor. These defeated dreamers denounced the social and cultural depravity they had largely created. They had an open disdain for the uneducated, the poor, the working class, the lesser breeds beneath them. And in the end they ushered in a moral nihilism to empower a dangerous class of demagogues, killers and fools.

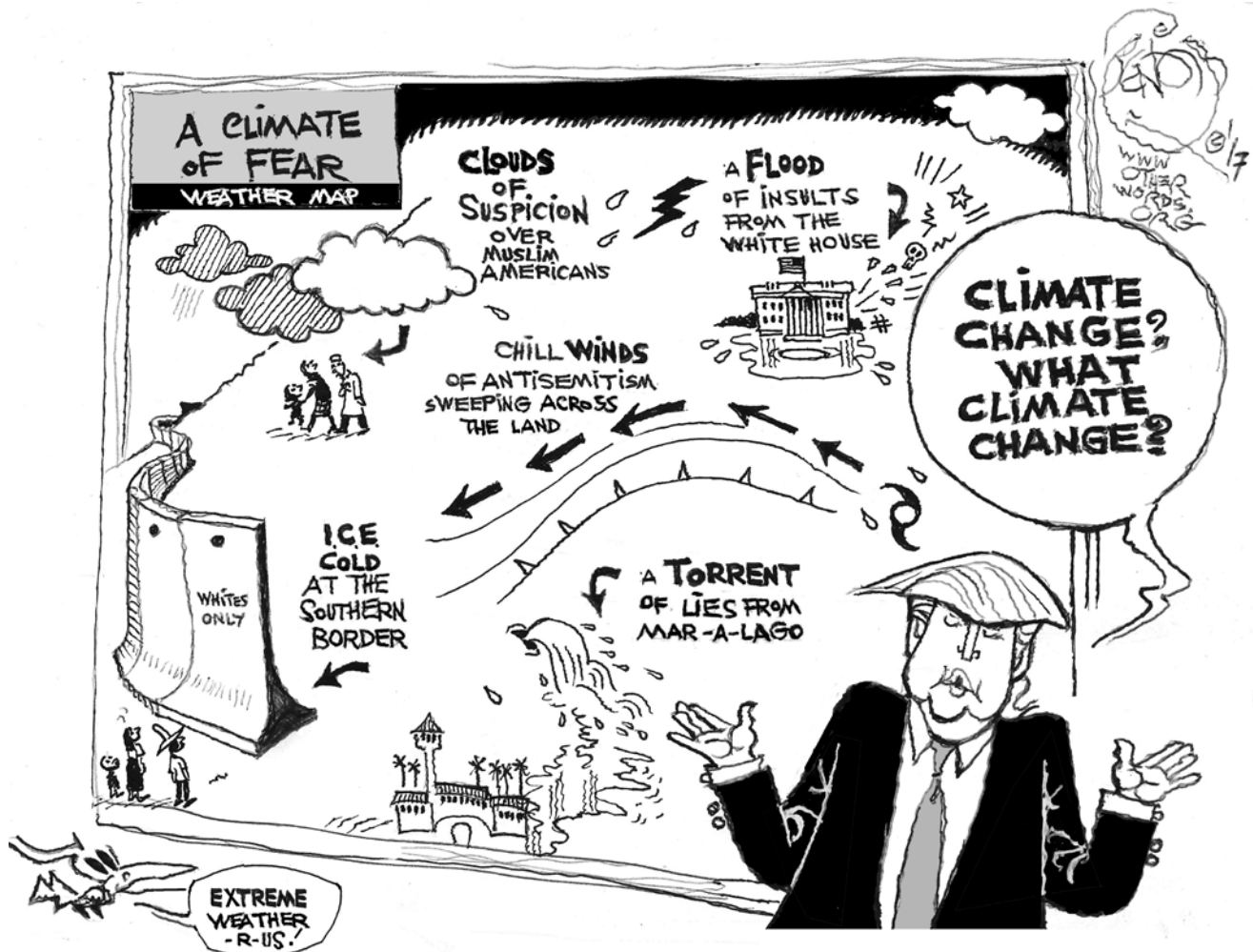
"I never even managed to become anything: neither wicked nor good, neither a scoundrel nor an honest man, neither a hero nor an insect," the Underground Man wrote. "And now I am living out my life in

my corner, taunting myself with the spiteful and utterly futile consolation that it is even impossible for an intelligent man seriously to become anything, and only fools become something. Yes, sir, an intelligent man of the 19th-century must be and is morally obliged to be primarily a characterless being; and a man of character, an active figure – primarily a limited being." **CT**

Chris Hedges has worked for *The Christian Science Monitor* and *The New York Times*, for which he was a foreign correspondent for 15 years. This essay was first published at www.truthdig.com

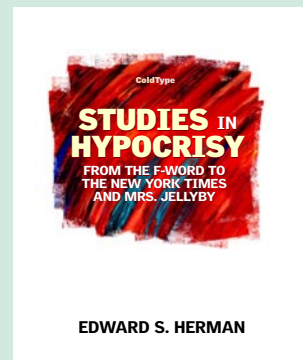
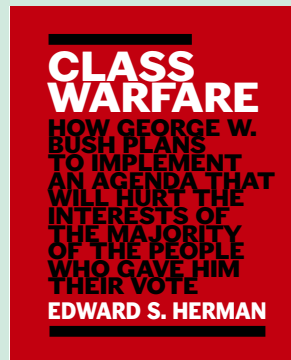
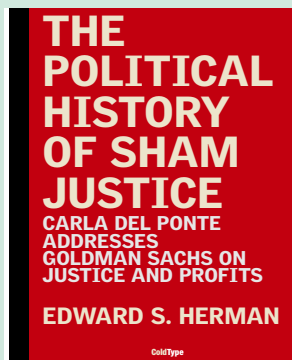
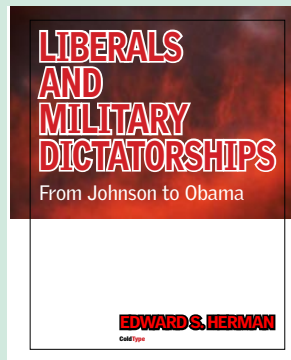
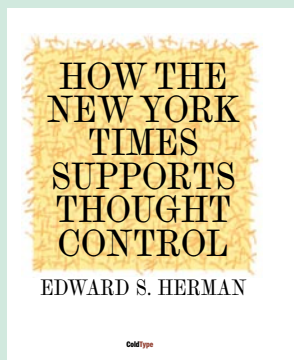
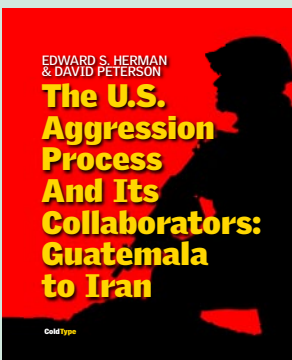
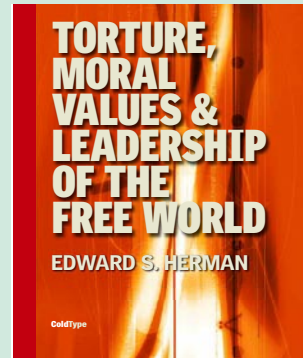
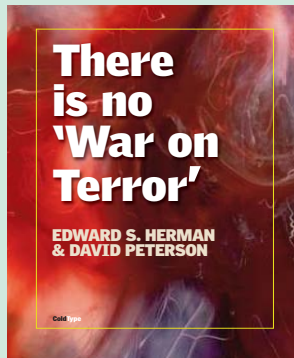
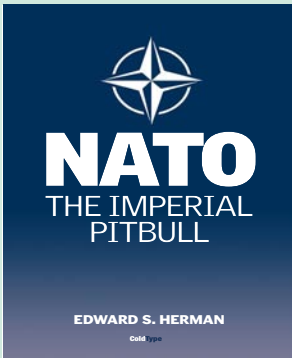
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In The Picture

From flak jacket to Lord Mayor

In 1987, when still a young Sinn Féin city councillor, Máirtín Ó Muilleoir travelled to Belfast's City Hall wearing a flak jacket under his raincoat. Twenty-six years later, after the country's political tensions eased, he became the city's lord mayor. For his new photobook, **Dónal McCann** recorded Ó Muilleoir's hectic year in office. Text: **Derec Henderson**

Máirtín Ó Muilleoir was the first Sinn Féin Lord Mayor of Belfast to attend an Armistice Day ceremony at the City Hall Cenotaph. It was not his only act of remembrance that day. Shortly after his official duties ended, he slipped away to Milltown Cemetery to the grave of his father, Sammy Millar, whose anniversary also falls on the 11th of the 11th. Milltown is also where his grandfather, Tommy McKeown, an IRA man in his day, is buried. He and two brothers were shot by loyalist



August 15, 2013: At an early engagement as Lord Mayor of Belfast, Máirtín Ó Muilleoir soaks up the atmosphere at a concert by the rock band Snow Patrol.



In The Picture

Photographs © Dónal McCann Photography



September 12, 2013: Máirtín Ó Muilleoir asks London's mayor Boris Johnson, "Would you like to be prime minister?" Johnson replies, "That job is taken." (Later, Johnson aims for the top after the resignation of David Cameron, but loses out to Theresa May.)

gunmen at their home near Magherafelt, Co. Derry in May 1922. One of them, James, was killed.

But he wanted to make sure he didn't leave the cemetery until he picked out another family headstone – that of John McManus, a retired company sergeant major in the Royal Irish Rifles, who fought in the Boer War. His funeral, in September, 1916 was the last for a British soldier to take place on the Falls Road, and unbelievably, this was the first time he stopped at the final resting place of his great grandfather. He laid some flowers there as well, and then stepped back to gather his thoughts.

For Ó Muilleoir, an unapologetic Irish republican, it was a quiet and emotional moment of reconciliation and a time to reflect on where the world was all those years ago and where it is today, especially in his divided and troubled home city.

Peace-making initiatives and full-on community dialogue were the hallmark of his period as the city's 69th lord mayor and nobody, including many who do not share his political affiliations or aspirations can recall a year quite like the term he had. It was frenetic and breathless. Once he hit the ground in June 2013, he fulfilled an estimated 2,000 engagements and travelled extensively, criss-crossing the Atlantic eight times to visit most major cities in the US, including New York where he owns the Irish Echo newspaper

Ó Muilleoir is the product of a highly disciplined political organisation, but as managing director and owner of the Belfast Media Group, he is very much his own man and succeeded in making a massive impression everywhere he went. Well, almost. He had to make a run for it after



October 17, 2014: The fastest way between meetings in Portland, Oregon is the bus.



November 15, 2013: Freedom of the City ceremony for Van Morrison at the Waterfront Hall.



Homeless on Christ's birthday. A visitor taking a break at the Welcome Organisation's shelter on the Falls Road, Belfast



January 25, 2014: Blind runner Tony McEvoy took part in a 5k park run with the lord mayor running at his side.

being kicked and slapped by a crowd of rowdy loyalists in Woodvale Park, off Belfast's sectarian Shankill Road, just minutes after telling one of his aides: "I've got a good feeling about this." How wrong he was. In a year of many, many highs, this was his one and only low point. He sympathised with the police who protected him and later forgave those who attacked him. But it was proof – if proof was needed - that nowhere in Belfast was considered out of bounds and his parlour at City Hall was open to all

He was introduced to President Barrack Obama and travelled to meet the mayor of London, Boris Johnston. He supped with the Queen at Windsor Castle. He was on first name terms with many senior American politicians, among them Andrew Cuomo, the New York governor, and Jerry Brown, governor of California. He named 24 ambassadors for the city, among them the actor Liam Neeson

and Marcus Robinson, the Belfast born documentarian who made the film, *Rebuilding the World Trade Center*. He also presented 50 special commendations, acknowledging the work of many organisations and charities and appointed nine chaplains to represent the four main religious denominations in the city as well as the Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist and Baha'i faiths.

Even though he was at the centre of many major set piece events, including the World Police and Fire Games, the Giro d'Italia cycle race – when he dyed his hair pink – and introduced singer Van Morrison as a freeman of Belfast at the Waterfront Hall, it was his engagement with the less well off, the disadvantaged, the carers, the men and women who trained kids in all kinds of sports, community volunteers, the sick, the aged, and those who helped them, which gave him the most satisfaction. He preferred disap-

In The Picture

Photographs © Donal McCann Photography



Feb 27, 2014: Fun on St Patrick's Day before the launch of the American Ireland Fund's 'Opportunity Belfast' programme.



March 18, 2014: Time for a selfie with pupils at Strandtown Primary School in East Belfast



April 16, 2014: Launch of the Relatives for Justice Remembering Quilt in City Hall – one square for each life lost in the Troubles.



May 9, 2014: The lord mayor had his hair sprayed pink each morning of the Giro d'Italia cycling event.

pearing into the background to meet and greet, rather than take his place at the front line in front of the cameras.

When he was first elected a councillor in 1987, Ó Muilleoir travelled to Belfast's City Hall wearing a flak jacket under his overcoat and varied his routes, such as the poisonous atmosphere which existed at the time. Belfast was a dark and dangerous city back then, and, although it still has a long way to go, it's a much different and better place. The lord mayor sometimes ran the three-and-a-half miles from his home to the office, and when his schedule was based in and around the city centre, he cycled. Occasionally the chain of office, which is insured for £500,000, was transported in the mayoral limo which followed behind.

Ó Muilleoir might not be to everyone's liking, but few

have challenged the view that he delivered on nearly all he promised, hammering home time and time again his message, handed down by his Buddhist chaplain Paul Haller of San Francisco: "Edit out the negativity."

Dónal McCann's brilliant pictorial record is but a snapshot, albeit an important one, of Ó Muilleoir's year in office. McCann, 37, who specialises in architectural and construction photography, was allowed uninhibited access for this special portraiture assignment, for which he took 10,000 images, beginning with the Mayor wearing a poncho while being drenched in the rain at an open air Snow Patrol concert and ending with his final day at City Hall. McCann followed him everywhere, even to the United States, to photograph him at all hours of the day and night.

The title of this photobook, *We, Too, Sing Belfast* is a variation of *I, Too, Sing America*, by the poet and novelist



June 2 2014: Heading home after the annual general meeting of Belfast City Council and the handover of the chain of office to incoming lord mayor Nichola Mallon.

Langston Hughes, known for his portrayals of black life in the United States from the 1920s to the sixties. It's classic Ó Muilleoir, for America, its history and culture have had a huge influence on his business, political and personal life.

CT

Editor's Note: Ó Muilleoir was appointed Northern Ireland's Minister of Finance after being elected to the Northern Ireland Assembly in 2016. After the Assembly's dissolution early this year, he was re-elected at the beginning of this month. He can be contacted via Twitter at @newbelfast

Derec Henderson is the former Ireland editor of the Press Association, the national news agency for the UK and Republic of Ireland. **Donal McCann**, a former UK Photographer of the Year, has had several solo exhibitions. His web site is www.donalmccann.com



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The forgotten prisoners of Guantanamo

Karen J. Greenberg on the prison's last 100 days – the story that never was

I was looking forward with particular relish to writing about the gates slamming shut on that symbol of the way the Bush administration had sent injustice offshore and about the re-opening of the federal courts to Guantanamo detainees

In the spring of 2016, I asked a student of mine to do me a favour and figure out which day would be the 100th before Barack Obama's presidency ended. October 12, he reported back, and then asked me the obvious question: Why in the world did I want to know?

The answer was simple. Years before I had written a book about Guantanamo's first 100 days and I was looking forward to writing an essay highlighting that detention camp's last 100 days. I had been waiting for this moment almost eight years, since, on the first day of his presidency, Obama signed an executive order to close that already infamous offshore prison within a year.

I knew exactly what I would write. The piece would narrate the unravelling of that infamous detention facility, detail by detail, like a film running in reverse. I would have the chance to describe how the last detainees were marched onto planes (though not, as when they arrived, shackled to the floor, diapered, and wearing sensory-deprivation goggles as well). I would mention the dismantling of the kitchen, the emptying of the garrison, and the halting of all activities.

Fifteen years after it was first opened by the Bush administration as a crucial site in its Global War on Terror, I would get to learn the parting thoughts of both the last US military personnel stationed there and the final detainees, just as I had once recorded the

initial impressions of the first detainees and their captors when Gitmo opened in January 2002. I would be able to dramatise the inevitable interagency dialogues about security and safety, post-Guantanamo, and about preparing some of those detainees for American prison life. Though it had long been a distant dream, I was looking forward with particular relish to writing about the gates slamming shut on that symbol of the way the Bush administration had sent injustice offshore and about the re-opening of the federal courts to Guantanamo detainees, including some of those involved in the planning of the 9/11 attacks.

I was eager to describe the sighs of relief of those who had fought against the very existence of that prison and what it had been like, year after year, to continue what had long seemed to many of them like a losing battle. I could almost envision the relief on the worn faces of the defence attorneys and psychologists who had come to know first hand the torment of the Gitmo prisoners, some still in their teens, who had been consigned to that state of endless limbo, many of them tortured psychologically and sometimes physically. I also looked forward – and call me the dreamiest of optimists here – to collecting statements of remorse from government and military types who had at one time or another shared responsibility for the Gitmo enterprise.



ABANDON HOPE: Camp Delta, Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

Photo: Wikimedia

Unlike me, most critics and activist opponents of that detention facility had long ago given up hope that Obama would ever follow through on his initial executive order. Across the years, the reasons for doing so were manifold. Some turned pessimistic in the spring of 2009 when, five months after he took the oath of office, the president let it be known that indefinite detention – the holding of individuals without either charges or plans to try or release them – would remain a key aspect of Washington’s policy. A collective cry of outrage came from the ACLU, the Center for Constitutional Rights, and other organisations that had long focused on the legal, moral, and political black hole of Gitmo. From there, it seemed like an endless slide to the idea that even closing Guantanamo wouldn’t finish off indefinite detention. (The heart and soul of Guantanamo, in other words, would simply be transposed to prisons in the US.)

Some lost hope over the years as the process of challenging the detention of Gitmo’s prisoners in federal court – known as filing a writ of habeas corpus – increasingly proved a dead-end. After a couple of years in which detainees were granted release by the lower

court approximately 75 percent of the time, reversals and denials began to predominate, bringing the habeas process to a virtual halt in 2011, a sorry situation Brian Foster, a prominent habeas lawyer from Covington and Burling LLP, has laid out clearly.

Then, in the 2011 National Defense Authorisation Act (NDAA), Congress instituted a ban on the transfer of any Gitmo detainee to the United States for any purpose whatsoever – trial, further detention, or release. If federal courts wouldn’t deal with them and federal prisons couldn’t hold them, then how in the world could Guantanamo ever close?

Still others lost hope as, in the Obama years, newly constituted military commissions that were meant to try the prisoners at Guantanamo became a collective fool’s errand. Since 2002, more prisoners (nine) have died there than have been successfully tried by those military commissions (eight). And of the eight convictions they got, two by trial and six by plea bargain, four have already been thrown out in whole or in part.

In other words, those commissions, the Obama administration’s answer to detention without trial, never worked. Pre-trial hearings, underway for years, in the cases still

Others lost hope as, in the Obama years, newly constituted military commissions that were meant to try the prisoners at Guantanamo became a collective fool’s errand

Obama's Legacy

By the end of the Obama years, there had been federal prosecutions of nearly 500 individuals accused of terrorism, including both the perpetrators of lethal attacks and individuals who had trained with the al-Qaeda leadership

pending are expected to continue well into the 16th year since the attacks for which the defendants are to be tried took place. The chief prosecutor for the five 9/11 defendants who were brought to Gitmo in 2006 and charged in 2012, has recently – without the slightest sense of irony or remorse – proposed that their trials begin in March 2018. With appeals, they might conceivably conclude in the third decade of this century.

The last 100 days that weren't

Add it all up and you had a steamroller of beyond-ominous facts suggesting that Guantanamo would never shut down. As the last days of the Obama presidency approached, it seemed as if I were the only person left with any faith that our 44th president would keep his day-one promise before leaving office. At times, I found my own optimism disturbing, but I couldn't give it up and, to be fair to myself, I wasn't just stubbornly refusing to add to the negativity around me. There were reasons for my optimism, however Pollyannish it might have been.

After all, it was obvious that Gitmo was utterly shutdownable. After a century of tackling issues related to national security, the federal courts were more than up to dealing with whatever was involved in such cases (despite the claims of congressional Republicans). There was never any excuse for Guantanamo. By the end of the Obama years, there had been federal prosecutions of nearly 500 individuals accused of terrorism, including both the perpetrators of lethal attacks and individuals who had trained with the al-Qaeda leadership, and, unlike at Gitmo, federal courts had lawfully and effectively put the guilty behind bars.

Classified evidence had been handled in a way that disclosed no sensitive information and yet allowed public trials to proceed. Juries had been repeatedly convened without risk to their wellbeing, while perfectly reasonable security measures had been taken to protect courtrooms and court officers. True, the federal courts had largely run away

from dealing with the widespread abuse and torture of prisoners in the war on terror, but in the one case in which a Guantanamo detainee, tortured at a CIA black site, had come into federal court, a judge had ruled that evidence obtained through torture could not be introduced and the trial had nevertheless proceeded swiftly to its conclusion.

In addition, although habeas proceedings had been yielding ever fewer releases of Gitmo prisoners, the tempo of hearings elsewhere to determine whether such individuals could be cleared and freed without trial had speeded up radically. In 2011, President Obama had initiated periodic review boards meant to identify individual detainees who no longer (or, in a number of cases, had never) posed a danger for release.

Then, in the fall of 2015, he appointed Lee Wolosky as special envoy for Guantanamo closure, again raising my hopes. I knew Wolosky, a no-nonsense lawyer who had served on the national security councils of both Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, and he seemed like the sort of man who would know how to broker the sensitive diplomatic deals that would get the job done. In fact, his work would result in the release to various willing countries of 75 prisoners, nearly 40 percent of the Gitmo population Obama had inherited. By the time he left office and Donald Trump entered it, the prison population had dwindled to 41: five prisoners cleared for release who still remained there when Wolosky went off the job, 10 military commissions cases, and 26 detainees whom Miami Herald journalist Carol Rosenberg aptly termed “forever prisoners” (to be held in indefinite detention because they were considered too dangerous for release and yet there wasn't enough evidence to bring them to trial).

One more factor seemed to speak in favour of the logic of the prison being closed: the financial piece of the puzzle. The price per prisoner of keeping Guantanamo open kept soaring with each successful transfer of detainees. When Obama first took office, with 174 detainees in custody, the govern-

ment was spending \$4-million per detainee annually. With 41 detainees remaining, the cost has shot up to nearly \$11-million per prisoner per year. This seemed to be potentially the most convincing argument of all, but as it turned out, Congress was unfazed by the extraordinary expense. It mattered not at all that transferring such prisoners to, say, the supermax prison in Florence, Colorado, where the most notorious terrorism convicts are commonly held, would have dropped that cost to approximately \$78,000 per year.

And then there were those rumours that Obama might circumvent Congress entirely and simply close the prison by executive order. In fact, in February 2016, Congress rejected a closure plan submitted by the Pentagon and by July the Obama administration had decided not to pursue the option of an executive order to close the base.

Above all, I knew one thing: if Obama ever actually made that decision, especially with President-elect Donald Trump intent on keeping the place open, it could be done remarkably rapidly. As I'd found out while researching my book on Guantanamo's early days, the military unit assigned to open Guantanamo Bay in January 2002 had been given only 96 hours to put together an initial facility consisting of open cages, interrogation huts, latrines, showers, and guard quarters, as well as food services, equipment, and telecommunications set-ups, most of which had to come from the mainland. There was no reason the prison couldn't be similarly dismantled in a few days, especially since closure would initially only involve moving prisoners and guards, not taking apart the facility itself.

It was easy enough to imagine the steps to closure: speed up the review process; convince Congress that \$11-million per prisoner was an unacceptable price tag; and yes, even perhaps swallow for the moment the idea of indefinite detention in the United States. Unfortunately, I wasn't the president.

As it turned out, of course, the pessimists couldn't have been more on target. On Inau-

guration Day, Gitmo was still open, awaiting a new president who seems determined to fill it up all over again, ensuring that in the rest of the world – and the Islamic world in particular – the United States would forever be associated with a place into whose DNA was etched abuse, torture, and injustice. The war on terror, the forever war, would now have its forever prisoners as well.

Closure seems inconceivable

Today, Gitmo's closure appears to be as inconceivable as shutting down the unending war on terror that birthed it. I will never, it seems, have the opportunity to compare the departure of its prisoners to their arrival, never be able to run that terrible film, that blot on our country, backwards. The legislative path is already being set for Gitmo to be eternally ours. In mid-February, 11 Republican senators wrote a letter requesting that President Trump suspend the periodic review boards and turn Guantanamo back into a prison that accepts detainees. (The last new detainee had been brought there in 2008, during the waning days of the presidency of George W. Bush.) Now, the new administration has reportedly identified its first potential new detainee in nine years.

It's easy enough to see why this is a bad idea. The backlash in the Muslim world (and not only there) will be intense and long-lasting. Even a number of top-ranking officials from the Bush administration have come to this conclusion, including President Bush himself who noted that Guantanamo "had become a propaganda tool for our enemies and a distraction for our allies." Former CIA Director David Petraeus has similarly pointed out that "the existence of Gitmo has indeed been used by the enemy against us." Former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen noted that Guantanamo "has been a recruiting symbol for those extremists and jihadists who would fight us." Emphasising America's "dismal reputation," former Republican Secretaries of State Henry Kissinger, Colin Powell, and James Baker joined their Democratic

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Obama's Legacy

As long as Gitmo remains open, whether we know it or not, we're imprisoned there, too, and so is the American way of life

peers Warren Christopher and Madeleine Albright in recommending its closure.

For 15 years, opponents of Guantanamo have insisted that its existence could change the character – and destiny – of the country. In its refusal to honour domestic, military, or international law, it has already opened the door to a new exceptionalist vision of the law. Unfortunately, Guantanamo is now a fixture of our landscape, as much an institution as new standards for the surveillance of American citizens, which means I may never get to write that piece about its last 100 days unless I resort to fiction.

If I did, I'd skip all the details about the prosaic negotiations that would undoubtedly have to go on to close it. Instead, in my vision, the old-fashioned spirit of American justice and law would simply rise up organically from the body politic and reframe Guantanamo as the place of sadness and shame that it's been from its earliest days.

What I'd write would be too succinct for even the shortest utopian novel. Think of it instead as the utopian op-ed that no paper will ever publish, the one in which the desire

to be lawful and a deep belief that decency and security go hand in hand prevailed. In my utopian fantasy, in the world I fear I will never see, in the American world whose absence I mourn to this day, Guantanamo will be closed not because of calculations related to its cost or the inefficiency of its military commissions or even global realpolitik. It will be closed because it's the only right thing to do. Otherwise there will be another set of forever prisoners – and I'm not thinking about the future terror suspects that Donald Trump will send there, presumably forever. I'm thinking about us. For as long as Gitmo remains open, whether we know it or not, we're imprisoned there, too, and so is the American way of life.

CT

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Karen J. Greenberg is the director of the Center on National Security at Fordham Law School and author of *The Least Worst Place: Guantanamo's First 100 Days*. Her latest book is *Rogue Justice: The Making of the Security State*. Rose Sheela and Elizabeth Hilton did research for this article. This essay first appeared at www.tomdispatch.com

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Gaza report ‘not about justice for Israel’s victims’

Report comes as Israeli officials have warned of the likelihood of another round of hostilities, writes **Jonathan Cook**

The Israeli leadership shows no signs of heeding the lessons of an official report into the 2014 Gaza war that led to massive destruction and loss of life in the tiny coastal enclave, Palestinians warned this month. After a two-year inquiry, the State Comptroller, an official Israeli watchdog, published a report into the 51-day war that began in July 2014. It was highly critical of Israeli government officials, as well as Israel’s military and its intelligence services.

In particular, the 200-page document faulted Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for failing to address the mounting humanitarian crisis in Gaza – conditions that made hostilities ever more likely, according to the report.

Netanyahu was also blamed for failing to pursue diplomatic moves that might have averted the confrontation or brought it to a quick end, sparing much of the bloodshed.

The war killed more than 2,250 Palestinians, the majority of them civilians, and 73 Israelis, almost all of them soldiers. According to United Nations figures, more than 100,000 Palestinians were made homeless by Israeli bombing that destroyed swaths of the enclave.

Comptroller Joseph Shapira’s findings come as Israeli officials have again warned of the likelihood of another round of hostilities with Gaza, possibly within the next few months. The precariousness of the situ-

ation was underscored this week as Israeli air strikes hit five sites in Gaza on Monday, wounding four, after a rocket from Gaza landed in an open space in Israel.

Israel has launched three major military operations against Gaza over the past eight years, after the Islamic group Hamas won Palestinian elections in 2006 and took control of the enclave a year later. Israel has imposed a blockade ever since, tightly limiting the entry and export of goods.

No serious lessons learned

But Ghassan Khatib, a former Palestinian Authority minister, said the report’s section on the Israeli government’s political failings had been overshadowed by the rest of the report, which dealt with operational and intelligence shortcomings. “It is hard to believe that there will be any serious lessons learned by Israel’s political leadership from this report,” Khatib told Al Jazeera.

So far, the debate about the report in Israel has focused on a lack of preparation for coping with what Israelis term Gaza’s “terror tunnels.” Hamas used a network of concealed tunnels to launch surprise attacks after Israeli ground forces entered the enclave.

Khatib said: “The comptroller failed to examine the deeper issue of the Israeli leadership’s motivation in repeatedly heating up the front with Gaza. That was all about internal political competition, about jockeying

The war killed more than 2,250 Palestinians, the majority of them civilians, and 73 Israelis, almost all of them soldiers

Fighting Talk

Difficulties locating and destroying the tunnels, according to the report, led to a more protracted ground operation than expected. The implication was that this increased casualties on both sides

for position within the ruling government coalition.”

Gaza made an easy military target for Israel because of its prolonged isolation, Khatib added. “The threat [posed by Gaza] has been exaggerated to the Israeli public to justify war. Successive governments have expected to win with little cost to their own side. Attacking Gaza empowers the right and helps to secure its success at the next election.”

Shapira’s report did not recommend action be taken against any of the officials it identified, or accuse them of committing crimes. Instead it highlighted a failure to recognise the tunnels threat, a lack of intelligence sharing, and inadequate operational plans. Difficulties locating and destroying the tunnels, according to the report, led to a more protracted ground operation than expected. The implication was that this increased casualties on both sides.

Most Israeli commentators thought it unlikely that Netanyahu would pay a political price for these criticisms, especially after such a long delay in publishing the report.

Nonetheless, in an apparent sign of Netanyahu’s discomfort with the findings at a time when he is facing a series of corruption investigations, he lashed out pre-emptively at Shapira at a meeting of his Likud party, suggesting that the ombudsman had betrayed the security establishment. In a statement the next day, as the report was released, Netanyahu claimed that the 2014 war had been an exceptional success. He said Israel had “hit Hamas harder than it had ever been hit before” and that, as a result, there had been “unprecedented quiet” from Gaza.

Khatib said Shapira’s report overlooked the escalation of hostilities by Israel in the weeks preceding the war. Israel, he noted, had made mass arrests of Palestinians in the West Bank as it searched for three Jewish youths who had been abducted. They were later found killed.

A recent editorial in Israel’s daily Haaretz described the war as Israel’s “revenge” for the youths’ deaths. The editorial criticised

Shapira for failing to question the wisdom of a “scorched-earth policy” by Israel that had kept Gaza’s population of two-million under a lengthy blockade. Given this strategy, the paper said, another round of hostilities was inevitable.

“Not interested in justice”

Hamdi Shaqura, deputy director of the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights, based in Gaza City, said most of the Palestinian public had shown little interest in the report. “This investigation and others like it are not interested in justice for the thousands of victims of Israel’s brutal attacks,” he told Al Jazeera.

“This is about Israel refining its operational capabilities so it can prepare better for the next attack. The chief beneficiaries will not be Palestinians, but the war criminals in Israel who will draw conclusions about how they can better conceal their crimes next time.”

Shaqura said the report’s references to the humanitarian crisis in Gaza were divorced from political realities. “This humanitarian crisis isn’t an accident. It has been sustained by Israel’s siege for more than 10 years. Israel wants Gaza isolated, and its population barely able to survive. That is the status quo for Israel.”

He noted that an Israeli defence ministry document from 2008, made public four years later, included advice on the amount of food Israel should allow into Gaza to keep the population on the minimum number of calories. Shaqura said: “Even when this report deals with the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, it is not in the context of finding a political solution to end it. Rather, Israel is more interested in improving its management of the crisis.”

The comptroller’s report noted that Netanyahu’s government had done almost nothing to address warnings from military officials more than a year before the 2014 war that Gaza’s humanitarian crisis was unsustainable. In this context, Shapira highlighted an apparent mea culpa from Moshe Yaalon, the then defence minister, two days into the war. He reportedly told officials: “If

Hamas' distress had been addressed a few months ago, Hamas might have avoided the current escalation."

In fact, observed Barak Ravid, an analyst for Haaretz, Israel had made things substantially worse in Gaza in the weeks preceding the hostilities. In early June 2014 it had imposed economic and diplomatic sanctions on a Palestinian unity government formed between Hamas in Gaza and Fatah in the West Bank, in an attempt to undermine it.

Shortly afterwards, Netanyahu's government sought to isolate Robert Serry, then the UN's special peace envoy, as he battled to transfer funds from Qatar to pay the salaries of Gaza's public workers. Gaza was "a volcano waiting to erupt," wrote Ravid.

'Like animals in zoo'

Haidar Eid, an academic at al-Aqsa University in Gaza, said conditions had deteriorated even further since 2014. He noted that two years ago the UN forecast that Gaza could be "uninhabitable" by 2020. It said the large-scale destruction of Gaza's infrastructure in 2014 had only accelerated that process.

More than 90 per cent of Gaza's water is considered "unfit" for human consumption. Shortages of electricity provoked the first mass public protests in January, with some families suffering blackouts for up to 21 hours a day.

Israel has also continued the enclave's isolation. In February, a delegation from the European parliament was again denied access to Gaza as it sought to assess the continuing need for reconstruction since the 2014 war. And Netanyahu is reported to be hampering efforts to offer Gaza relief. A proposal by transport minister Yisrael Katz to build an artificial island off Gaza's coast to serve as a seaport and airport has yet to be discussed by the cabinet, a year after it was raised.

At the same time, Herzi Halevi, head of military intelligence, warned a parliamentary committee of growing despair in Gaza. He reportedly said: "Israel will be the first to feel it when things explode." Eid told Al Jazeera:



In February, a delegation from the European parliament was again denied access to Gaza as it sought to assess the continuing need for reconstruction since the 2014 war

"When Israeli 'experts' talk about how to manage Gaza's crisis better, they sound like they are discussing how best to run a zoo so the animals remain quiet." He said Hamas supporters in Gaza viewed the report's focus on the tunnels as a vindication of the group's claims that it had been victorious in 2014. "Commentators here believe that this report has the power to bring down Netanyahu," he said.

But Netanyahu's difficulties with the report and his corruption scandals were also seen as a dangerous moment. Most Palestinians, said Eid, agreed with Israeli analysts that another outbreak of hostilities was on the horizon. "When Netanyahu is in such trouble, the assumption is that he will exaggerate the military threat of Hamas and the danger of the tunnels to justify launching another massacre," he said. "He needs a big distraction and Gaza can supply it." **CT**

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Jonathan Cook won the Martha Gellhorn Special Prize for Journalism. His latest books are "Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East" (Pluto Press) and "Disappearing Palestine: Israel's Experiments in Human Despair" (Zed Books). His website is www.jonathan-cook.net.



Photographs by
Ron Fassbender

Ronn Fassbender is a London-based activist and freelance photographer. His Flickr photostream is www.flickr.com/photos/theweeklybull



Photographs © Ron Fassbender



Fighting for a nation's health

More than 200,000 people from across England gathered in London on March 4 to defend the country's National Health Service from underfunding, closures and privatisation by Theresa May's Tory government. The march, in which doctors, nurses and other healthcare workers were joined by union members and concerned citizens, was organised by Health Campaigns Together and the People's Assembly. It was part of an effort to halt the government's proposed Sustainability and Transformation Plans which, protesters say, will help destroy the free health service. The Tories, who favour American-style health insurance that would be unaffordable for much of the population, claim the NHS is no-longer affordable, blaming "health tourism" and migrant workers for soaring costs. However, at the same time as they are underfunding healthcare, they have no qualms about wasting billions of pounds in updating the UK's nuclear "deterrent" systems. Killing people, it would seem, is more important than keeping them alive. – Editor



In The Picture

Photographs © Ron Fassbender



For details about this and forthcoming protests visit the following web sites:

Health Campaigns Together - www.healthcampaignstogether.com

The People's Assembly - www.thepeoplesassembly.org.uk



Screened out

For some of those immersed in virtual worlds, everything – even racism and fascism – loses its meaning, writes **George Monbiot**

As far as relevance and utility are concerned, we might as well train children to operate a spinning jenny. Our schools teach skills that are not only redundant but counter-productive

Everything is possible. Nothing is possible. Nothing hurts any more, until the consequences crash through the screen. Immersed almost permanently in virtual worlds, we cannot check what we are told against tangible reality. Is it any wonder we live in a post-truth era, when we are bereft of experience?

It is no longer rare to meet adults who have never swum except in a swimming pool, never slept except in a building, never run a mile or climbed a mountain, have never been stung by a bee or a wasp, broken a bone or needed stitches. Without a visceral knowledge of what it is to be hurt and healed, exhausted and resolute, freezing and ecstatic, we lose our reference points. We are separated from the world by a layer of glass. Climate change, distant wars, the erosion of democracy, the resurgence of fascism – in our temperature-controlled enclosures, all can be reduced to abstractions.

I'm prompted to write this for two reasons. The first is a fascinating and disturbing explanation of the bulletin board 4chan.org by one of its former inhabitants, Dale Beran. This is the forum in which many of the toxic memes of the alt-right grew, and whose vicious pursuit, through Gamergate, of women who have dared to develop video games rose into a new wave of misogyny. Its millions of members helped to put Donald

Trump on the throne.

Is 4chan a clever invention by a group of fascist conspirators? No. It evolved organically among young, often jobless, often sexually-frustrated men, who sought refuge in a world of their own making, and live there through almost every waking hour. As their online world of ironic self-reflection expanded, their contact with the real world shrank, until nothing was serious – except their hatred of women. Depicting their mascot Pepe the frog in a swastika t-shirt, giving the finger to liberals and people of colour, is just a joke. So was the rise, on their shoulders, of Milo Yiannopoulos. So was the election of Donald Trump.

Like adolescent boys and man-boys everywhere, 4chan's users, Beran explains, are "deeply sensitive and guarded." They disguise this sensitivity with extreme insensitivity to other people's suffering – of the kind that "only people who have never really suffered" can display. Whatever they do or say – posting swastikas, racist memes, incitements to bully and abuse – is just "for the lulz" (4chan's word for lols).

None of it, in the airless, affectless world in which they spend almost all their time, seems to matter. When they make the mistake of stepping into the real world, as Laurie Penny's description earlier this month of the young men accompanying Yiannopoulos on his roadshow reveals, they find it

a hard and terrifying place. “Very brave behind a computer screen,” these people are “absolutely unequipped to deal with any suggestion of real-world consequences.” Until they collided with anti-fascist demonstrators, their far right politics were just another lutz. Dale Beran explains that Donald Trump perfectly encapsulates the 4chan ethic. A loser who miraculously wins, a great spiteful prank on the world’s people, he brings its fantasy world to life.

Absurdish babble

My second reason for writing this column is that the same issues surround another online sensation: the output of the YouTube vlogger PewDiePie. His absurdist babble, adored by his 53-million mostly-teenage followers, evolved into giving a Nazi salute, inserting clips of Hitler’s speeches and images of swastikas into his shows, paying two Indian men to hold up a sign reading “Death to All Jews” and pondering whether Leslie Jones (the actor who was brutally bullied by Yiannopolous and his followers for the crime of being black and female in a public place) should be compared to Harambe the gorilla.

Several people have explained to me that it was all just fun; he didn’t mean it. Which, to my mind, is exactly the problem. When the Holocaust, nazism and racism are so abstracted from reality that they become just another expression of ironic detachment, when moral norms collapse into knowing laughter, our defences against offline horrors disintegrate.

Breaking down the barriers of acceptability through humour is now a deliberate tactic of the far right. PewDiePie might see his “jokes” as harmless and fun, but they mesh with agendas that are neither. The Nazi website the Daily Stormer notes that PewDiePie “could be doing all this only to stir things up and get free publicity . . . it doesn’t matter, since the effect is the same; it normalizes nazism, and marginalises our enemies.”

The shrinking of our contact with the tangible world has taken place at a speed to which we struggle to adapt, with consequences we cannot yet grasp. The outdoor childhoods – urban or rural – that people of my age enjoyed are seen by our children in the same light as mastodons and public hangings: exotic, frightening and impossibly distant. For those who still see the rainbow arcing over the town while everyone else is buried in their phones, life in the real world can feel lonely.

I suspect this has only just begun. Virtual reality is in its infancy. Once people retreat into the land behind the headset, in which they can no longer even see or hear what surrounds them, they are likely to become still less connected with the real world. Facebook’s attempt to make virtual reality goggles an indispensable tool for learning, watching sport, even consulting a doctor, is frankly terrifying. It threatens to turn almost everyone into what the Japanese call hikikomori – people who have withdrawn so far into virtual worlds that they can no longer be reached by those around them.

This makes us, especially in view of advances in neuromarketing and cognitive linguistics, that are now being ruthlessly exploited by the hard right, highly vulnerable to political manipulation. In a fiendishly complex world, the only hope we have of assessing competing claims is often to draw on our own experience. Without experience, we are lost.

This is more fundamental even than filter bubbles and values ratchets. This is about what it is to be human, what it is to lose that essential element of our existence: our contact with the real world. The political, social and environmental consequences are currently beyond reckoning. **CT**

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George Monbiot’s latest book, How Did We Get Into This Mess?, is published by Verso. This article was first published in the Guardian newspaper. Monbiot’s web site is www.monbiot.com

There is no single system for teaching children well, but the best ones have this in common: they open up rich worlds that children can explore in their own ways, developing their interests with help rather than indoctrination

Are you now, or have you ever been . . .

. . . a secret agent of Vladimir Putin? **John Stepling** analyses the new wave of liberal hysteria that is sweeping the United States

Wasn't it just yesterday that Bush Jr looked into Putin's eyes and declared him a honourable man?

"Take notice, That England is not a Free People, till the Poor that have no Land, have a free allowance to dig and labour the Commons, and so live as Comfortably as the Landlords that live in their Inclosures."
– Gerrard Winstanley, 1652

"Since the beginning, the US presidents (all of European stock, of course), had been promoting slavery, extermination campaigns against the native population of North America, barbaric wars of aggression against Mexico, and other Latin American countries, the Philippines, etc. Has anything changed now? I highly doubt it. Donald Trump is horrendous, but he is also honest. Both Presidents Clinton and Obama were great speakers, but unrepentant mass murderers."
– Andre Vltchek

"The solutions put forth by imperialism are the quintessence of simplicity . . . When they speak of the problems of population and birth, they are in no way moved by concepts related to the interests of the family or of society . . . Just when science and technology are making incredible advances in all fields, they resort to technology to suppress revolutions and ask the help of science to prevent population growth. In short, the peoples are not to make revolutions, and women are not to give birth. This sums up the philosophy of imperialism."– Fidel Castro

The strange sight of liberal America participating in a neo-McCarthyite assault on Trump appointees, not on the grounds of their inherent racism and stupidity, but because they have contacts with Russia, is among the more surreal spectacles of modern political history. At what point did Russia become the official enemy of the US? Wasn't it just yesterday that Bush Jr looked into Putin's eyes and declared him a honourable man? The truth is, of course, that Russia never stopped being the enemy. The internalised ethos of the cold war, the anti-communist hysteria of post WW2 has always been there. The resentful flinty heart of America tolerates no disobedience. No country exhibiting the slightest autonomy is allowed to escape punishment and censure. The shining light on the hill symbolism is one that demands nobody else dare to exhibit anything that resembles their own leadership role globally.

The current animus toward Putin can be traced back to several clear sources, though, as Justin Raimondo points out: "When Putin came to power one of the first things he did was go after the infamous oligarchs who had backed – and manipulated – his predecessor, Boris Yeltsin. Under the drunken Yeltsin, these 'entrepreneurs' had used the State apparatus to 'privatise' (i.e. loot) what had previously been the State-owned economy, gobbling up entire sectors at un-



Vladimir Putin carries Donald Trump.

Caricature by Donkeyhotey - www.flickr.com/photos/donkeyhotey/28512617446

believably cheap prices. Putin moved to disassemble what was a competing power center, and the result was the flight of the oligarchs to the West.”

And he adds the Israeli lobby (AIPAC et al) and the influence, however mediated these days, of Saudi Arabia. Both have a vested interest in keeping up a Russophobic slant to government policy and rhetoric. Israel long wanted Assad gone. Russia was getting in the way. Now there is also the rather obvious uses that blaming Russia serves for the DNC and its various funding sources. The fact that the Democratic Party snatched defeat from the jaws of victory by running a wildly hated and corrupt candidate in

Hillary Clinton, needs an explanation. And that explanation is Putin and Russia. The idea that somehow Trump is a Putin puppet and that the Russian state has manipulated a national election, is itself stunningly contradictory. It suggests a degree of power and cunning for Putin and Russia that is at odds with the America is the great-and-good-and-powerful symbolism. As a desperate reflex excuse for losing what was supposed to be a cake-walk for Hillary, it is sort of understandable. But what isn't understandable is how so many otherwise seemingly rational people buy into this fantasy.

The result of this new Russophobic hysteria is to create a precedent for the CIA and

The fact that the Democratic Party snatched defeat from the jaws of victory by running a wildly hated and corrupt candidate in Hillary Clinton, needs an explanation. And that explanation is Putin and Russia.

Official Enemy

The tragicomedy of the DNC's close support of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia deserves an entire volume all by itself: A country where women can't drive, where apostates and homosexuals are beheaded, and where economic inequality is of a magnitude perhaps unequalled in history, remains a close ally of the US

even more shady and shadowy forces to unseat an elected president. I mean common cause is being made with the worst actors in American politics. And, more, to sanction a public interrogation of whoever they deem hostile to their interests. This is the useful idiot meme on steroids. It is the white liberal class ASKING for totalitarian government.

The empowering of the deep state, those unelected and unregulated organisations and individuals that desire nothing so much as a totally authoritarian surveillance state from the pages of Orwell or Huxley, is a far worse consequence than any damage the Donald and his minions might wreak. Of course, the collapse of the Democratic Party is not entirely the result of Hillary's bungled campaign, but of 30 or 40 years of inexorable rightward lurch. An utter abandonment of the working class, and more, an indifference, publicly, to the consequences of that abandonment. The tragicomedy of the DNC's close support of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia deserves an entire volume all by itself: A country where women can't drive, where apostates and homosexuals are beheaded, and where economic inequality is of a magnitude perhaps unequalled in history, remains a close ally of the US. Most of the 9-11 hijackers were Saudis, assuming one accepts the official story, and its hardly a secret that the Saudi royal family funds extreme Wahabbi ideology throughout the Arab world. And, the Saudis remain the single largest purchaser of US weapons; weapons currently employed in the destruction of the tiny impoverished nation of Yemen – a destruction that US actively helped plan and orchestrate.

Never heard before

Gareth Porter wrote of the intelligence community's attacks: "A former US intelligence official with decades of experience dealing with the CIA as well other intelligence agencies, who insisted on anonymity because he still has dealings with US government agen-

cies, told this writer that he had never heard of the intelligence agencies making public unverified information on a US citizen.

"The CIA has never played such a open political role," he said.

"The CIA has often tilted its intelligence assessment related to a potential adversary in the direction desired by the White House or the Pentagon and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, but this is the first time that such a slanted report impinges not only on domestic politics but is directed at the President himself."

The take down of Trump's National Security Advisor appointee Michael Flynn was nakedly partisan. And in the middle of this was vice president Mike Pence, late of Columbus, Ohio, and Hanover College. A former talk show host (billed as Rush Limbaugh on decaf), Pence is a devout Christian who believes in intelligent design and the literal word of the Bible. He disbelieves climate change and desires the privatising of social security – which puts him in line with Hillary Clinton, actually. But the point is that Pence is a deeply repressed rube, a visibly uptight uncomfortable looking man who favours that televangelist look in his personal grooming. And it was Pence who felt exposed by Flynn's inept handling of whole scandal.

Porter again: "Many people who oppose Trump for other valid reasons have seized on the shaky Russian accusations because they represent the best possibility for ousting Trump from power. But ignoring the motives and the dishonesty behind the campaign of leaks has far-reaching political implications. Not only does it help to establish a precedent for US intelligence agencies to intervene in domestic politics, as happens in authoritarian regimes all over the world, it also strengthens the hand of the military and intelligence bureaucracies who are determined to maintain the New Cold War with Russia."

The new cold war is, in a sense, more than just a cold war. The ruthless coup

in Ukraine, courtesy of Clinton and her enforcer Victoria Nuland, helped put in play a neo nazi party with exterminationist tendencies, not to mention an affection for Hitler. And there continues to be savage fighting from these US proxies. The targeting of Assad was another anti Russian ploy (among other things). But for most Americans, woefully ignorant of history and geography, and mostly shockingly incurious overall: their education stems primarily from TV and film. And Hollywood endlessly produces narratives of CIA and military virtue. And, of course, police heroism. Take, for example, the new spin off *Blacklist: Redemption*, in which in episode two our friendly illegal and covert black ops travel to Turkmenistan, or maybe it was Kazakhstan, who knows, but either way this country is portrayed as a nation of bearded thugs, stupid, comically inept and ignorant, and yet the very premise of such clandestine interference in a sovereign nation is never questioned. Dozens are killed but, hey, they have beards and represent that great 'other' that America sees as disposable, much as most of white America sees the poor, especially black and brown poor, as disposable. The anti Russian theme is simply the latest instalment in the great genocidal founding principles of this slave owning nation. When D.H. Lawrence famously described America thus: "The essential American soul is hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer. It has never yet melted."

He was writing the epitaph of this bloated and fascistic nation, and this more than 100 years ago. Nobody in all this Putin-is-evil rhetoric ever questions why the US has close to 900 military bases around the world, a good many of them surrounding Russia and China. I have read on social media a nearly endless commentary on how, whatever its shortcomings, the US still represents something positive and how, no matter what, 'we' are better than Russia. Or China. Or Iran. The xenophobia of the average American, and

this includes the educated classes, is breathtaking. None of the people I have read who demand 'you' write your congressperson to demand Jeff Sessions be removed had ever gone on social media to demand a stop to US wars, to humanitarian intervention, or even to a reduction in defence spending. None, that I can remember, ever demanded an end to the militarised police occupation of black neighbourhoods, or the illegal CIA destabilising activities of foreign countries. No demand for the US to stop doing exactly what they claim Russia has done. How is this possible one might ask? How does the public so selectively organise their outrage? The answer is that most Americans are deceptively nationalistic and prejudiced. They are also profoundly provincial and ignorant of other cultures, other histories and cultures.

Rejected the underclass

Whatever crimes Trump may eventually engage in, if he survives, will not be of any degree worse than those Obama or Bush or Clinton committed. The ascension of Trump to the presidency came on the back of a liberal class that had rejected the underclass. These liberals have irrational anger that included deep seated racist feelings and a regressive, if often private, hatred of the poor and of foreigners in general. This is projected outward onto those they blame for Trump. A nation of immigrants is now a nation where those immigrants long ago lost touch with their own histories. This is mostly white America, of course. And white America loves to congratulate itself on its tolerance and democratic principles. The master narrative of liberal white America is one that has been distilled down to the most basic tropes of superiority and privilege. The deplorables - the flyover state populace - those angry left behind working class Americans are seen as inferior. They are made fun of, constantly, by the educated classes. And the alignment of liberal white America with the CIA and a McCarthyist sensibility is not

Dozens are killed but, hey, they have beards and represent that great 'other' that America sees as disposable, much as most of white America sees the poor, especially black and brown poor, as disposable

Official Enemy

I am a new father at an advanced age. We had twin boys this last month, born premature, but doing well – and here in Norway the amazing care they received, that WE received, was totally free. I cannot imagine how someone like me, an artist, would have been able to have these boys in the US

in the least surprising. For liberals are not tolerant. They are bigoted and close minded and arrogant. They are blind to their own privilege in ways that make one's head spin. Trump won for two reasons that are intertwined. One is the anger of the forgotten working class. And yes, that class is often racist and bigoted. But most are not, not really. And second, and more importantly, by the liberals who uncritically accepted a serial liar and criminal as their candidate. And while many who supported the illusion that was Bernie turned in anger to vote AGAINST Hillary, or just didn't bother to vote, the educated gatekeepers of American culture (sic) were the ones really responsible. Eight years of war crimes and destruction of civil liberties was ignored. It is still ignored. Trump is the result. He is the unvarnished face of America, accept that or not.

I am a new father at an advanced age. We had twin boys this last month, born premature, but doing well – and here in Norway the amazing care they received, that WE received, was totally free. I cannot imagine how someone like me, an artist, would have been able to have these boys in the US. I don't know how the working class manages, honestly. And its partly why I left the US a decade back. The struggles for basic things such as having children pose nearly impossible obstacles in this village on the hill with the shining light. A guard tower searchlight. Anyone without health insurance, meaning several million people, faces insurmountable obstacles. Or rent, those who don't own homes, those who must pay an ever steeper price to just live - to just have a roof over their head – are besieged with anxiety and worry and often despair. No wonder antidepressants are taken by one in four Americans, those who can afford them anyway. Or they turn to illegal drugs and alcohol. The worry for most Americans is lacerating and depletes the basic energy that sustains life.

Overweight, angry, resentful and depressed. That is America. Addicted to

mindless entertainments that repeat a litany of lies and deceit, this is a nation whose theoretically best and brightest are a disdainful, condescending and insolent class that is blind not just to their own privilege but blind to their own nativism and lack of sophistication. America is the most judgmental country on earth. The class that demands WE reject Jefferson (I'm guessing not named for Thomas) Sessions, that little nasty mean-spirited bigot demand it for all the wrong reasons. They demand it because he "has ties to a foreign power," as someone wrote recently on Facebook. Trump isn't one of them. Obama was. Both Clintons are. The culture produced by this class is ugly and narcissistic. It is puerile and fatuous and reflective of their own self adoration. Trump is a crude and uneducated man, but he was also a wildly popular reality TV star. That was OK; that was his place, a bit of entertainment to be condescended to, an organ grinder's monkey. But the presidency, well, that is for Ivy league grads, for those who wont embarrass 'America.' I mean, look at the rehabilitation of Bush Jr. Even he is better suited for the job, despite that little faux pas with Iraq. At least he came from 'real' wealth, the right kind of wealth, the right University – so OK, he almost flunked out, but whatever. The deep state doesn't want The Donald. Honestly, I'm not sure why, but they don't. And they are teaching him to heel. Sit, roll over, piddle yourself, and we might let you stay. If not, well, see what happened to that chump Flynn. Or worse, those lesser humans like Gaddafi . . . son of a Bedouin sheep herder, or Saddam, the CIA enforcer contracted to rid his country of commies and other undesirables. Or Aristide, a slum priest. Or Milosevic. Or now Assad. And here we return to Russia. Putin has the audacity to help Assad when he knows 'we' don't want that. What a monster. Russia still has the fucking cojones to suggest they won WW2!!! No, Tom Hanks did that. Don't you watch PBS? For Christ's sake, Russia, a

country that was fun to make fun of during the cold war. All those crappy suits the politburo wore. All those lousy cars and bad refrigerators. Ha, ha. What you don't hear is that people had paid vacations. They could go sailing for free and didn't worry about rent or doctors bills. Rehab Bush and demonise Castro, even after death. Ask the average African who he loves – Bush or Obama or Castro. Who fought FOR independence and who fought against it? Who called Mandela a terrorist? Not Russia. The Soviet Union fought against colonialism and with independence movements. The US fought against it. I could go on. But this is not news. It takes only a few minutes' internet research to verify all of this. Unless you only read Western news outlets. The US will tell you the 20th-century was the 'American Century.' There it is again, self congratulation. We are the best and a force for good. No, really!!

The ruling families of Venezuela called Chavez the little black monkey. Those were the families (and still are) that the US and its organs of chaos, the various NGOs and front groups support. They support those who saw Chavez as an ape. They aided a failed coup against Chavez. The US supported Mobutu and Pinochet, The Shah, and Papa Doc. This isn't part of that official 'American Century.' Neither was the USSR defeating fascism.

Crosshead

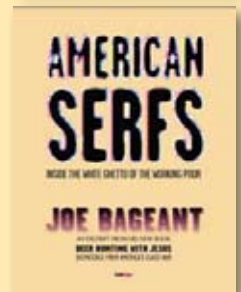
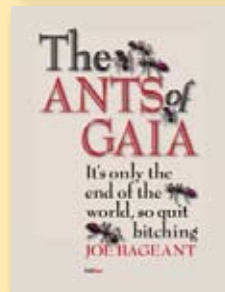
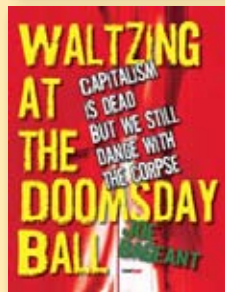
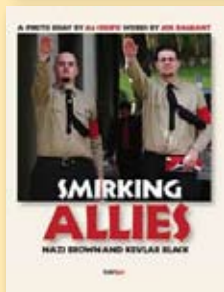
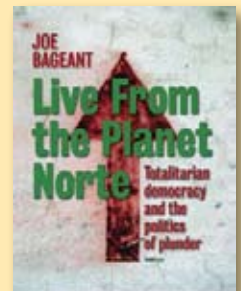
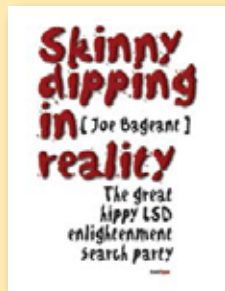
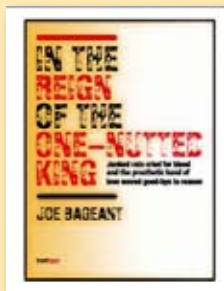
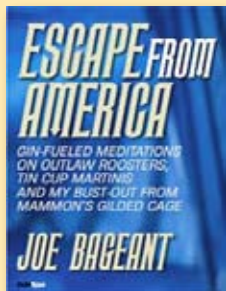
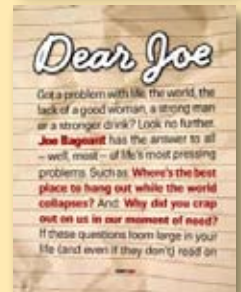
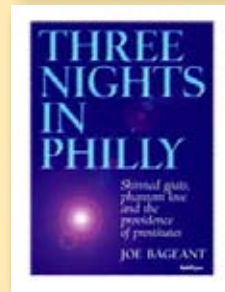
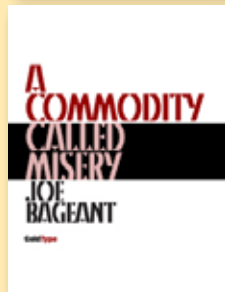
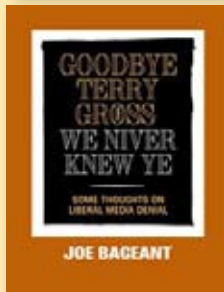
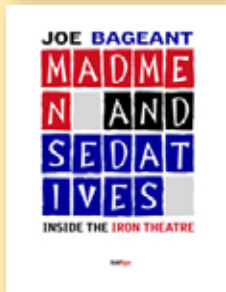
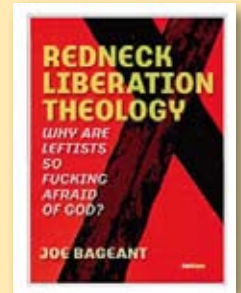
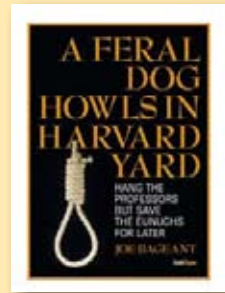
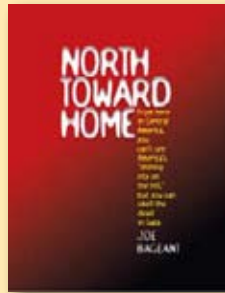
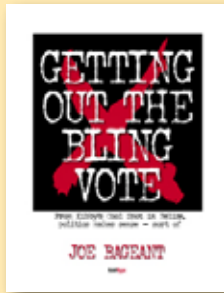
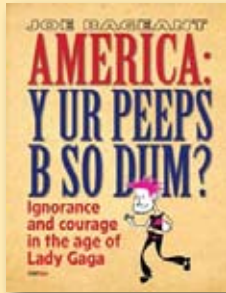
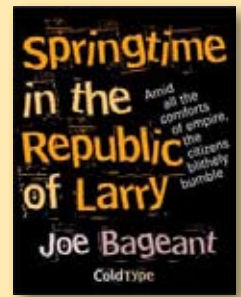
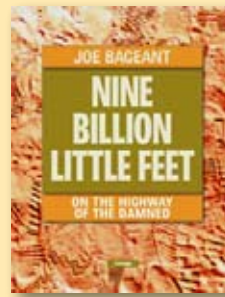
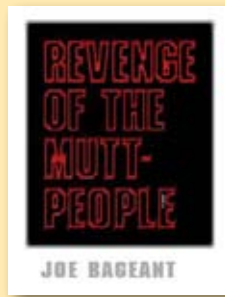
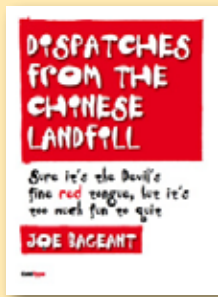
This week, I thought about the Diggers, the English movement led by Gerrard Winstanley in the 17th-century. There were no commons left, so people roamed the countryside homeless, foraging for food. The ruling gentry didn't care. The Levellers and Diggers (True Levellers) by virtue of their desire for fairness and justice also included an early environmental programme, a concern for the land that provided them with life. Today, I think it useful to remember Winstanley. The idea of equality is central to all other issues. Nobody deserves more.

Nobody should do with less. Nature is not a commodity. The US has done much worse and more often than any country it criticises. This is why it's important to reject those complaints that demand purity. Every great man or woman is now the subject of take down kitsch biographies. It's a cottage industry. Mao didn't brush his teeth. Brecht plagiarised. Aristide was insecure and uneducated and wore cheap shoes. I'm only half joking. The overwhelming bully of the planet is the USA. Full stop. It is so overwhelmingly so that to even bring up the offences of those they seek to brutalise is bad politics. All that matters is that this pathological war machine, this imperialist drive for global hegemony be stopped. You defend the weak, the vulnerable. Another full stop. You attack the comfortable and complacent. The End.

Daniel Johnson writing of Winstanley and the Diggers: "The Digger experiments and the ideas of Winstanley are also relevant in their call for self-organisation among the working classes, and for emphasising the intelligence and dignity of commoners often portrayed by elites as needing guidance and discipline. Liberation, as Winstanley frequently claimed in his Digger writings, would only come when working people throughout the world (not just in revolutionary England) withdrew their labour from market society, and set up a social system in which exploitation and poverty no longer existed." **CT**

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John Stepling is an original founding member of the Padua Hills Playwrights Festival, a two-time NEA recipient, Rockefeller Fellow in theatre, and PEN-West winner for playwriting. He taught screenwriting and curated the cinematheque for five years at the Polish National Film School in Lodz, Poland. A collection of his plays, *Sea of Cortez & Other Plays* was published in 1999, and his book on aesthetics, *Aesthetic Resistance and Dis-Interest*, was published this year by *Mimesis International*.

The ruling families of Venezuela called Chavez the little black monkey. Those were the families (and still are) that the US and its organs of chaos, the various NGOs and front groups support



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ColdType Insights

Why 'clean' swimming pool smell is bad for you

Simon Cotton & Laura Finney explain why it's probably a good idea not to pee in the water next time you go for a swim

It's recently been reported that scientists have managed to create a test to measure how much urine is in a swimming pool. It seems that peeing in the pool has become commonplace, and even high-profile swimmers have admitted to doing it during training sessions, arguing that the chlorine "kills it." Not only is this untrue, but the chemical reaction that occurs between your pee and the chlorine creates a chemical that has been linked to asthma and other respiratory issues.

Nitrogen trichloride, also known as trichloramine, is made when the urea in your pee reacts with chlorine – the disinfectant widely used in swimming pool water. Nitrogen trichloride is largely made by accident in pools these days, but this compound was originally made for interest in 1812 by Pierre Louis DuLong.

DuLong made the chemical by bubbling chlorine gas through a solution of ammonium chloride. But, despite his success, DuLong's joy at having made it was probably short-lived – he hadn't counted on the fact that it would be explosive – the

chemical exploded without warning and cost him an eye and a finger. It's extremely sensitive and will explode even under gentle shock or when exposed to sunlight.

Scientists Sir Humphry Davy and Michael Faraday also fell victim to the substance when they repeated DuLong's work shortly after: An explosion caused Davy to lose the use of an eye temporarily and Faraday did per-



Michael Phelps: Pees in pool.

Photo: Wikimedia

manent damage to his fingers.

Luckily for professional swimmers, only pure nitrogen trichloride is explosive, and so the fact that it is mixed with water and other substances in a swimming pool should be reassuring. However, research suggests that nitrogen trichloride, among other products formed when you pee in chlorinated water, such as chloramine and dichloramine, is

linked to eye and upper airway irritation.

It's ironic that the chlorine that is used to kill bacteria and protect the health of swimmers, is linked to the creation of toxic chemicals. But doubly so when the aroma that people associate with a clean pool, is actually the stench of nitrogen trichloride and an indicator of plenty of pee.

It is a volatile chemical, meaning it easily turns into a gas and hangs around in the air around the pool. One study has shown that people who work in swimming pools or spend a lot of time around them, such as lifeguards, have a higher level of airway issue symptoms in comparison with the general population – poolside workers showed more frequent work-related upper respiratory issues than administrative staff.

75 litres of urine in the pool

It's reported that one study found that a public swimming pool of 830,000 litres, can contain as much as 75 litres of urine in the water at one time, which could react to form nitrogen trichloride. This may not sound like a lot, but the toxicity of chemicals is often in the dose and repeated exposure, so even low levels of nitrogen trichloride will have damaging health effects.

But it isn't just pee that we should worry about – the dirt on people's bodies can consume up to 30 percent of the chlorine in the water on its own and in athletic swimmers,

sweat – which also contains urea – can also contribute to the production of nitrogen trichloride.

So what can we do to combat it? Research which models the amounts of nitrogen trichloride in a swimming pool over time has led some researchers to suggest that lowering the levels of chlorine in a pool, while remaining above the legal lower limit, would reduce the amount of chlorine available to react to form the toxic chemical. However, this study was limited to a single pool, so more research is required to establish whether this could be a feasible solution.

Swimming pools have long encouraged swimmers to take a shower before they swim, but the health implications of not showering are not emphasised enough. It's not enough to recommend a shower to "reduce irritants" – swimmers need to know that these irritants can cause respiratory issues, and not just for them but also the pool staff.

Swimmers should also be encouraged to pee before they get into the pool, something that should extend to elite athletes too – Michael Phelps might think it's an accepted part of the sport, but it only gives licence to others if the professionals are doing it – they need to lead the way in pool hygiene.

Unfortunately, the "swimming pool dye" which changes colour on pee contact seems to be a mere myth in most countries and there do not appear to be any feasible alternatives to chlorine to disinfect a pool and not expose the staff to harmful chemicals. So maybe it's best to keep up the pretence if the prospect of embarrassment means people will actually go to the toilet. **CT**

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Simon Cotton is senior lecturer in chemistry at the University of Birmingham. Laura Finney is a PhD candidate, at the University of Nottingham. This article first appeared at www.theconversation.com

across Nineveh province since the start of October."

Compared to a separate BBC report on the Russian-backed offensive to retake the Syrian city of Aleppo, the media's coverage of these two military operations can hardly be viewed as balanced. In that report, the idea that Russia is constantly killing civilians is laid out in almost every paragraph. A spokesperson for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reportedly told the Russian state-owned news site RT that the situation in Mosul is "incredibly desperate."

In Mosul, 650,000 civilians are reportedly at risk, and as the UN has indicated, half of those being killed in US-backed operation are civilians. The notion that American bombs are safer and more precise than Russia's has no evidentiary basis, nor does any suggestion that the troops the US military is fighting alongside are less violent than Russian or Syrian authorities. In fact, the troops fighting alongside the US in Iraq are more or less aligned with those attempting to liberate parts of Syria from terrorist groups, anyway. This demonstrates America's completely bipolar approach to the Middle East given the US has consistently opposed advances made by these troops in Syria.

In a press briefing, the Pentagon's Baghdad-based spokesperson, Colonel John Dorrian, admitted that American troops on the front lines have come under fire in Iraq. The Trump administration, with full knowledge of this, is nonetheless reportedly considering a "long-term commitment" to Iraq.

Siege of Mosul shows media hypocrisy

The US-backed siege of Mosul shows how hypocritical media manipulates us, writes **Darius Shahtahmasebi**

In order to determine the truth when it comes to the mainstream media's coverage of American-led offensives in the Middle East, be sure to scroll down to the bottom of any article. This is where the most important information can be found. As can be seen in a BBC re-

port on the US-backed offensive to retake the Iraqi city of Mosul from the Islamic State, the last line of the article reads:

"The UN said in late January that almost half of all the casualties in Mosul were civilians. At least 1,096 have been killed and 694 injured

According to a report compiled by a think tank founded by former UK prime minister and alleged war criminal Tony Blair, at least 65,000 fighters “share key parts of the ideology of ISIS, with 15 of its rivals ready to take its place if it is defeated.”

No matter what the US does in Syria and Iraq regarding combating terror groups, there will always be another group just as deadly and willing to replace its predecessor. The US has clearly used this dynamic to their advantage as these

terror groups consistently give the American military a cause to intervene, which can provide a smoke-screen for the real motives behind the war.

Currently, it is possible that the push to move ISIS out of Mosul is actually an attempt to drive ISIS back into Syria so they can put additional pressure on the Syrian regime.

That’s something worth looking forward to. **CT**

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Darius Shahtahmasebi wrote this article for www.anti-media.com

Try and match that, Vladimir!

And in case you’re wondering for what good reason all this was perpetrated? Officially, it was to arrest dictator Manuel Noriega on drug charges. How is that for a rationalisation for widespread devastation and slaughter? It should surprise no one that only shortly before the invasion Noriega had been on the CIA payroll.

It’s the “moral equivalency” that’s so tough to swallow for proud Americans such as O’Reilly and McCain. Republican Senate Majority leader Mitch McConnell also chipped in with, “And no, I don’t think there’s any equivalency between the way the Russians conduct themselves and the way the United States does.” Other senators echoed the same theme, all inspired by good ol’ “American exceptionalism,” drilled into the mind of every decent American from childhood . . . Who would dare to compare the morals of (ugh!) Russia with those of God’s chosen land, even in Moscow’s current non-communist form?

The communist form began of course with the October 1917 Russian Revolution. By the summer of 1918, some 13,000 American troops could be found in the newly-born state, the future Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Two years and thousands of casualties later, the American troops left, having failed in their mission to “strangle at its birth” the Bolshevik state, as Winston Churchill so charmingly put it.

US foreign policy has not been much more noble-minded since then. I think, dear students, it’s time for me to once again present my concise historical summary:

Since the end of World War 2, the United States has:

* Attempted to overthrow more

The United States and the Russian devil

Vladimir Putin is a former KGB officer. So what?
George HW Bush was head of the CIA, says **William Blum**

Conservatives have had a very hard time getting over President Trump’s much-repeated response to Fox News anchor Bill O’Reilly’s calling Russian president Vladimir Putin “a killer.” Replied Trump: “There are a lot of killers. We have a lot of killers. You think our country is so innocent?”

One could almost feel a bit sorry for O’Reilly as he struggled to regain his composure in the face of such blasphemy. Had any American establishment media star ever heard such a thought coming from the mouth of an American president?

Senator John McCain on the floor of Congress, referring to Putin, tore into attempts to draw “moral equivalency between that butcher and thug

and KGB colonel and the United States of America.”

Ah yes, the infamous KGB. Can anything good be said about a person associated with such an organisation? We wouldn’t like it if a US president had a background with anything like that. Oh, wait. A president of the United States was not merely a CIA “colonel,” but was the director of the CIA! I, of course, speak of George Herbert Walker Bush. And as far as butchery and thuggery . . . How many Americans remember the December, 1989, bombing and invasion of the people of Panama carried out by the same Mr Bush? Many thousands killed or wounded; thousands more left homeless.

than 50 foreign governments, most of them democratically-elected.

* Dropped bombs on the people of more than 30 countries.

* Attempted to assassinate more than 50 foreign leaders.

* Attempted to suppress a populist or nationalist movement in 20 countries.

* Grossly interfered in democratic elections in at least 30 countries.

* Though not as easy to quantify, has also led the world in torture; not only the torture performed directly by Americans upon foreigners, but providing torture equipment, torture manuals, lists of people to be tortured, and in-person guidance by American instructors.

Where does the United States get the nerve to moralise about Russia? Same place they get the nerve to label Putin a “killer” . . . a “butcher” . . . a “thug.” It would be difficult to name a world-renowned killer, butcher, or thug – not to mention dictator, mass murderer, or torturer – of the past 75 years who was not a close ally of Washington.

So why then does the American power elite hate Putin so? It can be dated back to the period of Boris Yeltsin. During the Western financial looting of the dying Soviet Union the US could be found meddling in favour of Yeltsin in the election held in 1996. Under Yeltsin’s reign, poverty exploded and life expectancy for men actually decreased by five years, all in the name of “shock therapy.” The US / Western-backed destabilisation of the Soviet Union allowed global capitalism to spread its misery unfettered by any inconvenient socialism. Russia came under the control of oligarchs concerned only for their own enrichment and that of their billion-

aire partners in the West. The transition of power to Vladimir Putin led to a number of reforms that curbed the disastrous looting of the nation by the oligarchic bandits.

Putin and his allies vowed to build an independent, capitalist Russia that was capable of determining its own affairs free from US and Western domination. Such an orientation placed Putin in direct confrontation with US imperialism’s plans for unipolar global hegemony.

Washington’s disdain for Putin increased when he derided US war propaganda leading up to the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Then, the Russian leader played a crucial role in getting Iran to curtail its nuclear programme and arranging for Syria to surrender its stockpiles of chemical weapons. Washington’s powerful neo-conservatives had been lusting for direct US military strikes against those two countries, leading to regime change, not diplomatic agreements that left the governments in place.

Lastly, after the United States overthrew the Ukrainian government in 2014, Putin was obliged to intervene on behalf of threatened ethnic Rus-

sians in Crimea and eastern Ukraine. That, in turn, was transformed by the Western media into a “Russian invasion.”

The same Western media has routinely charged Putin with murdering journalists but doesn’t remind its audience of the American record in this regard. The American military, in the course of its wars in recent decades, has been responsible for the deliberate deaths of many journalists. In Iraq, for example, there’s the WikiLeaks 2007 video, exposed by Chelsea Manning, of the cold-blooded murder of two Reuters journalists; the 2003 US air-to-surface missile attack on the offices of Al Jazeera in Baghdad that left three journalists dead and four wounded; and the American firing on Baghdad’s Hotel Palestine, a known journalist residence, the same year that killed two foreign news cameramen. **CT**

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*William Blum is the author of many books, including **Rogue State: A Guide To The World’s Only Superpower**, and **America’s Deadliest Export – Democracy**. His web site is www.williamblum.org*

Nothing moderate about Trump’s speech

Our obsession with Muslims and immigrants gives cover to a simmering white nationalist movement, writes **Peter Certo**

Donald Trump began his recent speech to Congress with a line seemingly designed to appease his critics. “As we mark

the conclusion of our celebration of Black History Month,” he said, “we are reminded of our nation’s path toward civil rights and the

Insights

work that still remains.”

He went on to condemn “recent threats targeting Jewish Community Centers and vandalism of Jewish cemeteries, as well as the previous week’s shooting in Kansas City” – and, why not, “hate and evil in all its forms.”

Some pundits, who apparently set a very low bar, applauded Trump for this “presidential” moment. Washington Post blogger Chris Cillizza, whom Trump himself once called “one of the dumber” pundits, praised Trump on Twitter for his “VERY nice grace note about our shared humanity.”

Was it, though? For context, Trump was referring to a wave of more than 100 recent bomb threats that have been called into Jewish schools and community centres all over the country, as well as the vandalism of hundreds of Jewish graves at cemeteries in St. Louis and Philadelphia. Meanwhile, in Kansas City, a drunken bar patron shouting “get out of my country!” recently shot two Indian immigrants, killing one. The shooter reportedly thought the men were Iranian, which would have put them on the list of banned migrants under Trump’s seven-country “Muslim ban.”

Investigations are ongoing, but many suspect that racist white nationalists are behind each of these incidents. Yet Trump never named those perpetrators. In the Kansas

City case, in fact, he didn’t even name the victims. Worse still, when talking about the anti-Semitic incidents before his speech to Congress, he even implied they might’ve been a false flag operation – carried out by his opponents “to make others look bad.”

You can be sure this was no accident. Because when Trump talked about other so-called threats, he was extremely explicit. He gestured for emphasis on every word as he promised to defend the country from “Radical Islamic Terror,” which is capitalised in the speech’s official transcript. And he falsely blamed “the vast majority” of “terrorism-related offenses since 9/11” on immigrants.

(Some factual asides: According to the New America Foundation, virtually all perpetrators were citizens or legal residents, and half of them were born here. And no Americans have ever been killed by refugees from any of the seven Muslim countries Trump has sought to ban.)

Moving on, Trump twice called out “vicious” crimes by “illegal gang members” before announcing the creation of a special agency to document alleged crimes by undocumented people. Yet numerous studies have confirmed that both documented and undocumented immigrants are less likely to commit crimes than native-born Americans.

Make no mistake, Trump’s lies

are carefully told to generate hostility toward Muslims and immigrants. Worse still, they conceal a growing threat the man obsessed with calling out “Radical Islamic Terror” won’t even name.

Last month, the Southern Poverty Law Center counted more than 1,000 active far-right and white nationalist groups in the United States. Groups like these, Foreign Policy magazine recently reported, “plan and carry out domestic attacks at a greater frequency than foreign terrorist groups.”

Since 9/11, it adds, “anti-government groups have racked up a death toll on par with that of Islamist extremists.”

No wonder authorities polled in a 2015 survey of 400 state, local, and federal law enforcement agencies listed far-right groups – not Muslims – as “the most severe threat of political violence that they face.”

You don’t have to read far between the lines to figure out that this speech was no “softer side” of a more “presidential” Trump. It was a barely-coded message to the president’s far-right followers that the administration’s going to continue covering for their hate.

And it was a not-so-subtle threat to everyone else. **CT**

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Peter Certo is the editorial manager of the Institute for Policy Studies and the editor of www.OtherWords.org

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Let's give the CIA the credit it deserves

Norman Solomon takes a sardonic look at the most recent achievements of the US intelligence services

For months now, the United States has endured the tacit denigration of American ingenuity. Countless statements – from elected officials, activist groups, journalists and many others – have ignored our nation's superb blend of dazzling high-tech capacities and statecraft mendacities.

Fortunately, the news about the release of illuminating CIA documents by WikiLeaks has begun to give adequate credit where due. And not a moment too soon. For way too long, Russia has been credited with prodigious hacking and undermining of democracy in the United States.

Many Americans have overlooked the US government's fantastic hacking achievements. This is most unfair and disrespectful to the dedicated men and women of intelligence services like the CIA and NSA. Far from the limelight, they've been working diligently to undermine democracy not just overseas but also here at home.

Undermining of democracy

The massive new trove of CIA documents can help to put things in perspective. Maybe now people will grasp that our nation's undermining of democracy is home-grown and self-actualised. It's an insult to the ingenious capacities of the United

States of America to think that we can't do it ourselves.

Contrary to all the public relations work that US intelligence agencies have generously done for them, the Russians don't even rank as peripheral to the obstacles and prospects for American democracy. Rest assured, throughout the long history of the United States, we haven't needed foreigners to get the job done.

In our current era, can Vladimir Putin take any credit for purging huge numbers of African Americans, Latinos and other minority citizens from the voter rolls? Of course not.

Did Putin create and maintain the barriers that prevented many low-income people from voting on November 8 last year? Only in his dreams.

Can the Kremlin hold a candle to the corporate-owned cable TV channels that gave Donald Trump umpteen free hours of uninterrupted air time for speeches at his campaign rallies? Absolutely not.

Could any Russian operation claim more than a tiny sliver of impact compared to the handiwork of FBI Director James Comey as he boosted Donald Trump's prospects with a pair of gratuitous announcements about a gratuitously re-opened probe of Hillary Clinton's

emails during the last days of the 2016 campaign? No way.

Is Putin anything but a miniscule lightweight in any effort to manipulate the US electorate compared to "dark money" American billionaires such as the Koch brothers? Give us a break.

And how about the Fourth Amendment of the US Constitution? The Kremlin can only marvel at the way that the CIA, the NSA and the bipartisan leadership in Washington have shredded the Fourth Amendment while claiming to uphold it.

Jaw-dropping false modesty

To sum up: The CIA's efforts to tout Russia add up to jaw-dropping false modesty! The humility of "deep state" leaders in Langley is truly awesome.

Let's get a grip. Overwhelmingly, the achievements of thwarting democracy in America have been do-it-yourself operations. It's about time we give adequate credit to the forces perpetuating this country's self-inflicted wounds to American democracy.

To loosely paraphrase the beloved comic-strip character Pogo, when the subject is grievous damage to democracy at home, "We have met the ingenuity and it is US." But we're having a terrible time recognising ourselves. **CT**

*Norman Solomon is the coordinator of the online activist group RootsAction.org and the executive director of the Institute for Public Accuracy. He is the author of a dozen books including *War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death*.*

Jimmy Kimmel and other Oscar Night jokes

This year's Oscar awards was notable for a mistake in envelope passing, but that wasn't the only problem, writes **John Eskow**

For talk show host Jimmy Kimmel, simply being unfunny is much too easy. He accomplished that goal very early in his Oscar night monologue, when he zeroed in on Mel Gibson: "Hey Mel, you look good – the Scientology is really working out!" Hilarious, because it means absolutely nothing – Gibson did look good, and he's not into Scientology, so . . .

But why suffer through more of Kimmel's 2000- pound one-liners, each one thudding and echoing in the excruciating silence like a massive hammer blow of dullness? He's hardly the first host to carpet-bomb the Academy like a Curtis LeMay of comedy. Nor is he the first host to find any human name more unique than Bob or Joan to be inherently comical – remember when his idol, David Letterman, died miserably on that very same stage by mocking the sound of "Uma" Thurman and "Oprah" Winfrey? In Kimmel's case, it was the name "Mahershala" Ali that we were supposed to find so delight-

fully amusing. "Mahershala!" Man, I'm still laffin'! As Jerry Seinfeld might say, "what is up with black people's names?" Which leads me to the crux of my argument: the utter dickishness of this smug Jimmy Kimmel.

Kimmel ported over to the Oscar broadcast a favoured shtick from his nightly show, which is the "pranking" of everyday slobs. Vile enough in its nightly incarnation, this mockery of uncool out-of-towners reached a zenith of Creepy on Oscar night when he arranged for a busful of tourists to be led into the auditorium unawares, so that they suddenly found themselves onstage at the Academy Awards. I give this "prank" full points for surrealist invention; there is a certain cruel, tedious genius to it. But the point of this kind of joke is always the same one: there are two classes of people, the puppeteers and the puppets, and we in show business – the men, specifically, the ones who wear the tuxedos – are always the ones whose fingers will make you dance.

The fact that these "tourists" – ha! they sign up for organised tours! they come from places like Oshkosh and Utica! they don't dress good like us! – responded to the prank with good humour did nothing to mitigate the ugliness of it.

And, of course, to cap it all, Kimmel ordered the Academy members to throw a shock into the tourists as they entered the hall by shouting – in unison – "Mahershala!" And with that, he married his two endlessly-battered themes – the intrinsic hilarity of "foreign-sounding" names and the goofy cloddishness of the everyday American – into one huge condescending punchline.

I work in this business, and I have seen up close the utter contempt that many people in it have for the audience they purport to entertain. But nothing embodies it more clearly than that smirk on Jimmy Kimmel's face as those everyday, hardworking Americans – you know, the idiots – were paraded offstage, past the uncomfortable movie-stars, back to their meaningless and unglamorous lives. **CT**

*John Eskow is a writer and musician. He wrote or co-wrote the movies *Air America*, *The Mask of Zorro*, and *Pink Cadillac*, as well as the novel *Smokestack Lightning*. He is a contributor to *Killing Trayvons: an Anthology of American Violence*.*

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