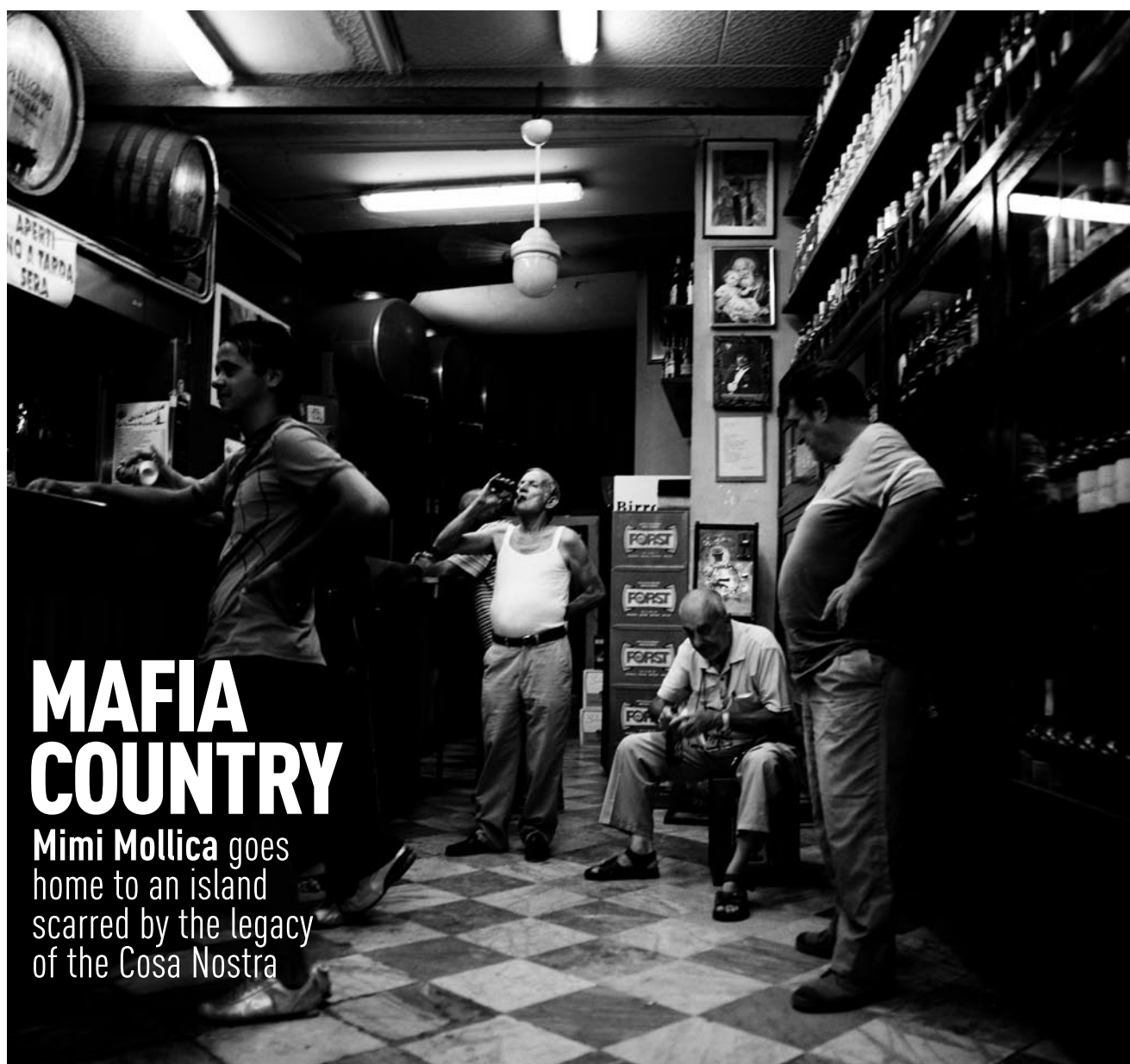


HIDDEN BEHIND PRISON WALLS | HEATHER ANN THOMPSON
THE BREAKING OF THE CORPORATE MEDIA | DAVID EDWARDS
NEVER FORGET. NEVER FORGIVE | CRAIG OLDHAM

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ISSUE 142



MAFIA COUNTRY

Mimi Mollica goes home to an island scarred by the legacy of the Cosa Nostra

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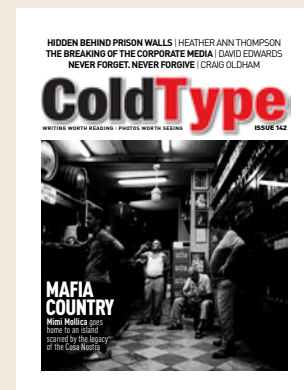


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The writing on the wall

Photographs by London-based freelance photographer Ron Fassbender
His Flickr feed is: www.flickr.com/theweeklybull/albums



Exit poll forecasts are projected onto the walls of the BBC's headquarters in Portland Place, London, after the close of voting in the British general election on June 8. This poll was considerably more accurate than the political those declared before the election. While Theresa May's Conservatives won more seats than Labour, they threw away their Parliamentary majority - required to form a government and pass laws - by calling an unnecessary election (which they had repeatedly said they would not do), and Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party did far better than most pundits and journalists had predicted. Final results for the two main parties were: Conservative - 318 (a loss of 13 seats); Labour 262 (a gain of 30). More than a week after the election, Theresa May and her ministers are still negotiating a deal with Northern Ireland's 10-seat Democratic Unionist Party to prop up her shaky hold on power.

Britain's real terror apologists

Theresa May and her media pals smeared Jeremy Corbyn as being soft on terror. Now, just take a look at *her* new best friends, writes **Finian Cunningham**

For Corbyn, the election was a stunning moral victory; for Prime Minister May it was a humiliating defeat

Despite a vicious smear campaign to denigrate Britain's Labour leader as a "terrorist sympathiser," Jeremy Corbyn pulled off an amazing achievement in this month's general election. Hardly has a politician in any Western state been so vilified with character assassination, and yet he has proven to be most popular Labour leader in Britain since the World War II.

After weeks of trailing his Conservative rival Theresa May in the polls, Corbyn's socialist manifesto appealed to a record number of voters – closing the gap between the parties to just two percentage points behind the Tories.

This was despite a media campaign to destroy Corbyn in the eyes of the British public as a "terrorist stooge." The irony here is that the Conservative party is busily forming a governing coalition with a Northern Ireland party whose history is steeped in British state terrorism. (More on that in a moment.)

For Corbyn, the election was a stunning moral victory; for Prime Minister May it was a humiliating defeat. The Conservatives lost their overall majority in the British parliament and now have to rely on this reactionary fringe party from Northern Ireland to form a government.

May called the snap election because she thought her party would increase its majority and calculated that Corbyn's socialist direction of Labour would be wiped out. Many Blairite naysayers in his own party thought so, too.

The opposite happened. The British public

largely rejected May and her neoliberal capitalist, pro-austerity, pro-NATO policies, rallying instead behind Corbyn. Granted, the Tories still won the election – only narrowly – but the surge in support for Labour under Corbyn means he has galvanised a party that stands a strong chance of winning if another election is called. And that could be just months away if May's shaky ad hoc government collapses.

Another riveting factor is that Corbyn's success came amid a torrential Tory and right-wing media campaign to denigrate him as a terrorist sympathiser. The propaganda onslaught had been conducted since May called the election in April, and it grew to a frenzy as election day approached, especially as opinion polls showed Labour steadily whittling away the earlier Conservative support.

The day before the public went to the polling booths, the Daily Mail ran the front page headline, Apologist For Terror, with Jeremy Corbyn's photo below.

The scurrilous allegation pounded over and over by the largely pro-Conservative British media that Corbyn is "soft on terrorism" stems from his otherwise principled history of campaigning on international justice and peace. During 35 years as an MP, he has voiced consistent support for Palestinian rights under illegal Zionist occupation; he has supported Hezbollah resistance against Israeli and American aggression; and, during the conflict in Northern Ireland, Corbyn gave a voice to Republicans

who were being assailed by British military violence. Other international causes include Corbyn's opposition to British government arms sales to the Saudi regime, which is propagating terrorism in Syria, Iraq and Yemen.

He has also campaigned to abandon nuclear weapons, and is critical of NATO's reckless expansion in Europe, which have seen him pilloried by the British establishment for "being soft on Russia."

Northern Ireland terror link

This brings us to the so-called Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) from Northern Ireland whose 10 MPs Theresa May's Tories are now relying on to form a government. This party was formed in the 1971 by firebrand Protestant preacher Ian Paisley. While Paisley mel- lowed in the years before his death in 2014, he spent most of his career preaching hatred against Catholics and Irish Republicans, who he saw as a threat to the political union between Northern Ireland and the rest of Britain. In British-run Northern Ire- land, it wasn't acceptable to have a demo- cratic aspiration for an independent Ireland. You were either a pro-British unionist or a "threat." So much for British democracy.

Senior members of Paisley's pro-British party played a crucial role in smuggling massive caches of weapons into Northern Ireland dur- ing the 1980s to illegally arm unionist paramili- taries, which murdered innocent people simply because they were Catholic Republicans.

One notorious pro-British killer was Gusty Spence, who belonged to the Ulster Volunteer Force paramilitary. He later expressed remorse and deplored Ian Paisley, the DUP founder, as the person whose sectarian hate speeches incited him to murder innocent Catholics.

The paramilitary murder gangs were not just supported covertly by members of the DUP. The British government of Margaret Thatcher – Theresa May's predecessor and political hero- ine – orchestrated these same death squads in a covert policy of "dirty war."

British military intelligence colluded with the pro-unionist militants in a covert pol-

icy of state-sponsored terrorism. The objective was to terrorise people in submitting to British rule over Northern Ireland, rather than allow- ing the island country to become united and independent. The British government provided intelligence and cover for the death squads and the unionist politicians had helped supply the AK-47 assault rifles and Browning handguns smuggled from Apartheid South Africa.

This secret dirty war policy has been uncov- ered by investigative journalists such as Paul Larkin (see his groundbreaking book, A Very British Jihad: Collusion, Conspiracy and Cover- up in Northern Ireland), as well as human rights campaign groups such as the Belfast-based Rel- atives for Justice and Pat Finucane Centre.

Not even Theresa May can deny this mur- derous legacy in Ireland, although there is a determined silence now as she fights for her political survival in the wake of the British elec- tion disaster. However, it is a fact that May's Conservative party and the unionist politicians whom she is now partnering with to govern Britain were complicit in terrorism.

Northern Ireland has since gained a peace settlement in which unionist and republican politicians have been able to work together to form a local governing administration. The Irish peace process was possible partly because of the courageous and principled intervention by British politicians like Jeremy Corbyn.

Corbyn has never apologised for terrorism. He has sought to overcome it by making poli- tics work. The same cannot be said for Theresa May's Conservative party, which was an ac- complice and an apologist for a covert policy of state-sponsored terrorism during Northern Ireland's recent 30-year conflict.

The ongoing muted policy of May's govern- ment and her unionist proxies about their mur- derous legacy in Ireland is a testimony to who the real apologists for terror are. **CT**

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Finian Cunningham worked as a scientific editor for the Royal Society of Chemistry, Cambridge, England, before pursuing a career in newspaper journalism. He wrote this article for Sputnik at www.sputniknews.com

Not even Theresa May can deny this murderous legacy in Ireland, although there is a determined silence now as she fights for her political survival in the wake of the British election disaster

The breaking of the corporate media

This month's UK general election delivered a humiliating blow to the mainstream media, whose smug commentators were woefully wrong, writes **David Edwards**

Corbyn achieved his party's success without resorting to angry lefty ranting. His focus was on kindness, compassion, sharing, inclusivity and forgiveness. This approach held up a crystal-clear mirror to the ugly, self-interested cynicism of the Tory party

On June 8, Jeremy Corbyn humbled the entire political and corporate media commentariat. With a little help from Britain's student population. And with a little help from thousands of media activists.

Without doubt this was one of the most astonishing results in UK political history. Dismissed by all corporate political pundits, including the clutch of withered fig leaves at the Guardian, reviled by scores of his own Blairite MPs, the Independent said, "Corbyn increased Labour's share of the vote by more than any other of the party's election leaders since 1945," with "the biggest swing since . . . shortly after the Second World War." He won a larger share of the vote than Tony Blair in 2005.

Corbyn achieved this without resorting to angry lefty ranting. His focus was on kindness, compassion, sharing, inclusivity and forgiveness. This approach held up a crystal-clear mirror to the ugly, self-interested cynicism of the Tory party, and transformed the endless brickbats into flowers of praise.

On Twitter, former Labour Party MP John Prescott disclosed that when Rupert Murdoch saw the exit poll "he stormed out of the room."

As ever, while the generals made good their escape, front-line troops were less fortunate. Outfought by Team Corbyn, out-thought by social media activists, outnum-

bered in the polls, many commentators had no option but to fall on their microphones and keyboards. LBC radio presenter Iain Dale led the way, "Let me be the first to say, I got it wrong, wholly wrong. I should have listened more to my callers who have been phoning into my show day after day, week after week."

The Guardian's Gaby Hinsliff, who had written in January, "This isn't going to be yet another critique of Corbyn, by the way, because there is no point. The evidence is there for anyone with eyes," tweeted, "This is why I trust @iaindale's judgement; he admits when it was way off. (As mine was. As god knows how many of ours was)"

Hinsliff promised, "Like everyone else who didn't foresee the result, I'll be asking myself hard questions & trying to work out what changed. . . "

Annoying as ever, I asked, "But will you be asking yourself about the structural forces, within and outside Guardian and corporate media generally, shaping performance?" And, "Is a corporate journalist free to analyse the influence of owners, profit-orientation, ad-dependence, state-subsidised news? Taboo subjects?"

Presumably engrossed in introspection, Hinsliff did not reply.

Right-winger John Rentoul, who insisted four weeks ago in the Independent that, "We are moving towards the end of the Cor-



Jeremy Corbyn appears at a huge rally in Birmingham two days before the General Election.

Photo: Geoff Dexter Flickr.com/geoffdexter

bynite experiment,” appeared to be writing lines in detention, “I was wrong about Jeremy Corbyn – The Labour leader did much better in the election than I expected. I need to understand and learn from my mistakes.”

Channel 4 News presenter and Telegraph blogger, Cathy Newman tweeted, “Ok let’s be honest, until the last few weeks many of us under-estimated @jeremycorbyn”

Translating from the “newspeak,” many corporate journalists waged a relentless campaign over two years to persuade the public to “underestimate” Corbyn, but were wrong about the public’s ability to see through the propaganda.

Piers Morgan, who predicted the Conservatives would win a “90-100 seat majority,” wrote, “I think Mr Corbyn has proved a lot of people, including me, completely wrong.”

In a typically dramatic flourish, Channel 4’s Jon Snow’s summation was harsh but fair, “I know nothing. We the media, the pundits, the experts, know nothing.”

Guardian columnist Rafael Behr, who wrote in February, “Jeremy Corbyn is run-

ning out of excuses,” also ate humble pie, “Fair play to Jeremy Corbyn and his team. They have done a lot of things I confidently thought they – he – could not do. I was wrong.”

In March, Observer columnist Nick Cohen graphically predicted that “Corbyn’s Labour won’t just lose. It’ll be slaughtered.” In an article titled, “Don’t tell me you weren’t warned about Corbyn,” Cohen indicated the words that would “be flung” at Corbynites “by everyone who warned that Corbyn’s victory would lead to a historic defeat, “I Told You So You Fucking Fools!”

Apparently frothing at the mouth, Cohen concluded by advising the idiots reading his column that, following the predicted electoral disaster, “your only honourable response will be to stop being a fucking fool by changing your fucking mind.”

Awkward, then, for Cohen to now “apologise to affronted Corbyn supporters . . . I was wrong,” presumably feeling like a fucking fool, having changed his fucking mind.

Tragically, Cohen then proceeded to be exactly as “wrong” all over again, “The links between the Corbyn camp and a Pu-

Observer columnist Nick Cohen advised those reading his column that, following the predicted electoral disaster, “your only honourable response will be to stop being a fucking fool by changing your fucking mind”

After The Election / 3

The former Guardian political editor Michael White responded to Jonathan Cook's tweet, "You're not still banging on, are you Jonathan. You do talk some bollocks"

tin regime that persecutes genuine radicals. Corbyn's paid propaganda for an Iranian state that hounds gays, subjugates women and tortures prisoners. Corbyn and the wider left's indulgence of real antisemites (not just critics of Israel). They are all on the record. That Tory newspapers used them against the Labour leadership changes nothing."

Former Guardian comment editor and senior columnist Jonathan Freedland spent two years writing a series of anti-Corbyn hit pieces. Last month, Freedland wrote under the title, "No more excuses: Jeremy Corbyn is to blame for this meltdown," lamenting, "What more evidence do they need? What more proof do the Labour leadership and its supporters require?"

Freedland helpfully relayed focus group opinion to the effect that Corbyn was a "dope," "living in the past," "a joke," "looking as if he knows less about it than I do." Freedland has also, now, had no choice but to back down, "Credit where it's due. Jeremy Corbyn defied those – including me – who thought he could not win seats for Lab. I was wrong."

Like Freedland, senior Guardian columnist Polly Toynbee has relentlessly attacked Corbyn. On April 19, she wrote of how "Corbyn is rushing to embrace Labour's annihilation," Wrong, wrong and wrong again. Was ever there a more crassly inept politician than Jeremy Corbyn, whose every impulse is to make the wrong call on everything?"

Now, Toynbee's tune has changed, "Nothing succeeds like success. Jeremy Corbyn looks like a new man, beaming with confidence, benevolence and forgiveness to erstwhile doubters . . ."

Apparently channelling David Brent of The Office, Toynbee added, "When I met him on Sunday he clasped my hand and, with a twinkle and a wink, thanked me for things I had written."

With zero self-awareness, Toynbee noted that the Mail and Sun had helped Corbyn, "by dredging up every accusation against

him yet failing to frighten voters away, they have demolished their own power."

Former Guardian political editor Michael White, yet another regular anti-Corbyn commentator, admitted, "I was badly wrong. JC had much wider voter appeal than I realised"

Former Guardian journalist, Jonathan Cook, replied, "Problem is you 'all' got it wrong. That fact alone exposes structural flaw of corporate media. You don't represent us, you represent power."

White responded, "You're not still banging on, are you Jonathan. You do talk some bollocks"

Guardian, Telegraph, Independent and New Statesman contributor Abi Wilkinson tweeted: "Don't think some of people making demands about who Corbyn puts in shadow cabinet have particularly earned the right to be listened to . . ."

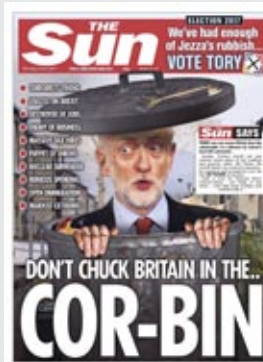
We paired this with Wilkinson's comment from June 2016, "Any hope I once held about Corbyn's ability to steer the party in a more positive direction has been well and truly extinguished."

Wilkinson replied, "Oh fuck off", before concluding that Medialens consisted of "two misogynistic cranks in a basement," and "just some dickheads who aren't actually fit" to hold the media to account.

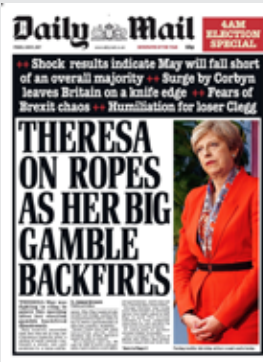
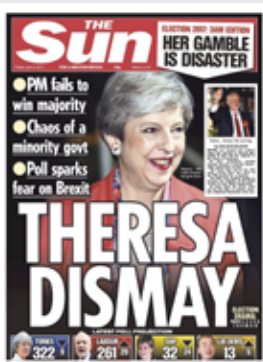
When a tweeter suggested that Corbyn's result was "brilliant," New Statesman editor Jason Cowley replied, "Yes, I agree." Just three days earlier, Cowley had written under the ominous title, "The Labour reckoning - Corbyn has fought a spirited campaign but is he leading the party to worst defeat since 1935?"

In March, Cowley opined, "The stench of decay and failure coming from the Labour Party is now overwhelming – Speak to any Conservative MP and they will say that there is no opposition. Period."

Like everyone else at the Guardian, columnist Owen Jones's initial instinct was to tweet away from his own newspaper's ferocious anti-Corbyn campaign, "The British



BEFORE THE VOTE: How the Sun and Daily Mirror attack the Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn.



AFTER THE VOTE: Then the Conservative Party – and the tabloids – took aim at Prime Minister Theresa May.

right wing press led a vicious campaign of lies, smears, hatred and bigotry. And millions told them where to stick it.”

And yet, as recently as April 18, Jones had depicted Corbyn as a pathetic figure, “A man who stood only out of a sense of duty, to put policies on the agenda, and who certainly had no ambition to be leader, will now take Labour into a general election, against all his original expectations. My suggestion that Corbyn stand down in favour of another candidate was driven by a desire to save his policies . . .”

Jones has now also issued a mea culpa, “I owe Corbyn, John McDonnell, Seumas Milne, his policy chief Andrew Fisher, and others, an unreserved, and heartfelt apology . . .”

“I wasn’t a bit wrong, or slightly wrong, or mostly wrong, but totally wrong. Having one foot in the Labour movement and one in the mainstream media undoubtedly left

me more susceptible to their groupthink. Never again.”

We will see!

To his credit, Jones managed to criticise his own employer (something he had previously told us was unthinkable and absurd):

“Now that I’ve said I’m wrong . . . so the rest of the mainstream commentariat, including in this newspaper, must confess they were wrong, too.”

Despite the blizzard of mea culpas from colleagues, George Monbiot also initially pointed well away from his employer, “The biggest losers today are the billionaires who own the Mail, Sun, Times and Telegraph. And thought they owned the nation.”

And: “It was The Sun wot got properly Cor-Binned.” And, “By throwing every brick in the house at Corbyn, and still failing to knock him over, the billionaire press lost much of its power.”

After receiving criticism, and having of

“The biggest losers today are the billionaires who own the Mail, Sun, Times and Telegraph. And thought they owned the nation”

After The Election / 3

A week before the election, the Guardian reported that “Alternative news sites are run from laptops and bedrooms miles from the much-derided ‘Westminster bubble’ and have emerged as one of the most potent forces in election news sharing”

course seen Jones’s mea culpa, Monbiot subsequently admitted that anti-Corbyn bias is found “even in the media that’s not owned by billionaires,” “This problem also affects the Guardian . . . Only the Guardian and the Mirror enthusiastically supported both Labour and Corbyn in election editorials.

“But the scales still didn’t balance.”

This is a change from Monbiot’s declared position of three years ago, when he rejected the idea that the Guardian was part of the problem. This week, he recalled his own dumping of Corbyn in a tweet from January. “I have now lost all faith.” The full tweet read: “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 blamed media bias on the way journalists are selected – “We should actively recruit people from poorer backgrounds” – and wrote, curiously, “the biggest problem, I believe, is that we spend too much time in each other’s company.”

We suggested to Monbiot that this was not at all “the biggest problem” with “mainstream” media, and pointed instead to elite ownership, profit-orientation, advertiser dependence and use of state-subsidised “news,” as discussed by Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky in their “propaganda model.”

Jonathan Cook responded to Monbiot, describing the limits of free speech with searing honesty, “This blindness even by a ‘radical’ like Monbiot to structural problems in the media is not accidental either. Realistically, the furthest he can go is where he went today in his column: suggesting organisational flaws in the corporate media, ones that can be fixed, rather than structural ones that cannot without rethinking entirely how the media functions. Monbiot will not – and cannot – use the pages of the Guardian to argue that his employer is structurally incapable of providing diverse and representative coverage.

“Nor can he admit that his own paper polices its pages to limit what can be said on the left, to demarcate whole areas of reasonable thought as off-limits. To do so would be to end his Guardian career and consign him to the outer reaches of social media.”

The same, of course, applies to Jones, who made no attempt at all to account for corporate media bias.

Media grandee Will Hutton, former editor-in-chief of the Observer, now Principal of Hertford College, Oxford, wrote of “How the rightwing tabloids got it wrong – It was the Sun wot hung it.” On Twitter, we reminded Hutton of his own article, one month earlier, “Er, excuse us . . . ! Will Hutton, May 7: ‘Never before in my adult life has the future seemed so bleak for progressives.’”

Tragically, given the awesome extent of his employer’s anti-Corbyn bias, John Cody Fidler-Simpson CBE, BBC World Affairs Editor, tweeted: “I suspect we’ve seen the end of the tabloids as arbiters of UK politics. Sun, Mail & Express threw all they had into backing May, & failed.”

We replied: “Likewise the ‘quality’ press and the BBC, which has been so biased even a former chair of the BBC Trust spoke out.”

Sir Michael Lyons, who chaired the BBC trust from 2007 to 2011, commented on the BBC’s “quite extraordinary attacks on the elected leader of the Labour Party, “I can understand why people are worried about whether some of the most senior editorial voices in the BBC have lost their impartiality on this.”

Conclusion – The Corporate Media Monopoly Is Broken

A week before the election, the Guardian reported that “a new force is shaping the general election debate,” “Alternative news sites are run from laptops and bedrooms miles from the much-derided ‘Westminster bubble’ and have emerged as one of the most potent forces in election news sharing, according to research conducted for the

Guardian by the web analytics company K aleida.”

These alternative articles were “being shared more widely online than the views of mainstream newspaper commentators.” Remarkably, “Nothing from the BBC, the Guardian or the Daily Mail comes close” to the most-shared alternative media pieces. The Canary reported that it had doubled the number of visitors to its site to six-million in May. A story by Evolve Politics, run by just two people, was shared 55,000 times on Facebook and was read at least 200,000 times. These websites “explicitly offer a counter-narrative to what they deride as the “MSM” or mainstream media.”

Indeed, the evidence is now simply overwhelming – the 100-year big business monopoly of the mass media has been broken.

It is obvious that the right-wing press – the Daily Mail, the Sun, The Times and Telegraph – play a toxic role in manipulating the public to favour elite interests. But many people are now realising that the liberal press is actually the most potent opponent of progressive change. Journalist Matt Kennard commented, “The Guardian didn’t get it ‘wrong.’ It is the mouthpiece of a liberal elite that is financially endangered by a socialist program.”

In truth, the Guardian sought to destroy Corbyn long before he became Labour leader. This means that it did not target him because he was an ineffective leader imperilling Labour. And this hostility was no aberration, not a well-intentioned mistake that they got “wrong.” To this day, the Guardian remains Tony Blair’s great cheerleader, despite his awesome crimes, just as it was Hillary Clinton and Obama’s cheerleader, and just as it was Bill Clinton’s before them.

While employing a handful of compromised fig leaves, the Guardian has ruthlessly smeared anyone who has sought to challenge the status quo: Julian Assange, Russell Brand, Hugo Chavez, Noam Chomsky, Edward Herman, John Pilger, George

Galloway and many others. It has also been complicit in the great war crimes of Iraq, Libya and Syria – accepting fake government justifications for war at face value, ignoring expert sources who made a nonsense of the claims, and propagandising hard for the West’s supposed “responsibility to protect” the nations it so obviously seeks to destabilise and exploit.

In the view of Medialens, the corporate journalists who should be treated with most caution are precisely those celebrated as “dissidents.” Corporate media give Owen Jones, George Monbiot, Paul Mason and others immense outreach to draw 100,000s of progressives back to a filtered, corporate version of the world that favours established power and stifles progressive change. Above all, as Jonathan Cook says, the unwritten rule is that they will not speak out on the inherent structural corruption of a corporate media system reporting on a world dominated by corporations.

This is crucial, because, as the election confirms, and as we have been arguing for 16 years, if change begins anywhere, it begins with the public challenging, exposing and rejecting, not just the right-wing press, but the corporate media as a whole, the “liberal-left” very much included.

In the last month, we saw astonishing numbers of people challenging all media, all the time on every bias – we have never seen anything like it. The young, in particular, are learning that they do not need highly-paid, privileged corporate employees to tell them what to think.

We don’t need to tolerate a corporate-filtered view of the world. We can inform ourselves and each other, and we can do so with very much more honesty, courage and compassion than any corporate journalist. If there is one message from the election campaign, it’s a simple one – dump the corporate media; all of it. **CT**

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

It is obvious that the right-wing press – the Daily Mail, the Sun, The Times and Telegraph – play a toxic role in manipulating the public to favour elite interests. But many people are now realising that the liberal press is actually the most potent opponent of progressive change

Cows, beggars, the Peace Corps, and too much tea

Chellis Glendinning reads an enlightening and entertaining book about a young volunteer who was sent to work in India

Much to the amazement of the young idealists who were sent to the subcontinent, little-to-no work actually took place

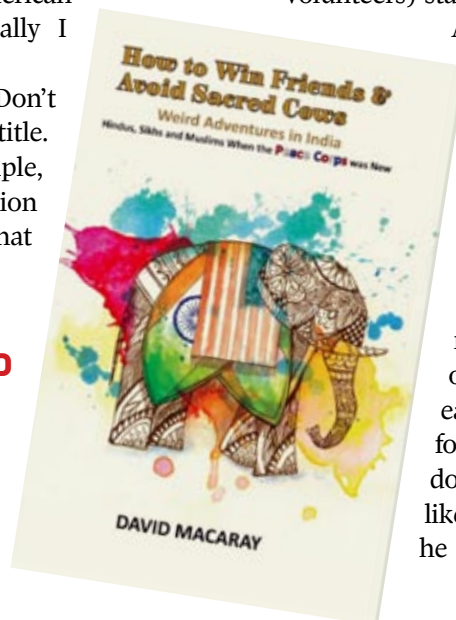
I first took notice of the writer/playwright/labor reporter Dave Macaray when I read his hilarious, poker-faced, report on the vagaries of the manufacture of toilet paper, an article that led to an email relationship that has since spanned a number of years.

When I got word that *How to Win Friends and Avoid Sacred Cows* had come out, my fingers sped to the only internet site from which I can get books sent from the northern imperium south to the *altiplano*. To tell the truth, the title didn't draw me in. Nor did the topic: Macaray's stint in the Peace Corps in India in 1967-68. I was busy reading books about German concentration camps and Latin American dictatorships. But finally I got around to it.

My humble lesson: Don't judge a book by its title. Macaray's style of simple, diary-like documentation of everyday events that

HOW TO WIN FRIENDS AND AVOID SACRED COWS

DAVID MACARAY
The Ardent Writer Press
\$16.67
(www.amazon.com)



took place during Peace Corps training and throughout his two-year experience of India belies the reality that his topic is far more profound. His literary achievement is nothing less than a slide down the razor's edge of one of history's most pressing social issues: cross-cultural sensibility. Much to the amazement of the young idealists who were sent to the subcontinent, little-to-no work actually took place. As Macaray writes:

"From the onset, we sensed a serious disconnect. Because we were self-conscious of the fact our Indian Peace Corps experience didn't seem to correspond to those inspirational stories we'd all heard – those bracing accounts of heroic PCVs (Peace Corps Volunteers) stationed in Africa and Central America, logging prodigious hours doing noble work – we were constantly battling a nagging sense of 'failure.'"

By his own report, it appears that during his total time in the Peace Corps, our author did not build more than a small number of deep-bore water wells, each of which took three or four days. Lacking anything to do that even vaguely sounded like the humanitarian mission he had signed up for, he made

do with what was: a tonnage of free time; the never-ending education that India offered to a 22-year old who, just months before, had been flipping hamburgers in a fast-food joint in southern California; and the perennial eruptions of dysentery-of-a-bacillary-assortment in a country – dare I say it? – dangerously low on toilet paper.

Global Moments abounded, meaning those unfortunate, and either humiliating or hilarious, frictions that have been made manifest by millennia of imperial pursuits. I rather like Macaray's account of the time he went to a Calcutta nightclub and, a mere five years after the Cuban Missile Crisis, was directed to a table occupied by four inebriated Soviet sailors. Said adversaries burst into a table-pounding rendition of "Amri-ka!! Amrika!!" – as the cabaret singer belted out, "Happy Birthday to You/You Belong in a Zoo," gyrating her hips as the men in the audience hurled rupees at her.

A midget on his handlebars

Then there was the occasion when the police in the small town of Malerkotla pulled his bicycle over to give him a palm reading. Or the day he hired the town midget to perform a massage, rode the fellow for all to see on the handlebars of a bike to his house, as the townspeople heckled and hooted due to the going rumour that the man's real business was sexual favours. And, lest I forget, the 30-minute speech our protagonist was called upon to deliver at the local university on the American Electoral College . . . the wild-boar hunt the chief-of-police invited

him to attend . . . the time he accidentally ventured into the women's quarters of a local house . . . the double date at the Taj Mahal . . . the non-stop inquiries about who killed JFK.

Each story arrives as a surprise, compels one to stay up too late reading and, needless to say, is always punctuated by a glass of tea with sugar and milk.

Macaray tells his tales in such a down-home way that, by book's end, I had the feeling that I myself had been in the Peace Corps – seeing, smelling, tasting, listening to, and making an ass of myself in India. Curiously, unexpectedly, I now know much more about the country's history, its problems, its cultures, its passions, its conflicts, its sense of humour, and its foods than I ever did from reading books, watching movies, viewing Indian art, or hanging out with Gandhi-ophiles in anti-war/pacifist movements.

And true to the power of any good book, Macaray's inviting style has caused me to reflect on my own experiences – both humiliating and hilarious – as a border-crosser into cultures other than those in which I grew up.

CT

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The townspeople heckled and hooted due to the going rumour that the man's real business was sexual favours

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Lynching free speech

John W. Whitehead warns of the dangers posed by the increasing levels of intolerance in America

If Americans don't learn how to get along then we're going to soon find that we have no rights whatsoever

My hometown of Charlottesville, Va, has become the latest poster child in a heated war of words – and actions – over racism, “sanitising history,” extremism (both right and left), political correctness, hate speech, partisan politics, and a growing fear that violent words will end in violent actions.

In Charlottesville, as in so many parts of the United States right now, the conflict is over how to reconcile the nation's checkered past, particularly as it relates to slavery, with the present need to sanitise the environment of anything – words and images – that might cause offense, especially if it's a Confederate flag or monument.

In Charlottesville, that fear of offence prompted the City Council to get rid of a statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee that has graced one of its public parks for 82 years. In doing so, they have attracted the unwanted attention of the Ku Klux Klan.

Yale University actually went so far as to change the name of one of its residential colleges, which was named after John C. Calhoun, the nation's seventh vice president, a secretary of state, secretary of war, senator and Yale alum who supported slavery.

New Orleans ran up a \$2-million tab in its efforts to remove its four Confederate monuments, with the majority of the funds being used for security to police the ensuing protests and demonstrations.

With more than 1,000 Confederate monuments in 31 states (in public parks, courthouse squares and state capitols), not to mention Confederate battle flags on display in military cemeteries, and countless more buildings and parks named after historic figures who were slaveholders, this isn't an issue that is going away anytime soon, no matter how much we ignore it, shout over it, criminalise it, legislate it, adjudicate or police it.

The temperature is rising all across the nation, and not just over this Confederate issue.

The “winter of our discontent” has given way to an overheated, sweltering summer in which shouting matches are skating dangerously close to becoming physical altercations.

As journalist Dahlia Lithwick writes for Slate, “These days, people who used to feel free to shout and threaten are emboldened to punch, body-slam, and stab. It is a short hop, we are learning, from ‘words can never hurt us’ to actual sticks and stones and the attendant breaking of bones. That is what has become of free speech in this country.”

Road to no rights

Here's the thing: if Americans don't learn how to get along – at the very least, agreeing to disagree and respecting each other's right to subscribe to beliefs and opinions that may be offensive, hateful, intolerant or merely different – then we're going to soon find that we have no rights whatsoever (to



Goodbye: Charlottesville's statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee.

Photo by Billy Hathorn/Wikimedia

speak, assemble, agree, disagree, protest, opt in, opt out, or forge our own paths as individuals).

The government will lock down the nation at the slightest provocation. It is ready, willing and able to impose martial law within 24 hours.

Indeed, the government has been anticipating and preparing for civil unrest for years now, as evidenced by the build-up of guns and tanks and militarised police and military training drills and threat assessments and extremism reports and surveillance systems and private prisons.

Connect the dots, people. The government doesn't care about who you voted for in the presidential election or whether you think the Civil War was fought over states' rights versus slavery. It doesn't care about your race or gender or religion or sexual orientation.

When the police state cracks down, it will

not discriminate.

We'll all be muzzled together.

We'll all be jailed together.

We'll all be viewed as a collective enemy to be catalogued, conquered and caged.

Thus, the last thing we need to do is play into the government's hands by turning on one another, turning in one another, and giving the government's standing army an excuse to take over.

The police state could not ask for a better citizenry than one that carries out its own censorship, spying and policing.

This is how you turn a nation of free people into extensions of the omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent police state, and in the process turn a citizenry against each other. It's a brilliant ploy, with the added bonus that while the citizenry remains focused on and distrustful of each other, they're incapable of presenting a united front against the threats

The police state could not ask for a better citizenry than one that carries out its own censorship, spying and policing

Erasing History

We have allowed our fears – fear for our safety, fear of each other, fear of being labelled racist or hateful or prejudiced – to trump our freedom of speech and muzzle us far more effectively than any government edict could

posed by the government and its cabal of Constitution-destroying agencies and corporate partners.

Unfortunately, we have already become a nation of snowflakes, snitches and book burners: a legalistic, intolerant, elitist, squealing bystander nation eager to report fellow citizens to the police for the slightest offence.

Mind you, once the police are called in, with their ramped-up protocols, battlefield mindset, militarised weapons, uniforms and equipment, and war zone tactics, it's a process that is near impossible to turn back and one that too often ends in tragedy for those involved.

So how do we stop this train from barreling down the tracks past the police state and straight into martial law?

Let's start with a little more patience, a lot more tolerance and a civics lesson on the First Amendment.

As my good friend Nat Hentoff, that inveterate champion of the First Amendment, once observed, "The quintessential difference between a free nation, as we profess to be, and a totalitarian state, is that here everyone, including a foe of democracy, has the right to speak his mind."

What this means is opening the door to more speech not less, even if that speech is offensive to some.

Tolerating unpopular speech

Understanding that freedom for those in the unpopular minority constitutes the ultimate tolerance in a free society, James Madison, the author of the Bill of Rights, fought for a First Amendment that protected the "minority" against the majority, ensuring that even in the face of overwhelming pressure, a minority of one – even one who espouses distasteful viewpoints – would still have the right to speak freely, pray freely, assemble freely, challenge the government freely, and broadcast his views in the press freely.

We haven't done ourselves – or the nation – any favours by becoming so fearfully polite, careful to avoid offense, and largely unwilling

to be labelled intolerant, hateful or closed-minded that we've eliminated words, phrases and symbols from public discourse.

The result is a nation where no one really says what they really think anymore, at least if it runs counter to the prevailing views. Intolerance is the new scarlet letter of our day, a badge to be worn in shame and humiliation, deserving of society's fear, loathing and utter banishment from society.

For those who dare to voice an opinion that runs counter to the accepted norms, retribution is swift: they are shamed, shouted down, silenced, censored, fired, cast out and generally relegated to the dust heap of ignorant, mean-spirited bullies who are guilty of various "word crimes."

We have entered a new age where, as commentator Mark Steyn notes, "we have to tiptoe around on ever-thinner eggshells" and "the forces of 'tolerance' are intolerant of anything less than full-blown celebratory approval."

In such a climate of intolerance, there can be no freedom speech, expression or thought.

We have allowed our fears – fear for our safety, fear of each other, fear of being labelled racist or hateful or prejudiced – to trump our freedom of speech and muzzle us far more effectively than any government edict could. Ultimately the war on free speech – and that's exactly what it is: a war being waged by Americans against other Americans – is a war that is driven by fear.

By bottling up dissent, we have created a pressure cooker of stifled misery and discontent that is now bubbling over and fomenting even more hate, distrust and paranoia among portions of the populace.

The First Amendment is a steam valve. It allows people to speak their minds, air their grievances and contribute to a larger dialogue that hopefully results in a more just world.

When there is no steam valve to release the pressure, frustration builds, anger grows and people become more volatile and desperate to force a conversation.

The problem as I see it is that we've al-

lowed ourselves to be persuaded that we need someone else to think and speak for us. The result is a society in which we've stopped debating among ourselves, stopped thinking for ourselves, and stopped believing that we can fix our own problems and resolve our own differences.

Not only has free speech become a "politically incorrect" four-letter word – profane, obscene, uncouth, not to be uttered in so-called public places – but in more and more cases, the government deems free speech to be downright dangerous and in some instances illegal.

The US government has become particularly intolerant of speech that challenges the government's power, reveals the government's corruption, exposes the government's lies, and encourages the citizenry to push back against the government's many injustices. Indeed, there is a long and growing list of the kinds of speech that the government considers dangerous enough to red flag and subject to censorship, surveillance, investigation and prosecution: hate speech, bullying speech, intolerant speech, conspiratorial speech, treasonous speech, threatening speech, incendiary speech, inflammatory speech, radical speech, anti-government speech, right-wing speech, and extremist speech.

Government-controlled thought

The powers-that-be understand that if the government can control speech, it controls thought and, in turn, it can control the minds of the citizenry. In fact, some of this past century's greatest dystopian authors warned of this very danger.

In Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, reading is banned and books are burned in order to suppress dissenting ideas, while televised entertainment is used to anaesthetise the populace and render them easily pacified, distracted and controlled.

In Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, serious literature, scientific thinking and experimentation are banned as subversive, while critical thinking is discouraged through the

use of conditioning, social taboos and inferior education. Likewise, expressions of individuality, independence and morality are viewed as vulgar and abnormal.

In George Orwell's 1984, Big Brother does away with all undesirable and unnecessary words and meanings, even going so far as to routinely rewrite history and punish "thoughtcrimes."

And in almost every episode of *Twilight Zone*, Rod Serling urged viewers to unlock their minds and free themselves of prejudice, hate, violence and fear. "We're developing a new citizenry," Serling declared. "One that will be very selective about cereals and automobiles, but won't be able to think."

It's time to start thinking for ourselves again.

It's time to start talking to each other. It's time to start listening more and shouting less.

Most of all, it's time to start acting like people who will choose dangerous freedom over peaceful slavery.

As Dahlia Lithwick concluded for Slate: "To guarantee an escape from conflict, from violence, requires censorship. To have free speech in this moment, when the stakes are so high, is to live with fear. This is not an easy thing to confront – or to accept . . . Conversation might still be our best chance of getting out of this mess. Free speech is just free speech. It takes actual humans making the effort to talk to each other to transform speech into something more vital and more valuable. Conversations don't always work. They may sometimes go wrong – horribly, terribly wrong. . . . The First Amendment will never be able to protect us from horrible words and horrific acts. It does guarantee that we'll keep talking." **CT**

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*John W. Whitehead is a constitutional lawyer and founder and president of the Rutherford Institute. His book *Battlefield America: The War on the American People* (Select Books, 2015) is available online at www.amazon.com. He can be contacted at johnw@rutherford.org*

It's time to start acting like people who will choose dangerous freedom over peaceful slavery

Tony Sutton checks out a remarkable new visual record of Britain's miners' strike of 1984-85 by **Craig Oldham**



Never Forget. Never Forgive

Craig Oldham, son of a Yorkshire miner who was assaulted, arrested, and wrongly prosecuted during Britain's 1984-85 miners' strike, has created, with his new book, **In Loving Memory of Work**, a stunning visual portrayal of the year-long struggle that thrust workers into what became a bloody and violent 'civil war' against the might of Margaret Thatcher's right-wing Conservative government.

The 33-year-old strike might have long been relegated to a dusty corner of history were it not for its enduring impact on British society. Thatcher's onslaught on labour – using police, security agencies, courts, and social services as weapons; the attacks cheered on by a shrill and compliant media – enabled the rise of neoliberalism, the political doc-



Miners' union leader Arthur Scargill shows Mrs Thatcher the way as he clears up at union headquarters in 1983.

trine that has caused so much economic and social inequality over recent decades.

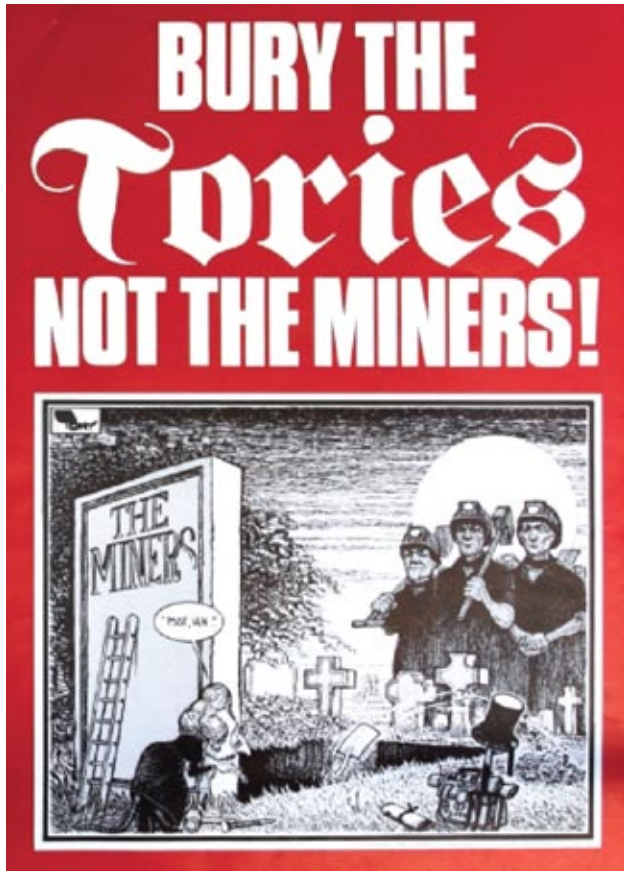
Those policies, writes celebrated filmmaker Ken Loach in the book's introduction, destroyed "the post-war consensus that we should all work for the common good. We were told that there is no such thing as society, and that it's every man, or woman, for themselves. "The issue we now face," he says, "could not be clearer or more urgent. How do we reassert the principles for which the miners and their families fought so hard to defend? How do we find an economic model that enables to work together for the benefit of all? It is a question even more urgent now than in 1984. We ignore it at our peril."

Loach's question was partially answered at this month's historic general election



Support The Miners Postcard No.11: Victory to the Miners, published by Leeds Postcards for the NUM in September 1984. © Paul Morton

In The Picture



LEFT: Poster published in the Labour Herald. The image shows a hiding Margaret Thatcher, whispering to “Ian” (Coal Board chairman Ian MacGregor). From the Working Class Movement Library, Salford. **RIGHT:** Poster for the Militant Miner. © Alan Hardman/The Militant



when Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn’s stunning campaign saw a huge shift away from a political structure that worships at the altar of profits-at-all-costs, replacing the capitalist mantra of “every man for himself,” with his socialist message of hope, “For the many, not the few.”

It’s fitting that the election turnaround came just days before the 33rd anniversary, on June 18, of the Battle of Orgreave, the most infamous event of the 1984 strike, where picketing miners were attacked by mounted policemen, arrested and charged (the trial broke down after police witnesses were caught lying) with rioting, an offence with a maximum sentence of life imprisonment.

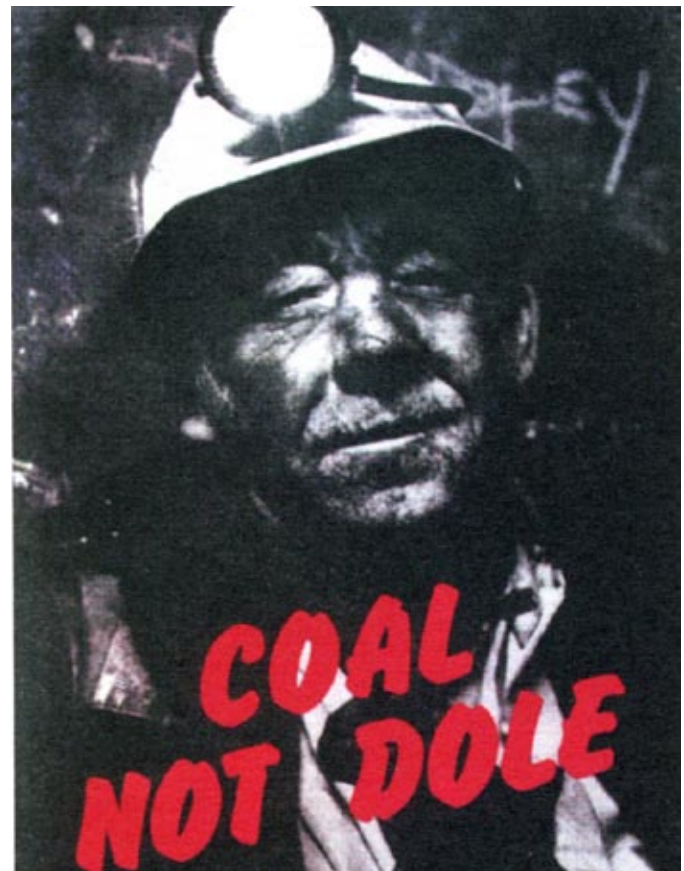
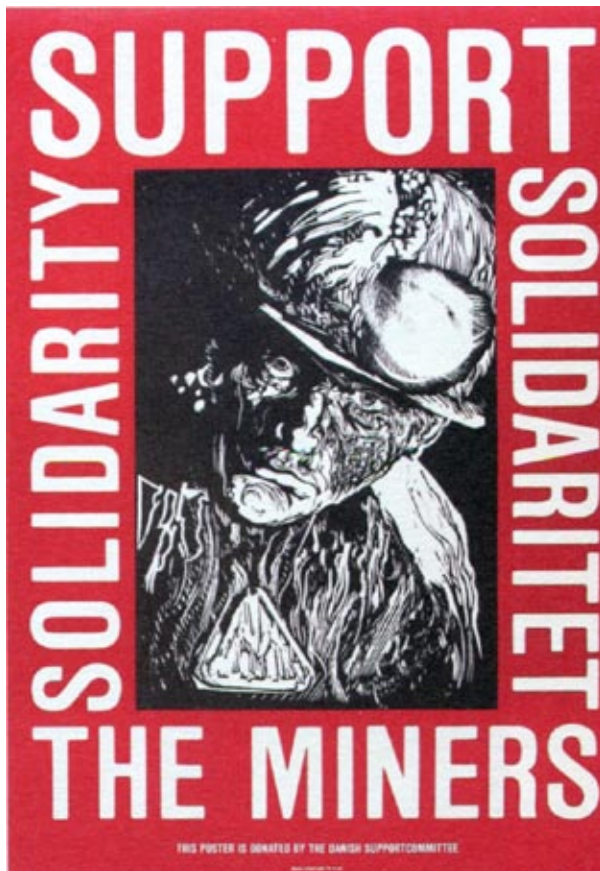
Corbyn’s fight was not easy. He has spent the past year fighting the Blairite rearguard of his own party aided by a savage onslaught by the tabloid press. Seeing how many young people have rejected the old media, it’s hardly surprising that the MSM is now obsessed with

the ‘fake’ news that they claim is flooding social media feeds. A cursory glance at *their* pre-election treatment of Corbyn – an eerie echo of the lies published about the miners 33 years ago – shows the real source of fake news: the hate-filled pages of billionaire-owned mass-market propaganda-sheets-posing-as-newspapers, such as the Sun and the Daily Mail. They have long posed a far greater threat to democracy than Twitter or Facebook.

In Loving Memory of Work’s oversized paperback format brings together haunting images from the miners’ year-long battle in a fascinating collection of memorabilia, with text as insightful and informative as you’d expect from someone who was there (well, almost there) at the time.

“I was born in the mining town of Barnsley, just weeks after the formal end of the miners’ strike,” writes Oldham. “It’s hard for me not to have been influenced





Left: Poster, produced by Werks Offset, features a striking portrait of a miner emerging from the blackness. From the Working Class Movement Library, Salford. Right: Another application of the iconic 'Coal Not Dole' showing a working miner. From the collection of the NUM

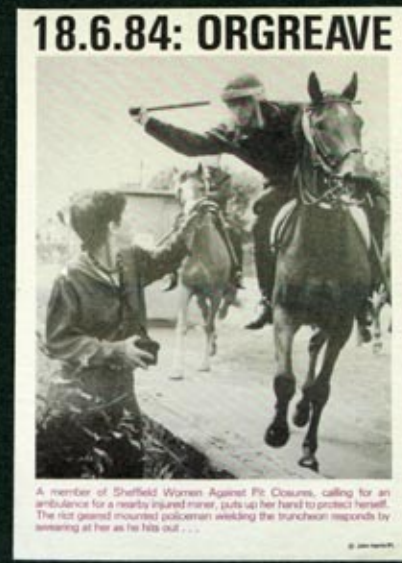
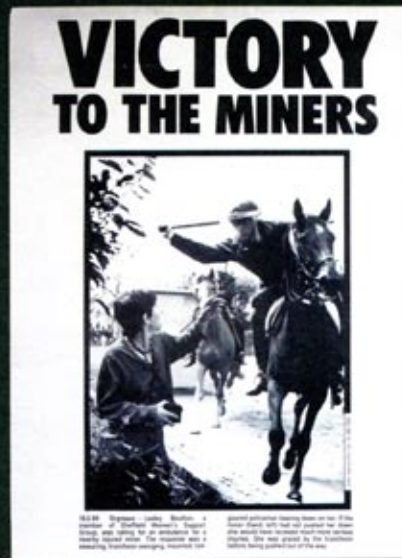


ABOVE: A miner emerges from the pit. The poster was seen in numerous halls and kitchens as well as on the picket line. LEFT: The departure of the 'flying pigs' is toasted by figures representing the state. The quote is a rephrased twist on the line from a war-time speech by Winston Churchill © Alan Hardman / The Militant

In The Picture

In the Britain's 1984-85 miners' strike, the image that best represents the struggle was John Harris's photo of a policeman mounted on horseback about to strike fellow photographer Lesley Boulton with his heavy truncheon during the infamous battle of Orgreave. The image, reproduced on posters and badges, was the most iconic and poignant political image to come from the strike and perhaps from Thatcher's Britain. Boulton was saved from the assault by a quick-thinking activist who dragged her out of the way of the policeman's attack.

© John Harris / reportdigital.co.uk



Strike buttons feature Harris's image

Badges from the collection of the NUM

by those events. After all, three generations of my family had worked in the Barnsley pits. As I grew up, and as my parents and their community adjusted to the closures, it was impossible to avoid a certain amount of cultural fallout. Everyone, it seemed, had a story to tell.

“Mick, my father, picketed at Orgreave, where he was assaulted, arrested, and prosecuted by a colluding South Yorkshire police force. My mother, Kerena, although pregnant with me during the strike, was empowered by the women’s movement, while also caring for my young brother and



sister. . . . Tens of thousands of mining families, from all over the country, can tell similar tales. . . . For those involved, the story of the miners’s strike continues. Over 30 years on, those who stood up against Thatcher’s cruel and senseless policies continue to fight for accountability, justice and reform; in the hope that no other family or community has to suffer the same fate.

“The miners’ jobs may be forgotten. But let never forget the work they did.”

In Loving Memory of Work ends with a section titled with



Campaign badge for one of many food convoys to help the families of striking miners. NUM Collection

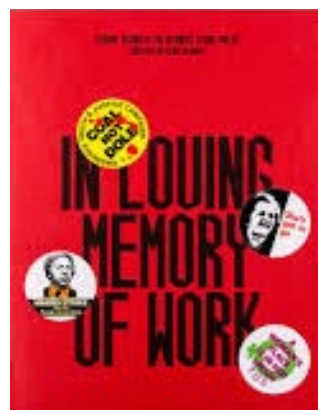


ABOVE: Hand-drawn fundraising placard displayed in and around the Greater Manchester area during the strike. From the Working Class Movement Library, Salford

LEFT: Poster in aid of Normanton and Altofts Miners Support Group based on a poem by Maureen Ward. It was designed by Dawn Hampson, Janine Head and Maureen Ward. Design © Hampson, Head, Ward / Private Collection

the phrase “Never Forget, Never Forgive,” an epitaph that epitomises the courage and resilience of the country’s mining families, while acknowledging their unending anger at Margaret Thatcher and her free-market successor who have ravaged the nation’s proud industrial heartland, while driving the country into its present state of post-election, pre-Brexit turmoil. **CT**

Tony Sutton is the editor of ColdType – editor@coldtype.net



IN LOVING MEMORY OF WORK
A Visual History of the UK Miners’ Strike 1984-85

CRAIG OLDHAM

Published by UTOE, England – £30
www.inlovingmemoryofwork.com

Hidden behind the walls of America's prisons

Heather Ann Thompson tells of the unimaginable suffering taking place in the name of safety and security in US prisons, and explains why it's time to stop it

There is a long history of the public being kept away from prisons so that corrections officials could run them as they wished

Few Americans fully appreciate just how many of their fellow citizens are ensnared in the criminal justice system.

Some may have heard that there are about 2.3-million people behind bars, but that figure tells only part of the story. Yes, in a stunning array of 1,719 state prisons, 102 federal prisons, 901 juvenile correctional facilities, 3,163 local jails and 76 Indian Country jails, as well as in military prisons, immigration detention facilities, civil commitment centres and prisons in the territories, we physically contain more human beings than any other country in the world. In addition to those actually locked up, there are another 840,000 Americans being supervised on parole and an additional 3.7-million people being monitored on probation.

Consider this: The world's most populous city, Tokyo, and the US's most populous state, California, have fewer residents combined than the up-to 100-million US citizens who now have a criminal record.

That most of are blissfully unaware of just how many people are, or have been, subject to containment or control is, perhaps, unsurprising. Prisons are built to be out of sight and are, thus, out of mind. Somehow, even though these institutions contain human beings, including children, and even though we are the ones who cough up the billion of dollars that it costs to run them, we are expected simply to trust that they are operated humanely and

that they in fact make society safer.

As a historian of crime and punishment who has been inside of America's prisons and has documented severe abuses that have taken place within them, I know this trust is not warranted. It is past time that the public has unfettered access to these public institutions so that we can know exactly what happens behind prison walls.

The fight to see inside

There is, in fact, a long history of the public being kept away from prisons so that corrections officials could run them as they wished. For much of the 19th- and into the 20th-century, state politicians' deeply ingrained fear of federal encroachment on their power more generally translated into the so-called "hands-off doctrine" when it came to how they ran their prisons. Prison authorities, it was understood, had the right to do what they wanted to those in their charge.

Of course prisoners routinely tried to bring attention to the abuses that happened to them. But time and again, and most notably in the infamous 1871 case *Ruffin v. Commonwealth*, their bid to be treated as human beings was formally denied. In fact, according to the court in this case, prisoners were "slaves of the state."

In the 1960s and 1970s, though, in response to escalating protests in penal facilities and in cities across the country, prisoners finally



Overcrowding in California State Prison.

Photo: California Department of Corrections

Even in countries not known for their human rights, such as Singapore, prison officials explicitly connect the humane treatment of the incarcerated to the broader public good

gained some rights. In turn, the public began to learn a bit more about what was happening to them behind bars.

It was, for example, deeply significant when the Warren Court opined in a 1974 case, *Wolff v. McDonnell*, that, “a prisoner is not wholly stripped of constitutional protections when he is imprisoned for crime. There is no iron curtain drawn between the Constitution and the prisons of this country.”

However, at the moment that more light was being shone on prison conditions because of specific judicial rulings, it was also clear that serious limitations on the public’s access to these institutions would remain and, overtime, actually increase.

In 1974, the court ruled in *Pell v. Procunier* that prisoners’ First Amendment rights were in fact limited. In this case, the court held that journalists, the people who might hear prisoner accounts of abuse and share them with the public, “have no constitutional right of access to prisons or their inmates beyond that afforded to the general public.” As Ted Kennedy noted passionately before his colleagues in the Senate, this decision was alarming since, as he pointed out, “the public cannot regularly tour the prisons and interview inmates.”

Another significant blow to the public’s access came in 1987 when a decision was rendered in the case *Turner v. Safley*. The court ruled that prisoners’ rights to speak to the media existed only to the extent that prison authorities didn’t have a reasonable justification for restricting those rights. And the lid on access lowered even farther in the 2003 case *Overton v. Bazzetta*. The court ruled, in short, that if prison administrators wished to bar visitors to prison, their desires trumped other constitutional considerations such as the First Amendment rights of prisoners.

The court even found that prison officials could prevent visits between prisoners and their kids if the restrictions on visitation were related to “valid interests in maintaining internal security.”

Access abroad

Notably, other prison systems, most famously those in countries such as Sweden and Norway, are much more transparent. The primary goal of prison, officials in these countries maintain, is to return people to the society improved. And, thus, they insist, prisons must have oversight to ensure that they are run humanely.

Not only are Scandinavian prisoners as-

Out Of Sight . . .

It wasn't until prisoners ended up dead with marks on their body indicating to outside coroners that they had been tortured that we knew about the traumas that the mentally ill are suffering in prison

signed a special officer “who monitors and helps advance progress toward return to the world outside,” but Norwegian prisons boast an “explicit focus on rehabilitating prisoners through education, job training and therapy ... [and the] priority of reintegration.”

Even in countries not known for their human rights, such as Singapore, prison officials explicitly connect the humane treatment of the incarcerated to the broader public good. As their corrections officials put it, “by rehabilitating our inmates, society can continue to be safe even when these offenders leave prison.”

The principle that the public has a responsibility to run prisons humanely was in fact adopted by the United Nations back in 1955.

When the UN revised and again adopted its Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners in 2013, thereafter dubbed the Nelson Mandela Rules, not only was it endorsing the idea that penal practices must be humane and prisoners treated like people, but it also made clear that humane treatment depended upon outsider access to prisons. According to the UN, “services and agencies, governmental or otherwise” interested in prisoners’ well being “shall have all necessary access to the institution and to prisoners.”

Even a cursory glance at US history indicates that such access is not only desirable, but necessary. The abuses that went on in this country’s 19th-century penal institutions, both in the North and in the South, are well-documented, and it is now obvious that the 20th-century did not bring much improvement.

One need only read of the pain and suffering the men locked up at the Angola Penitentiary in Louisiana endured in the 1950s. Here, men willingly cut their own Achilles’ tendons so that they might avoid the abuses of the guards driving them in the prison’s cotton fields. Or we can look at the horrific torture endured by the men at Attica in the wake of their 1971 protest.

Throughout American history, unspeakable abuse of men and women has been al-

lowed to happen behind prison walls because the public had no access.

And, if we pay close attention to what has been happening much more recently behind bars, it is clear that the closed nature of prisons remains a serious problem.

In September 2016, prisoners at facilities across the country erupted in protests for better conditions. In March and April of 2017, prisons in Delaware and Tennessee similarly exploded.

In each of these rebellions, the public was told little about what had prompted the chaos and even less about what happened to the protesting prisoners once order was restored.

In fact, when we, the public, just dig a little, it is obvious that much trauma takes place behind bars while we aren’t watching.

In a juvenile facility in Florida it is now clear that over the course of many decades in the 20th-century, prison officials murdered scores of young boys. In facilities such as Rikers Island, young people today experience physical abuse and some have died in custody. And not just children, but vulnerable adults as well, suffer tremendously, and daily, because they are at the utter mercy of officials who don’t have to answer to the public.

Indeed, it is only when there is a particularly dramatic abuse, or a death that simply can’t be hidden, that the public gets any glimpse of what life on the inside is like for so many Americans.

It wasn’t until concern was raised about babies being born with brain damage that we learned that women are shackled during childbirth in our prisons. It wasn’t until brave health care professionals came forward that we learned about the many broken bones and internal injuries prisoners were suffering at the hands of their captors. It wasn’t until prisoners ended up dead with marks on their body indicating to outside coroners that they had been tortured that we knew about the traumas that the mentally ill are suffering in prison. And, sadly, it isn’t until we hear of cases being filed on behalf of children that we finally learn how many of them have suffered

sexual and physical abuse and about how much emotional distress they suffer from being kept in utter isolation.

More recently, until journalist Nell Bernstein managed to get access to our nation's juveniles facilities, the public was blissfully unaware of the alarming fact that, "More than a third of youth reported that staff used force unnecessarily, and 30 percent said that staff placed them into solitary confinement as discipline," or that the amount of physical forced used on children in these facilities is "staggering."

Here is but one account that Bernstein was able to share with the public of a 12-year-old boy who, when his mother was allowed finally to visit him, was found "rail-thin," with his eyebrows shaved off, a dent in his temple and with a "huge black eye, a busted lip, and a bruise on his rib cage in the shape of a boot." When she asked him, appalled, how he had got so injured, he explained flatly, "Mom, this is what happens . . . A guard did this. They want you to know who's boss."

Volatile and dangerous workplaces

It isn't just those who have been sentenced to serve time in prisons who suffer from the public's lack of access to those institutions. The men and women who work inside of them also pay a high price.

Every American prison is, of course, severely overcrowded and, therefore, they are not just hellholes for the incarcerated, they are also volatile and dangerous workplaces.

Like prisoners, correction officers also end up injured and killed behind bars and, also like prisoners, they experience high rates of suicide as a result of the terrible conditions. And, also as with prisoners, the only way we hear just how terrible things really are for guards is when something particularly awful happens to one of them and protests erupt, as they did in states such as Alabama in 2016.

Barriers to access

When ordinary citizens learn of atrocities committed behind bars, most are appalled, but the sad reality is that the public actually

has few legal tools at its disposal to insist on the access it needs to protect guards or prisoners.

Yes, the American public does have some right to know what the officials we pay are doing via the 1966 Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). This piece of legislation was intended to facilitate "the watchdog function of the public over the government," and it was meant to give citizens "the knowledge necessary to evaluate the conduct of government officials." All who supported the passage of FOIA understood that "access to the government information necessary to ensure that government officials act in the public interest."

When one group tried to get documents from the Bureau of Prisons, for example, it was denied access to files for 14 years and, even then, it took a law suit to settle the matter. As journalist Jessica Pupovac points out, "Restrictive prison policies continue to be an issue – and a problem – for journalists." Of course, for those without press credentials, finding out what is happening behind bars – having any idea what behaviours and actions their tax dollars are making possible in America's vast carceral network – remains virtually impossible.

How then might Americans ever know what actually goes on in the criminal justice system that they fund, the penal institutions that their loved ones populate in ever greater numbers and in the many other apparatuses of containment they are told will keep them safer?

The answer to that question is not at all clear, but the imperative of continuing to loudly demand public access to our public penal institutions is. Access is a responsibility even if it has yet to be a guaranteed right.

As history and present-day headlines make clear, the public must know what happens in prisons. Not knowing is what makes it possible for unimaginable suffering to take place in the name of safety and security. There is no reason for to make this Faustian bargain, and countless, human, reasons why we must not.

The only way we hear just how terrible things really are for guards is when something particularly awful happens to one of them and protests erupt

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Heather Ann Thompson is professor of history and Afro-American and African studies at the University of Michigan. This article was first published at www.theconversation.com

CT

Inside the US fight to fix Israel's global standing

The United States and Israel are leading a campaign of intimidation against the UN to forcibly rehabilitate Israel's international standing, writes **Jonathan Cook**

The increasingly overt alliance between Israel and the US at the UN was highlighted when Danon escorted Nikki Haley, Trump's envoy to the UN, on a visit to Israel

The Trump administration is using unprecedented threats and financial “blackmail” against the United Nations and its agencies to end their focus on human rights abuses by Israel, according to analysts and Palestinian leaders. They accuse the United States of joining Israel in a campaign of intimidation against the UN secretariat and member states to forcibly rehabilitate Israel's international standing.

The offensive comes after the Israeli government of Benjamin Netanyahu had faced several years of criticism in diplomatic circles for refusing to engage in a peace process with the Palestinians. An early indication of the new campaign's success, analysts noted, was the election last week of Danny Danon as a vice-president of the UN's main representative forum, the General Assembly.

Danon has been Israel's ambassador to the UN since 2015. He is known as an arch-opponent of the two-state solution and, before heading to the UN in New York, had repeatedly called for Israel to annex most of the West Bank.

It is views like Danon's, which are increasingly dominant inside the Israeli government, that have driven a swelling boycott movement, as well as increasing comparisons between Israel and apartheid South Africa.

“The US and Israel are now jointly engaged in ‘street fighting’ at the UN,” a

Western diplomat, who wished to remain anonymous, told Al Jazeera. “Washington is throwing its weight around and bullying people. The old rules of diplomacy have been thrown out of the window.”

That view was confirmed by Hanan Ashrawi, a former Palestinian negotiator and member of the PLO Executive Committee. “The Trump administration has become a very vocal and aggressive attorney for Israel,” she told Al Jazeera. “It threatens consequences for anyone seen to be supporting the Palestinians or criticising Israel.”

Danon will take up his new post in September, chairing sessions of the General Assembly, helping to set its agenda and overseeing enforcement of rules and decorum during its meetings.

The increasingly overt alliance between Israel and the US at the UN was highlighted when Danon escorted Nikki Haley, Trump's envoy to the UN, on a visit to Israel. In a speech to the US pro-Israeli lobby group AIPAC in March, Haley promised to be “a new sheriff in town” at the UN.

On the way to Israel, Haley stopped in Geneva to berate one of the UN's chief agencies, the Human Rights Council (UNHRC), for what she termed its “chronic anti-Israel bias”. Its behaviour “makes a mockery not of Israel, but of the Council itself,” she added. She threatened that the US would pull out of the UNHRC if it did not rein in its

criticism.

In April, Haley issued a similar warning when she took over the rotating presidency of the UN's most powerful body, the Security Council. She told members that their monthly Middle East debates would now focus on Iran, Syria, Hamas and Hezbollah, not Israel.

Israel and the White House have been leaning on other key UN agencies. In March, the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia was forced to retract an expert report after it concluded that Israel had established an apartheid regime ruling over the Palestinians. And last month the US condemned a resolution by the UN's cultural agency, UNESCO, after it called on Israel to uphold international law and end policies that were changing the religious and cultural character of occupied East Jerusalem.

Although the resolution passed, most European countries either abstained or voted against it. Afterwards, Netanyahu crowed: "The number of countries who support this absurd UNESCO resolution is getting smaller."

Threat to UN budget

All this has been occurring against the drumbeat of threats from the Trump administration that it is ready to impose drastic cuts to the UN budget. Washington is the UN's biggest contributor, covering nearly \$13.5bn of the world body's funding. "The main factor behind Danon's promotion is blackmail by the Trump administration," said Ashrawi. "It is threatening to withhold UN funding and it is clear member states are scared."

Nathan Thrall, author of a new book on Israeli-Palestinian diplomacy, *The Only Language They Understand*, said the campaign had forced the Palestinians to back off from diplomatic initiatives at the UN.

Over the past seven years, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas placed an emphasis on the struggle to win recognition of Palestinian statehood at the UN. That

included joining a UN agency, UNESCO, in 2011. The US responded by suspending its UNESCO's funding.

"The Palestinians are afraid what Trump might do," Thrall told Al Jazeera. "If the US starts making global institutions collapse, the Palestinian leadership are worried they will get the blame from other countries."

Peacekeeping operations and humanitarian assistance would be among the UN operations expected to suffer. "The Palestinians don't want to lose friends when they need them most," added Thrall.

Danon, aged 46, was selected for the role of General Assembly vice-president by a regional faction at the UN known as the Western European and Others Group. It includes most European countries, plus Israel, Australia, Canada and New Zealand.

The election of vice-presidents is organised on a regional basis to ensure fair geographical representation.

Salah Bardawil, a senior Hamas official, tweeted that Danon's elevation was "a mark of Cain on the UN's forehead." Israel has been the subject of dozens of resolutions condemning its violations of the UN charter – far more than any other member state. But in particular, the choice of Danon has disturbed Palestinian leaders. Until recently, his was widely seen as the enfant terrible of the Israeli right.

Netanyahu sacked Danon from his post as deputy defence minister in summer 2014, during Israel's attack on Gaza, in which some 500 Palestinian children were killed. He called Danon "irresponsible" for describing Israel's military operation as too lenient. When Netanyahu announced Danon's posting as ambassador a year later, Israeli analysts described the decision as a "cruel joke".

Ashrawi noted that Danon's treatment at the UN contrasted strongly with that of Salam Fayyad, the former Palestinian prime minister.

Efforts by the US Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, to appoint Fayyad, a Pales-

Netanyahu sacked Danon from his post as deputy defence minister in summer 2014, during Israel's attack on Gaza, in which some 500 Palestinian children were killed. He called Danon "irresponsible" for describing Israel's military operation as too lenient

Battle Lines

The UN, mired in financial difficulties, is reeling from the threat of further penalties from the US and its allies if it continues to be seen as anti-Israel

tinian moderate, as the UN envoy to Libya were blocked by the US in February. Haley described the move as against Israel and added: "The United States will act, not just talk, in support of our allies."

Even before Trump, there were signs that Israel's fortunes at the UN were changing. Last year, Danon made history becoming the first Israeli ambassador to chair a permanent committee – dealing, paradoxically, with international law, the subject on which Israel has faced most criticism. Again, Danon received the backing of the Western European and Others Group.

However, Danon's relations with the previous US administration were strained. In late 2012 he accused President Barack Obama of being "no friend of Israel".

Security Council seat?

By contrast, Danon has been enthusiastically embraced by the Trump administration, observed Thrall. "Israel is doing well diplomatically, at the moment. There are rumours that it aspires to a seat in the Security Council. The climate is such that some Israeli politicians even seem to think that might be achievable."

Interviewed by the settlers' news agency Arutz Sheva last month, Danon said there was a "new spirit" at the UN. "They no longer focus only on Israel. The UN is no longer the Palestinian playground. Something is changing here." Of his relationship with Haley, he told the Orthodox Jewish magazine Mishpacha in April: "When it comes to Israel, we share the same views."

Although the world body has been

viewed as traditionally hostile to Israel, experts have cited several factors that explain Israel's changing fortunes.

In recent years, Israel has made strategic alliances with powerful states at the UN, in addition to its main ally in Washington. Israel has won favour often through arms sales and intelligence sharing.

The diplomat, who has worked in Israel, said: "Israel has been reaching out to emerging economies in BRICS [Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa] as well as Mexico. That is starting to pay a diplomatic dividend."

Also, Europe, which is in growing disarray, has abandoned even the pretence of acting as a counterweight to Washington. That has made it easier to win over European countries to Israel's side. Thrall noted: "The apparent calculus in countries like the UK is that the best way to ingratiate themselves with the US is to be good to Israel."

And the UN, mired in financial difficulties, is reeling from the threat of further penalties from the US and its allies if it continues to be seen as anti-Israel. "Israel and the US are ready to break the international order to get their way," said the diplomat. "People are scared of what they might be capable of doing." **CT**

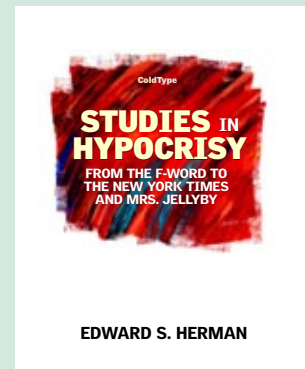
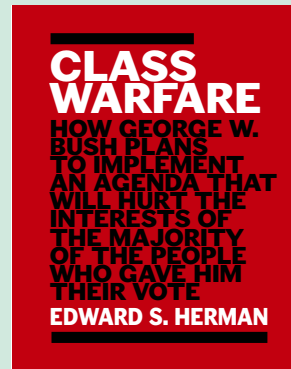
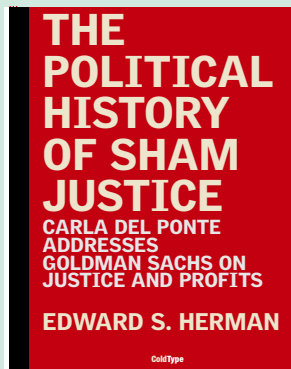
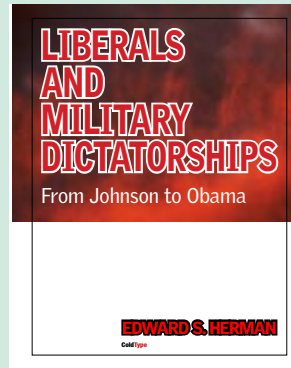
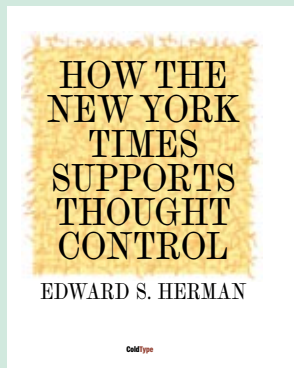
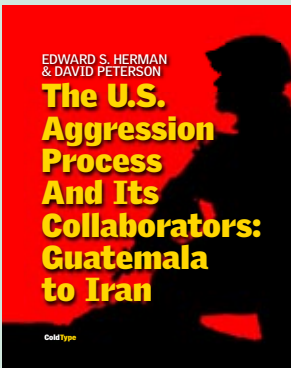
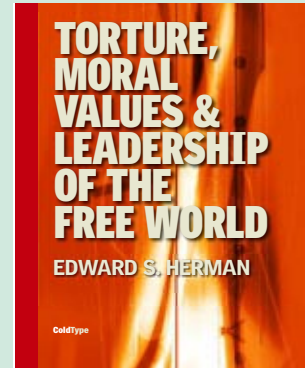
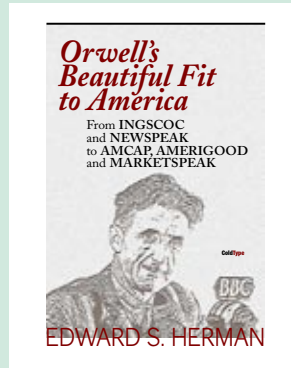
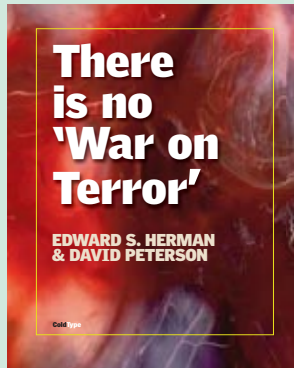
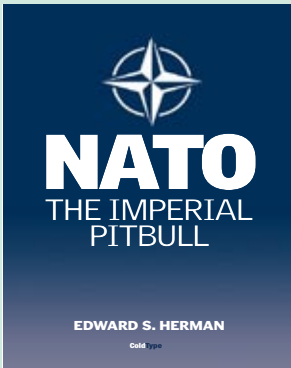
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Jonathan Cook won the Martha Gellhorn Special Prize for Journalism. His books include "Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East" (Pluto Press) and "Disappearing Palestine: Israel's Experiments in Human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

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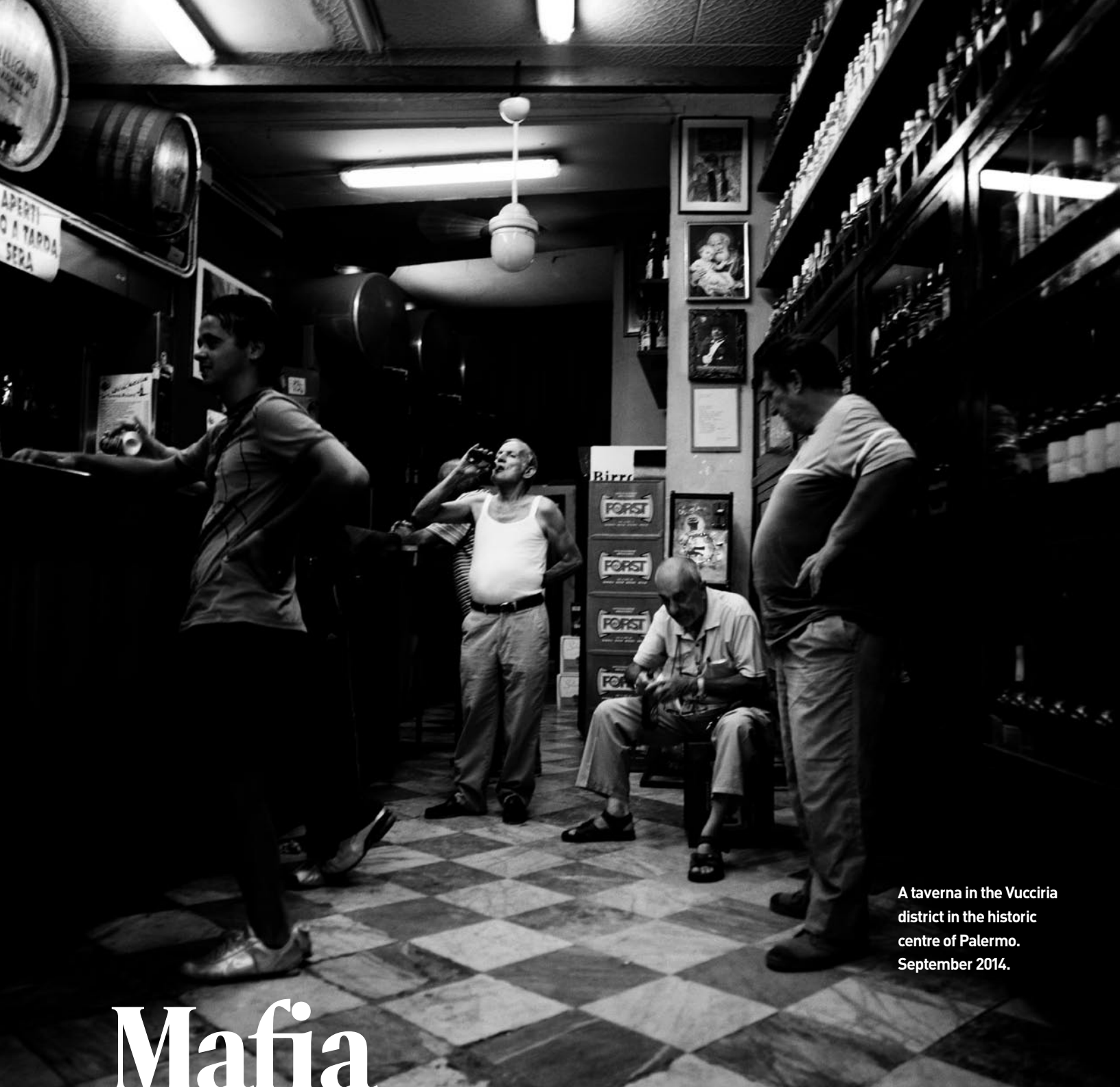
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A taverna in the Vucciria district in the historic centre of Palermo. September 2014.

Mafia country

Mimi Mollica goes home to Sicily, an island scarred by the legacy of the Cosa Nostra

In his new book, **Terra Nostra**, Sicilian-born photographer Mimi Mollica explores the disruptive effects of the mafia on his homeland, documenting the scars inflicted by the Cosa Nostra during its long, until fairly-recently unpoliced, reign of fear and corruption.

Mollica, who began shooting the photographs included in **Terra Nostra** in 2009, says his biggest challenge was to convey the legacy the criminal organisation imposed on the Sicilian people and on the land, the coastline of which is blighted by illegal speculative building. Here is a system based on extortion and the corruption of public



Capo, an historic street market in Palermo. March 2009.



A man waits at a vandalised bus stop. Palermo. March 2009.



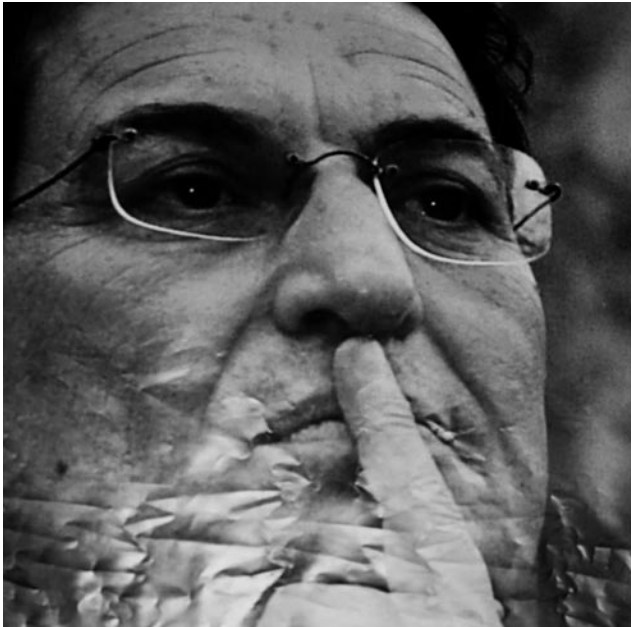
Uncollected refuse overflows into the main road in the Brancaccio district on the north-east outskirts of Palermo. September 2010.



Stray dogs in the Albergheria district in the historic centre of Palermo. September 2011.

In The Picture

Allimages © Mimi Mollica/Terra Nosta/www.dewilewis.com



An election poster depicting the former Mayor of Gela, Rosario Crocetta, now Governor of Sicily. Gela, June 2009.



A shop window riddled with bullets. It is believed that 90% of businesses in Palermo pay extortion money to the mob. May 2014.



Young boys play on a pile of old furniture stacked together to be burned later that day as part of the religious celebration in honour of San Giuseppe. March 17th 2016.



The Badalamenti Family chapel in Cinisi. Tano Badalamenti was the instigator of the murder of Peppino Impastato, a leftist anti-mafia activist who was brutally executed by Cosa Nostra killers. May 2014.

office, and an unsustainable economy that is still overseen by crime families.

In an accompanying essay, Sicilian judge, Roberto Scarpinato, who has been under police protection since 1989 due to his involvement in many high-profile mafia trials, tells of the defacement of the island by “mafioso real-estate developers, their accomplices and political protectors, corrupt public administrators and hordes of professionals willing to do anything to get rich.”

The damage caused by these predators, he adds, is apparent in Mollica’s photographs of the island’s “architectural cadavers, like the

vast, multi-storey building rising up behind the beach, metres from the shore.”

In an endnote, the Observer’s Sean O’Hagan, adds, “At first glance, Mollica’s Sicily resembles the blighted terrain of so many Mediterranean islands where mass tourism and thoughtless development have disfigured the natural landscape. As the visual narrative progresses, though, something deeper and more disturbing emerges. This is a place where everything new – hotels, houses, roads, resorts – seems either unfinished or constructed without a thought for the surrounding environment.” **CT**



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The Good Americans

Following orders, worshipping anyone wearing a uniform or a Giorgio Armani suit, the public is preparing for a coup it won't see coming, writes **CJ Hopkins**

Good Americans, as a general rule, are not overly concerned with what actually happened. Or what is actually happening now. Or at least they're not too concerned with the details

The Pink Revolution of 2017, better known as Russiagate, is now more or less a fait accompli. Whether the corporatist ruling classes and their servants in Congress formally impeach him or force him to resign in disgrace, Donald J. Trump is being regime-changed, or at the very least effectively neutralised until he can be replaced with a grown-up, ie, someone who will serve their interests without getting the masses all riled up about “taking the government back from the elites,” putting “America first,” and, well, just generally making an ass of himself.

At this point, not even a war will save him. Even if he could somehow manage to convince the boys in the Pentagon to back an invasion of Iran, or Syria, or wherever, the corporate-owned press would crucify him, and you can't arbitrarily invade other countries without the support of the corporate media. No, the simple fact is, the Corporatocracy has decided to make an example of Trump, to remind folks who is really running things, and what happens when you attempt to defy them, and there's nothing Trump can do about it, other than rant and rave on Twitter.

The United States of America being a profoundly authoritarian society (whose citizens have been conditioned from childhood to follow orders, go through channels, submit to a host of humiliating rituals devised

by an ever-expanding range of government and private “security services,” and to worship leaders, police, soldiers, and, basically, anyone wearing a uniform, or a Giorgio Armani business suit), this ruling class soft coup is cause for celebration. Good Americans up and down both coasts are already dusting off their vuvuzelas. It isn't quite time to use them yet, but they want to be ready for the moment Trump waddles across the lawn of the White House, boards Marine One for the final time, and is flown away to exile in Florida, or to Leavenworth to be hanged for treason. At which point they, these Good Americans, will pour en masse onto Lafayette Square, hooting, hollering, and waving flags, as they did when Obama sent Seal Team Six to roust the former CIA asset, Osama bin Laden, out of bed, shoot him several times in the face, and then dump his body in the Indian Ocean, or whatever it was that actually happened.

Good Americans, as a general rule, are not overly concerned with what actually happened. Or what is actually happening now. Or at least they're not too concerned with the details. History, politics, economics, not to mention the inner workings of the media, are complicated subjects best left to experts. Good Americans trust such experts (not implicitly, they're not dupes, after all) to explain what happened, or what is happening, to them. They have no choice

but to trust these experts, and government officials, and the mainstream media, and the general consensus among the members of their privileged socioeconomic circles, as they do not have the time or the energy to go digging through reams of declassified documents, or to check the facts of the stories that appear in the New York Times or the Washington Post, or on their National Public Radio affiliate, or to read a book about history or politics, or the dissemination of propaganda, written by someone who isn't parroting the official narrative of the ruling classes.

What with all the demands of work, family, Facebook, Twitter, yoga, shopping, keeping up-to-date with the latest dining trends, not to mention the new season of House of Cards, there simply aren't enough hours in the day to scrutinise everything their leaders are doing, or the "information" the media is feeding them.

This does not make these Good Americans accomplices to any alleged atrocities perpetrated by their elected government. The United States isn't Nazi Germany. OK, sure, we wiped out the Native Americans (and sadistically named some of our sports teams after them), but that was hundreds of years ago. The same goes for slavery . . . ancient history. And, alright, so the United States, and the indigenous death squads we have trained and funded, have murdered millions of men, women, and children in places like Indochina, Indonesia, Central America, South America, and the Middle East, and we've bombed and invaded a long list of countries that posed no threat to whatsoever purely to advance the interests of the corporations that own the government, and their ongoing quest for global hegemony . . . still, it's not like Nazi Germany, where people went blithely on with their lives, pretending they had no idea what was happening.

No, these Good Americans, who at the moment are shrieking for Donald Trump's head on a pike because the CIA and the cor-

porate-owned media told them he's a Russian operative, or that the Russians somehow "hacked" the election, are not at all like the Germans back then. Parroting the mindless propaganda pumped out by a global network of corporate media that Joseph Goebbels would have given Hitler's other nut to control, and otherwise collaborating with the intelligence agencies, financial elites, and other deep state players intent on making an example of Trump, is . . . OK, admittedly, pretty pathetic, but it's not like looking the other way while your government methodically kills the Jews. On top of which, Trump really is a bad guy, and Good Americans traditionally support, or at least don't raise a major fuss about, the summary removal of government leaders the mainstream media tells them are bad guys.

Coincidentally, a lot of these bad guys, in addition to being hideously evil, have been, circa the time of their removal, interfering with the vital interests of the corporations that own our government. Bashar al-Assad, Muammar Gaddafi, and Saddam Hussein are the most recent examples, but we've been doing this since the late 1940s. A partial list of CIA ops, including assassinations, torture, election rigging, coups, and so on, stretching back to the post-WWII period, when we re-installed fascists in Greece and Italy and smuggled Nazis like Reinhard Gehlen, Klaus Barbie (aka "the Butcher of Lyon"), and Eichmann's good buddy, Otto von Bolschwing to America to help defeat "the Communists," is available for perusal online, and in any number of books and articles. It's not like this stuff is secret or anything.

But whatever . . . no government is perfect, right? And Good Americans are grown-ups, after all. So they understand that all that crap about democracy is important to teach the children, and to put on the masthead of your newspaper, or whatever, but the real world doesn't work like that. In the real world, where the Good Americans live, safely insulated from the

Good Americans are grown-ups, after all. So they understand that all that crap about democracy is important to teach the children, and to put on the masthead of your newspaper, or whatever, but the real world doesn't work like that

Accomplices Of Power

Please join the Good Americans as they do their part to help the corporatist establishment make an example of this monster (whose evil outstrips that of Hitler, and Pol Pot, and Stalin, and, well, pick your monster)

abject poverty they are not in any way responsible for, sometimes you have to hire a few Nazis, or support a couple of fascist regimes, or sell a few boatloads of arms to the Saudis, despite the fact that they're a brutal theocracy and the primary sponsors of the terrorism we claim to be bombing the Middle East to stop, or bankrupt a few hundred thousand Americans to bail out your pals at the Wall Street banks that bled them dry with their Ponzi scheme, or support an apartheid state like Israel, or sell Americans some convoluted corporate-friendly healthcare plan as if it were somehow completely impossible to provide a universal healthcare system like every other developed country, or lead the world in mass incarceration, primarily of the lower classes, who are already mass incarcerated in ghettos patrolled by militarized police, which of course bears no resemblance at all to the ghettos in Nazi-occupied Europe, and is regrettably just a permanent feature of the grown-up reality the Good Americans are utterly powerless to ever change.

Alright, I know you're probably thinking that sounds a lot like the rationalisations the Good Germans used to excuse themselves for not resisting the horrors of the Nazis, but it isn't the same kind of thing at all. The Good Americans are resisting . . . they're resisting Trump, who, after all, is the one responsible for all that stuff, all those wars of aggression, the CIA coups, the torture, the death squads, the ghettos, etcetera . . . our entire 72-year history as enforcer of global capitalist empire and all the incalculable human suffering and irreparable dam-

.. age to the planet it has caused . . . all that is somehow the doing of Trump and his puppet-master, Vladimir Putin. Or at least it's not Obama's fault, or the fault of any of his Democrat predecessors, those champions of the poor and downtrodden who never need to be resisted.

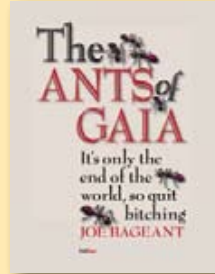
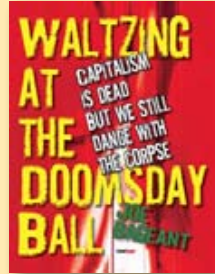
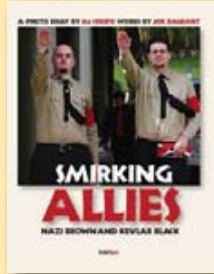
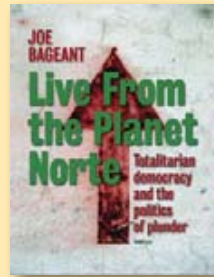
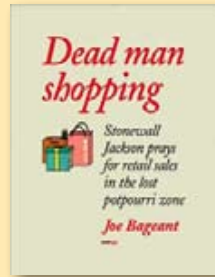
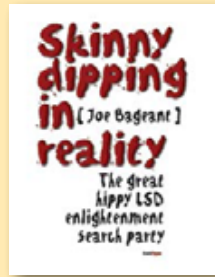
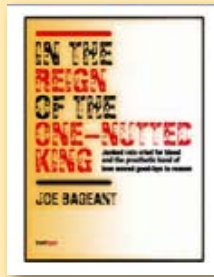
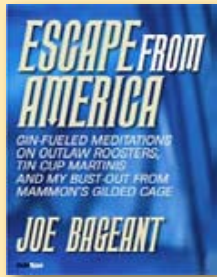
So please join the Good Americans as they do their part to help the corporatist establishment make an example of this monster (whose evil outstrips that of Hitler, and Pol Pot, and Stalin, and, well, pick your monster) and discourage any future billionaire ass hats from screwing with their simulation of democracy.

They'll be staging huge rallies all around the country to whip up support for the Pink Revolution, and possibly even all-out Blitzkrieg against our bestial Slavic enemies before they "influence" another election, or hack another rural power grid. They're calling it the "March for Truth." It's a totally grassroots volunteer effort that has absolutely nothing to do with David Brock, Peter Daou, or Shareblue, or the Democratic Party, or any of its neoliberal backers. This one probably won't quite match the Nuremberg rallies for flat-out hysteria, but give the ruling classes some time . . . "Resistance Summer" is just getting started. **CT**

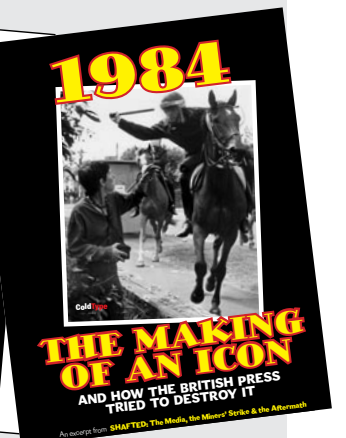
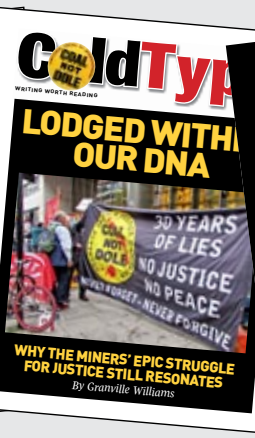
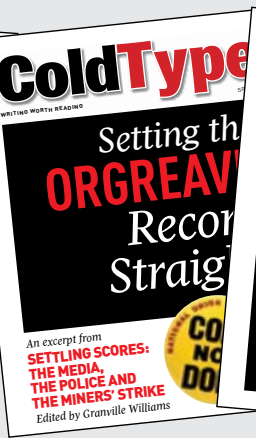
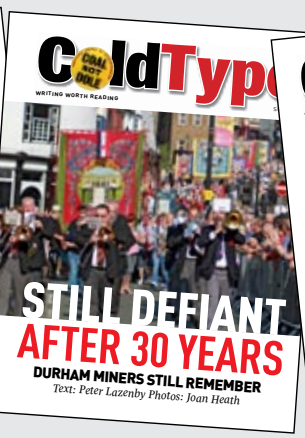
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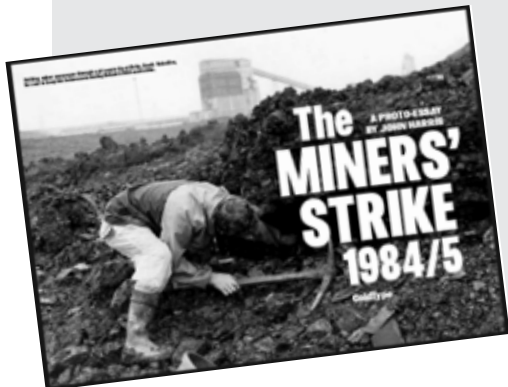
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Beating the drums of war. Again!

Nixon went to China; will Trump ever go to Tehran? Don't hold your breath, writes **Danny Sjursen**, as he ponders the irrationality of the West's vilification of Iran

The truth is that Iran is simply not behind most of the turmoil in the Middle East, and until Washington's policymakers change their all-Iran-all-the-time mental model, they are doomed to failure

“Everywhere you look, if there is trouble in the region,” Secretary of Defense James Mattis told reporters on a mid-April visit to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, “you find Iran.”

I must admit that when I stumbled across that quote it brought up uncomfortable personal memories.

East Baghdad, January 25, 2007: my patrol had missed a turn and so we swung onto the next grimy avenue instead. As platoon leader, I rode shotgun in the second of our four vehicles, yakking away on the radio. The ensuing explosion rocked the senses: the sound, the blinding dust, and the smell – a mix of burnt metal and, well. . . I still can't bring myself to describe it.

Our lead Humvee, a military utility vehicle, aimlessly swerved right and came to rest beside a telephone pole. Only then did the screams begin.

The “cost” would be two wounded and two dead: my then-unborn son's namesakes, Specialist Michael Balsley and Sergeant Alexander Fuller. These were our first, but not last, fatalities. Nothing was ever the same again. I'm reminded of poet Dylan Thomas's line: “After the first death, there is no other.”

The local militia had shredded our truck with an advanced type of improvised explosive device that was then just hitting the

streets of Baghdad – an explosively formed projectile, or EFP. These would ultimately kill hundreds of American troops. Those EFPs and the requisite training to use them were provided to Iraqi militias by the Islamic Republic of Iran. It's a detail I'm not likely to forget.

Still, there's one major problem with bold, sweeping pronouncements (laced with one's own prejudices) of the sort Secretary of Defense Mattis recently offered on Iran: they're almost always wrong. It's the essential flaw of “lumping” – that is, of folding countless events or ideas into one grand theory. But, boy, does it sound profound! The truth is that Iran is simply not behind most of the turmoil in the Middle East, and until Washington's policymakers change their all-Iran-all-the-time mental model, they are doomed to failure. One thing is guaranteed: they are going to misdiagnose the patient and attack the wrong disease.

Look, I'm emotionally invested myself. After all, I fought Iranian-trained militiamen, but a serious, workable national strategy shouldn't rely on such emotion. It demands a detached, rational calculus. With that in mind, perhaps this is the moment – before the misdiagnosis sets in further – to take a fresh look at the nature of America's thorny relationship with Iran and the Islamic Republic's true place in the pantheon of American problems in the Greater Middle East.

Let's start this way: How many Americans even realise that there are only three countries in the world with which their country has no ongoing diplomatic relations at all? Actually, the number was four until the Obama administration began slowly normalising bilateral ties with one long-time member of the naughty list: Cuba. How many could name the three remaining states on that roll of shame? The first and easiest to guess is surely North Korea; the most obscure is Bhutan (the "Switzerland of the Himalayas"). And, yes, of course, last but by no means least is the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Think of all the scoundrels not on that list: Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe; our Pakistani "frenemy"; Vladimir Putin's Russia; Equatorial Guinea with its craven, 40-year dictator, accused of cannibalism; and, until 2012, Bashar al-Assad's grim Syrian regime. Throughout the Cold War, the US kept an embassy in the Soviet Union and it similarly maintained formal relations with apartheid South Africa. As of 2014, the State Department officially dealt with nine-tenths of the globe's most abusive regimes, according to the Human Rights Risk Atlas.

So, is the secretary of defense correct? Is Iran really behind all regional trouble in the Greater Middle East?

Hardly. In fact, such an assertion – and the language of absolutes that goes with it – is by definition problematic. In a Washington filled with Iranophobes, the demonisation of that country is already a commonplace of everyday political chatter and it almost invariably rests on three inflated assumptions about Iran's menacing nature: that it is on an eternal quest to develop and perhaps employ nuclear weapons (especially against Israel); that it massively supports regional "terrorists" and their proxies; and that it regularly exhibits an unquenchable desire to establish its regional hegemony by force of arms. All three suppositions rest on another faulty assumption: that Iran has a straightforwardly dictatorial system of fun-

damentalism led by irrational "mad mullahs."

Let's consider each of these propositions.

The Iran exaggeration

Close your eyes for a moment and imagine a Middle Eastern country – no, not Israel – but one with a sizeable, protected Jewish community, a place where Islam is the state religion but its president regularly tweets Rosh Hashanah greetings for the Jewish New Year.

Sounds like somebody's wild fantasy, but it's actually Iran. In fact, the Islamic Republic sets aside one mandatory seat in its parliament for a Jew, three for Christians, and another for a Zoroastrian. It would be a mistake to conclude from such token gestures that Iran is a paragon of tolerance. But they do speak to the complexity of a diverse society full of paradox and contradiction.

It certainly is a land in which hardline fundamentalists chant "Death to America!" It's also a country with an increasingly young, educated populace that holds remarkably positive views of Americans. In fact, whatever you might imagine, Americans tend to have significantly more negative views of Iran than vice versa. Don't be shocked, but Iranians hold more positive views of the US government than do the citizens of Washington's allies like Egypt, Jordan, and Turkey. In reality, there's long been a worrying paradox in the region: an inverse relationship between the amiability of a government's relationship with Washington and the favourability ratings of this country among its people.

In other words, when it comes to Iran . . . well, it's complicated. The trouble is that Americans generally don't do nuance. We like our bad guys to be foreign and unmistakably vile, even if such a preference for digestible simplicity makes for poor policy.

If you want to grasp this point more fully, just think about Secretary of Defense Mattis's recent statement again. He assures that

The Islamic Republic sets aside one mandatory seat in its parliament for a Jew, three for Christians, and another for a Zoroastrian

Still The Enemy?

The Lebanon-based Hezbollah, for example, is largely fixated on Israel, but has sometimes even fought ISIS in Lebanon and Syria. In other words, Hezbollah, though it had previously attacked US troops in the region, isn't sending its operatives to crash planes into American buildings

Iran's shadow hovers over every regional crisis in the Middle East, which is empirically false. Here, for instance, are just a few recent conflicts that Iran is not behind or where its role has been exaggerated:

- The Arab Spring and the subsequent chaos in Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt. Iran didn't start or significantly influence the uprisings in those countries.

- Turkey's decades-long war with separatist Kurds in its southeast provinces. Again, not Iran.

- The ongoing spread of al-Qaeda affiliates in Syria and on the Arabian Peninsula. Iran actually abhors such groups, and certainly wasn't behind their rise.

- Or, if you want, take Yemen, since supposed Iranian meddling in the Middle East's poorest state happens to be one of the favourite drums Washington's Iranophobic hawks like to beat. And yet a range of credible reports suggest that the much-decried collusion between Iran and the Houthis rebels, who are the focus of the Saudi war in that country, is highly exaggerated.

Look, Iran is a significant, if often thwarted and embattled, regional power and a player, sometimes even a destabilising one, in various regional conflagrations. It supports proxies, funds partner states, and sometimes intervenes in the region, even sending in its own military units (think Syria). Then again, so does Saudi Arabia (Yemen and, in funding terms, elsewhere), the United Arab Emirates (Yemen), Russia (Syria), and the United States (more or less everywhere). So who's destabilising whom and why almost invariably turns out to be a matter of perspective.

The State Department and various other government agencies regularly label Iran the world's leading "state sponsor of terrorism" – and that couldn't sound more menacing or impressively official and authoritative. Yet to tag Iran as #1 on any terror list is misleading indeed. The questions worth asking are: Which terrorists? What constitutes terrorism? Do those "terror" outfits

truly threaten the US homeland?

As a start, in 2016, the State Department's annual survey of worldwide terrorism labelled ISIS – not Iran, Hezbollah, or the Houthis – as "the greatest [terror] threat globally." How do we square that "greatest sponsor" stamp with an Iran that has proven both thoroughly hostile to and deeply invested in the fight against ISIS and various al-Qaeda-linked groups in Iraq and Syria?

Iran does support Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in the Palestinian territories. However, lumping regionally focused nationalist organisations like Hezbollah with genuine global jihadist groups like ISIS and al-Qaeda (in its proliferating forms) is deceptive, often purposely so. The Lebanon-based Hezbollah, for example, is largely fixated on Israel, but has sometimes even fought ISIS in Lebanon and Syria. In other words, Hezbollah, though it had previously attacked US troops in the region, isn't sending its operatives to crash planes into American buildings.

To think of it another way, more foreign ISIS volunteers hail from Belgium or the Maldives Islands than from Iran. In fact, most of the top sources of ISIS's foreign recruits (Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Jordan) turn out to be "friendly" American "partners." From 1975 to 2015, Iranian-born terrorists inflicted zero deaths in attacks on US soil. In contrast, citizens of key US allies – Saudis, Egyptians, and Lebanese – killed thousands on 9/11. In fact, since then, 85% of domestic terrorists turned out to be American citizens or permanent residents. Most were American-born. Of the 13 US citizens involved in such fatal terror attacks, none were Iranian-American.

As to the charge that Iran is by nature an aggressive power, there can be little question that the Islamic Republic aggressively pursues its regional interests. That, however, by no means makes its moves automatically antagonistic to Washington's interests in the region. If anything, as a Pentagon assessment concluded in 2014, its military

strategy is ultimately defensive in nature and based on a feeling of being threatened, which makes sense when you think about it. After all, when it comes to American power – from the 1953 CIA-British coup that overthrew Iran’s elected prime minister and installed the autocratic Shah to Washington’s support for Iraqi autocrat Saddam Hussein in his war of aggression against Tehran (1980-1988) to the present administration’s all-in support for the autocratic Saudis in an anti-Iranian partnership, they have legitimate reasons to feel threatened.

In addition, unlikely as it may seem to most Americans, on certain issues like a Taliban-free Afghanistan, the US and Iran actually have had converging, if complex, interests. Additionally, though Iran once promoted Iraqi Shiite militias that attacked and killed US troops (including my soldiers, Mike Balsley and Alex Fuller), today, both countries desire a relatively stable, ISIS-free Iraq. None of this is easy to swallow (least of all by me), but prudent strategy demands a dispassionate, rational assessment of inherently emotional issues. Unfortunately, when it comes to Iran, that’s hardly an American predilection at the moment.

The company we keep

In 1957, the US supplied a key regional leader with his first (“peaceful”) nuclear reactor, as well as the necessary scientific training for those who would run it and some weapons-grade uranium to power it. Then, in the 1970s, American experts began to fear that their partner might be seeking to develop nuclear weapons on his own. A few years later, revolutionaries overthrew him and inherited that American-originated programme. That leader was, of course, the man the Americans had installed as ruler of Iran in 1953, Reza Shah Pahlavi.

It always struck me as odd that Iran made the cut for the very exclusive membership in George W. Bush’s “axis of evil.” After all, unlike those 15 Saudi hijackers and perhaps even the Saudi government, it had no con-

nection to 9/11 and was “comprehensively helpful” in the initial takedown of the Afghan Taliban and the arrest of fleeing al-Qaeda fighters.

By contrast, consider just a few of Washington’s “partners” in the region:

● **Saudi Arabia:** this monarchy enforces a strict brand of conservative Wahhabi Islam not so terribly different from the basic theology of ISIS. The Saudi government publicly executes an average of 73 people per year, including juveniles and the mentally ill. Beheading is the favoured technique. (Sound familiar?) Nor are all the victims convicted murderers. According to a 2015 Amnesty International report, “Non-lethal crimes including adultery, robbery, apostasy, drug-related offenses, rape, ‘witchcraft,’ and ‘sorcery’ are punishable by death.” In addition to its citizens carrying out the 9/11 attacks, Saudi Arabia supported a branch of al-Qaeda (Jabhat al-Nusra) in the Syrian conflict. Furthermore, its ongoing US-backed air strikes against Yemen’s Houthi rebels have been killing numerous civilians and may have helped to cause and further intensify a disastrous famine. The US response: a record-breaking \$110-billion arms deal for the Saudis.

● **Egypt:** In the wake of a 2013 coup d’état led by General Abdel Fatah al-Sisi against an elected government, that country’s military gunned down hundreds of demonstrators. Since then, its strongman has used “mass, arbitrary arrests,” tortured detainees, and conducted “extrajudicial executions” – all in the interest of retaining power. The US response: \$1.4-billion in (mostly military) foreign assistance in fiscal 2017. To top it off, President Trump recently invited Sisi to the White House, lauded the dictator’s “fantastic job in a very difficult situation,” and is planning a future visit to Egypt.

● **Turkey:** this formal ally boasts NATO’s second largest military and hosts an important US airbase. Unfortunately, Turkey is increasingly unstable thanks to a recent coup attempt, its ongoing war with Kurdish sepa-

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Still The Enemy?

Current policy is counterproductive in so many ways, while Washington's never-ending bellicosity and threats to "rip up" the nuclear agreement only undercut Iran's moderates and the eminently sensible President Hassan Rouhani

ratists, and an escalating intervention in Syria's civil war. Worse yet, after relaunching an internal war against Kurdish rebels, its president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, has taken the country into distinctly autocratic terrain in the wake of a narrow victory in a referendum that does away with the office of prime minister and further centralizes executive power in his hands. Turkey's deteriorating human rights record includes the pre-trial detention of more than 40,000 coup "suspects," the summary dismissal of 90,000 civil servants, the shuttering of hundreds of offices of nongovernmental organisations and media outlets, and the imposition of a 24-hour curfew in the predominantly Kurdish southeastern part of the country. The US response: \$3.8-million in direct (military) assistance in fiscal 2017, and promises to continue arms sales which topped \$2.3 billion last year.

This motley crew has one thing in common – they're no angels.

"Rip It Up"

Iran hawks live on both sides of the political aisle. In 2015, for example, Hillary Clinton told an audience at Dartmouth College that Iran represents "an existential threat to Israel." Though she expressed tacit support for Obama's then-pending nuclear deal – the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA – she added that "even if we do get such a deal, we will still have major problems . . . [Iran is] the world's chief sponsor of terrorism."

When it comes to real rancour toward Iran, however, you have to look to the right. Senator John McCain, for instance, immediately cried foul about the JCPOA, calling it a "bad deal" likely to "nuclearise" the Middle East. More colloquially, as both a candidate and as president-elect, Donald Trump repeatedly vowed to "rip it up," while former governor and presidential hopeful Mike Huckabee accused President Obama of "marching the Israelis to the door of the oven."

Despite the bellicose rhetoric, intelligence

and congressional testimony indicate that Iran is complying with the JCPOA. Former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs General Martin Dempsey – not exactly a dove – believed that the deal reduced the risk of Iran weaponising its nuclear power. All the appeals from the president, various pundits, neocons of every sort, and congressional hawks to withdraw from it also neglect an obvious reality: the JCPOA is a multilateral deal and none of our partners (Russia, China, Great Britain, France, and Germany) will support "tearing up" the agreement. Imagine the optics of a future American unilateral abrogation of an agreement Iran is complying with: the onus will be on Washington alone; its allies will continue to abide by the deal and, with genuine justification, Iran's leaders will be able to depict the Americans as destabilising "cowboys."

Here's the reality of the present situation: despite decades of sanctions and the military containment of Iran, the US has not significantly affected its policies or stance in the region. Few in Washington display the courage to ask the crucial question: Why continue? Why not a creative new approach – the gradual normalisation of relations?

Though you wouldn't know it, given the prominence of Iranophobes in Washington, the US has little to lose. Current policy is counterproductive in so many ways, while Washington's never-ending bellicosity and threats to "rip up" the nuclear agreement only undercut Iran's moderates and the eminently sensible President Hassan Rouhani, who recently won a smashing electoral victory against a hardline, fundamentalist opponent in which a stunning 73% of Iranian voters cast ballots. Why not make it more, not ever less, difficult for Iran's conservatives to vilify the US?

Forty Years of Failure

There's an uncomfortable truth that Washington needs to face: US policy toward Iran hasn't achieved its goals despite almost four decades of effort since an American-

installed autocrat was overthrown there in 1979. Foreign policy hawks – Democrats and Republicans alike – will undoubtedly fight that reality tooth-and-nail, but as with the Cuban embargo, Iranian isolation has long outworn any imagined usefulness. That ostracising Iran remains fashionable reflects domestic political calculus or phobic thinking, not cogent strategy, and yet our new president just travelled to Saudi Arabia, a truly autocratic country, and in the wake of an Iranian election that was by all accounts resoundingly democratic, denounced that land as despotic and all but called for regime change.

So here's a question that, believe it or not, is okay to ask and is not actually tantamount to treason: What exactly does Iran want and fear? It wants international legitimacy, security, and a reasonable degree of regional power (not world domination). It fears continued isolation, any coalition of hostile Sunni Arab nations led by Saudi Arabia (assisted by Israel), and US-sponsored attempts at regime change. If you think that makes the Iranians sound paranoid, just check out the recent celebratory get-together in Saudi Arabia or remember how, just before the Bush administration's 2003 invasion of Iraq, Newsweek quoted a senior British official summing up the situation in Washington this way: "Everyone wants to go to Baghdad. Real men want to go to Tehran."

In sum, US policy in the Middle East is confused, contradictory, counterproductive, and dangerous. It could leave Washington involved in a war with Iran. (And given our recent wars in the region, imagine where that's likely to land us.)

The US doesn't require more enemies. Its hands are already full enough without additional faux "existential" threats or, as John Quincy Adams warned so long ago, eternally going "abroad seeking monsters to destroy."

Oddly enough, the Trump administration has a unique opportunity to normalise relations with Iran. While President Obama's modest overtures toward that country were greeted with scathing partisan scorn, President Trump might just be able to garner enough Republican support to do so much more, were he ever to try. At the moment, he clearly possesses no such plans, and yet, as only Nixon could go to China, perhaps only Trump can go to Tehran!

My small bit of advice, however: don't hold your breath . . .

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