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ISSUE 222

# ColdType

WRITING WORTH READING ■ PHOTOS WORTH SEEING

May 2021



## CHASING THE DREAM OF FREEDOM

**Jacob Ehrbahn** spent five years chronicling the lives of desperate people fleeing from war, political suppression, and poverty. He met them in the Mediterranean, in refugee camps, under motorway bridges, in run-down factories, and at border crossings, where they live in inhumane conditions

**SIX PAGES OF PHOTOGRAPHS – PAGES 14-19**



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TOM ENGELHARDT

# War is peace. Peace is war

Living through an American-style war 'til the end of time

**H**ere's the strange thing in an ever-stranger world: I was born in July 1944 in the midst of a devastating world war. That war ended in August 1945 with the atomic obliteration of two Japanese cities, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, by the most devastating bombs in history up to that moment, given the sweet code names "Little Boy" and "Fat Man".

I was the littlest of boys at the time. More than three-quarters of a century has passed since, on September 2, 1945, Japanese Foreign Minister Mamoru Shigemitsu and General Yoshijiro Umezu signed the Instrument of Surrender on the battleship USS. Missouri in Tokyo Bay, officially ending World War II. That was V-J (for Victory over Japan) Day, but in a sense for me, my whole generation, and this country, war never really ended.

The United States has been at war, or at least in armed conflicts of various sorts, often in distant lands, for more or less my entire life. Yes, for some of those years, that war was "cold" (which often meant that such carnage, regularly sponsored by the CIA, happened largely off-screen and out of sight), but war as a way of life never really ended, not to this very moment.

In fact, as the decades went by, it would become the "infrastructure" in

which Americans increasingly invested their tax dollars via aircraft carriers, trillion-dollar jet fighters, drones armed with Hellfire missiles, and the creation and maintenance of hundreds of military garrisons around the globe, rather than roads, bridges, or rail lines (no less the high-speed version of the same) here at home. During those same years, the Pentagon budget would grab an ever-larger percentage of federal discretionary spending and the full-scale annual investment in what has come to be known as the national security state would rise to a staggering \$1.2 trillion or more.

In a sense, future V-J Days became inconceivable. There were no longer moments, even as wars ended, when some version of peace might descend and America's vast military contingents could, as at the end of World War II, be significantly demobilised. The closest equivalent was undoubtedly the moment when the Soviet Union imploded in 1991, the Cold War officially ended, and the Washington establishment declared itself globally triumphant. But of course, the promised "peace dividend" would never be paid out as the first Gulf War with Iraq occurred that very year and the serious downsizing of the US military (and the CIA) never happened.

**C**onsider it typical that, when President Biden recently announced

the official ending of the nearly 20-year-old American conflict in Afghanistan with the withdrawal of the last US troops from that country by 9/11/21, it would functionally be paired with the news that the Pentagon budget was about to rise yet again from its record heights in the Trump years. "Only in America", as retired Air Force lieutenant colonel and historian William Astore wrote recently, "do wars end and war budgets go up".

Of course, even the ending of that never-ending Afghan War may prove exaggerated. In fact, let's consider Afghanistan apart from the rest of this country's war-making history for a moment. After all, if I had told you in 1978 that, of the 42 years to follow, the US would be involved in war in a single country for 30 of them and asked you to identify it, I can guarantee that Afghanistan wouldn't have been your pick. And yet so it's been. From 1979 to 1989, there was the CIA-backed Islamist extremist war against the Soviet army there (to the tune of billions and billions of dollars). And yet the obvious lesson the Russians learned from that adventure, as their military limped home in defeat and the Soviet Union imploded not long after – that Afghanistan is indeed the "graveyard of empires" – clearly had no impact in Washington.

Or how do you explain the 19-plus years of warfare there that followed the



HELL, NO!: Anti-Vietnam War demonstration in Chicago as the city was preparing to host the 1968 Democratic National Convention.

9/11 attacks, themselves committed by a small Islamist outfit, al-Qaeda, born as an American ally in that first Afghan War? Only recently, the invaluable Costs of War Project estimated that America's second Afghan War has cost this country almost \$2.3-trillion (not including the price of lifetime care for its vets) and has left at least 241,000 people dead, including 2,442 American service members. In 1978, after the disaster of the Vietnam War, had I assured you that such a never-ending failure of a conflict was in our future, you would undoubtedly have laughed in my face.

And yet, three decades later, the US military high command still seems not faintly to have grasped the lesson that we “taught” the Russians and then experienced ourselves. As a result, according to recent reports, they have uniformly

opposed President Biden's decision to withdraw all American troops from that country by the 20th anniversary of 9/11. In fact, it's not even clear that, by September 11, 2021, if the president's proposal goes according to plan, that war will have truly ended. After all, the same military commanders and intelligence chiefs seem intent on organising long-distance versions of that conflict or, as the *New York Times* put it, are determined to “fight from afar” there. They are evidently even considering establishing new bases in neighbouring lands to do so.

America's “forever wars” – once known as the Global War on Terror and, when the administration of George W. Bush launched it, proudly aimed at 60 countries – do seem to be slowly winding down. Unfortunately, other kinds of

potential wars, especially new cold wars with China and Russia (involving new kinds of high-tech weaponry) only seem to be gearing up.

In these years, one key to so much of this is the fact that, as the Vietnam War began winding down in 1973, the draft was ended and war itself became a “voluntary” activity for Americans. In other words, it became ever easier not only to not protest American war-making, but to pay no attention to it or to the changing military that went with it. And that military was indeed altering and growing in remarkable ways.

In the years that followed, for instance, the elite Green Berets of the



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Vietnam era would be incorporated into an ever more expansive set of Special Operations forces, up to 70,000 of them (larger, that is, than the armed forces of many countries). Those special operators would functionally become a second, more secretive American military embedded inside the larger force and largely freed from citizen oversight of any sort. In 2020, as Nick Turse reported, they would be stationed in a staggering 154 countries around the planet, often involved in semi-secret conflicts “in the shadows” that Americans would pay remarkably little attention to.

Since the Vietnam War, which roiled the politics of this nation and was protested in the streets of this country by an antiwar movement that came to include significant numbers of active-duty soldiers and veterans, war has played a remarkably recessive role in American life. Yes, there have been the endless thank-yous offered by citizens and corporations to “the troops.” But that’s where the attentiveness stops, while both political parties, year after endless year, remain remarkably supportive of a growing Pentagon budget and the industrial (that is, weapons-making) part of the military-industrial complex. War, American-style, may be forever, but – despite, for instance, the militarisation of this country’s police and the way in which those wars came home to the Capitol last January 6th – it remains a remarkably distant reality for most Americans.

One explanation: though the US has, as I’ve said, been functionally at war since 1941, there were just two times when this country felt war directly – on December 7, 1941, when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, and on September 11, 2001, when 19 mostly Saudi hijackers in commercial jets struck New York’s World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

And yet, in another sense, war has been and remains us. Let’s just consider some of that war-making for a moment. If you’re of a certain age, you can certainly call to mind the big wars: Korea

## Since the Vietnam War, which roiled the politics of this nation, war has played a remarkably recessive role in American life

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(1950-1953), Vietnam (1954-1975) – and don’t forget the brutal bloodlettings in neighbouring Laos and Cambodia as well – that first Gulf War of 1991, and the disastrous second one, the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Then, of course, there was that Global War on Terror that began soon after September 11, 2001, with the invasion of Afghanistan, only to spread to much of the rest of the Greater Middle East, and to significant parts of Africa. In March, for instance, the first 12 American special-ops trainers arrived in embattled Mozambique, just one more small extension of an already widespread American anti-Islamist terror role (now failing) across much of that continent.

And then, of course, there were the smaller conflicts (though not necessarily so to the people in the countries involved) that we’ve now generally forgotten about, the ones that I had to search my fading brain to recall. I mean, who today thinks much about President John F. Kennedy’s April 1961 CIA disaster at the Bay of Pigs in Cuba; or President Lyndon Johnson’s sending of 22,000 US troops to the Dominican Republic in 1965 to “restore order”; or President Ronald Reagan’s version of “aggressive self-defense” by US Marines sent to Lebanon who, in October 1983, were attacked in their barracks by a suicide bomber, killing 241 of them; or the anti-Cuban invasion of the tiny Caribbean island of Grenada that same month in which

19 Americans were killed and 116 wounded?

And then, define and categorise them as you will, there were the CIA’s endless militarised attempts (sometimes with the help of the US military) to intervene in the affairs of other countries, ranging from taking the nationalist side against Mao Zedong’s communist forces in China from 1945 to 1949 to stoking a small ongoing conflict in Tibet in the 1950s and early 1960s, and overthrowing the governments of Guatemala and Iran, among other places. There were an estimated 72 such interventions from 1947 to 1989, many warlike in nature. There were, for instance, the proxy conflicts in Central America, first in Nicaragua against the Sandinistas and then in El Salvador, bloody events even if few US soldiers or CIA agents died in them. No, these were hardly “wars”, as traditionally defined, not all of them, though they did sometimes involve military coups and the like, but they were generally carnage-producing in the countries they were in. And that only begins to suggest the range of this country’s militarised interventions in the post-1945 era, as journalist William Blum’s “A Brief History of Interventions” makes all too clear.

Whenever you look for the equivalent of a warless American moment, some reality trips you up. For instance, perhaps you had in mind the brief period between when the Red Army limped home in defeat from Afghanistan in 1989 and the implosion of the Soviet Union in 1991, that moment when Washington politicians, initially shocked that the Cold War had ended so unexpectedly, declared themselves triumphant on Planet Earth. That brief period might almost have passed for “peace,” American-style, if the US military under President George H. W. Bush hadn’t, in fact, invaded Panama (“Operation Just Cause”) as 1989 ended to get rid of its autocratic leader Manuel Noriega (a former CIA asset, by the way). Up to 3,000 Panamanians (including many civilians)

died along with 23 American troops in that episode.

And then, of course, in January 1991 the First Gulf War began. It would result in perhaps 8,000 to 10,000 Iraqi deaths and “only” a few hundred deaths among the US-led coalition of forces. Air strikes against Iraq would follow in the years to come. And let’s not forget that even Europe wasn’t exempt since, in 1999, during the presidency of Bill Clinton, the US Air Force launched a destructive 10-week bombing campaign against the Serbs in the former Yugoslavia.

And all of this remains a distinctly incomplete list, especially in this century when something like 200,000 US troops have regularly been stationed abroad and US Special Operations forces have deployed to staggering numbers of countries, while American drones regularly attacked “terrorists” in nation after nation and American presidents quite literally became assassins-in-chief. To this day, what scholar and former CIA consultant Chalmers Johnson called an American “empire of bases” – a historically unprecedented 800 or more of them – across much of the planet remains untouched and, at any moment, there could be more to come from the country whose military budget at least equals those of

## The last three-quarters of this somewhat truncated post-World War II American Century has, in effect, been a timeline of carnage

the next 10 (yes, that’s 10!) countries combined, including China and Russia.

The last three-quarters of this somewhat truncated post-World War II American Century has, in effect, been a timeline of carnage, though few in this country would notice or acknowledge that. After all, since 1945, Americans have only once been “at war” at home, when almost 3,000 civilians died in an attack meant to provoke – well, something like the war on terror that also become a war of terror and a spreader of terror movements in our world.

As journalist William Arkin recently argued, the US has created a permanent war state meant to facilitate “endless

war”. As he writes, at this very moment, our nation “is killing or bombing in perhaps 10 different countries”, possibly more, and there’s nothing remarkably out of the ordinary about that in our recent past.

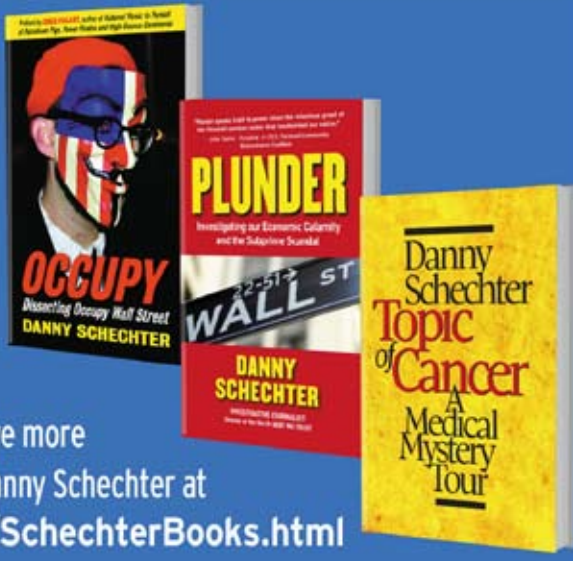
The question that Americans seldom even think to ask is this: What if the US were to begin to dismantle its empire of bases, repurpose so many of those militarised taxpayer dollars to our domestic needs, abandon this country’s focus on permanent war, and forsake the Pentagon as our holy church? What if, even briefly, the wars, conflicts, plots, killings, drone assassinations, all of it stopped?

What would our world actually be like if you simply declared peace and came home?

**CT**

*Tom Engelhardt created and runs the website TomDispatch.com. He is also a co-founder of the American Empire Project and the author of a highly praised history of American triumphalism in the Cold War, *The End of Victory Culture*. A fellow of the Type Media Center, his sixth and latest book is *A Nation Unmade by War*. This essay was first published at [www.tomdispatch.com](http://www.tomdispatch.com)*

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JOE ALLEN

# Looking for God in the monkey forest

Simians show us our place in Nature's hierarchy. You'll know you've attained Enlightenment when you start tossing the turds back at them

Humans look down their noses at other primates, as if monkeys were our playthings. We shoot them into space, tinker with their genomes, make them ride tricycles in the circus, and in some locales, people hunt and eat them. Chimpanzees are said to be particularly tasty. When the first monkey cyborg learns to use a ray gun, we'd better hope she doesn't look down her haughty snout at us.

With just a bit of self-reflection, it should be obvious that monkeys and apes are deserving of dignity and respect, if only because they're so similar to us. That's a narcissistic rationale, certainly, but what more can you expect from a snobbish species like ours?

The key is exposure, though. If people want to understand our kinship to the monkeys, they have to spend a little time around them.

One of the more illuminating places I've ever visited is the Sacred Monkey Forest. It's located in the city of Ubud, on the Hindu island of Bali in Indonesia. It's a densely forested public park situated near the city centre, inhabited by almost a thousand macaques.

These monkeys group themselves

into seven tribes, each with its own distinct cultural flavour. Defection from one tribe to another is pretty common, as are skirmishes between them.

All things considered, it's not a bad life being a monkey. I watched them chase each other through the tropical trees, shrieking with glee. They fought over hunks of fruit, and groomed each other tenderly.

Watching their gestures and facial expressions, you can see how their experiences mirror our own. It would take an icy sociopath to deny they have souls.

A visit to the Monkey Forest reveals our place in the sprawling hierarchy of sentient beings. The monkeys are like us. We are like the monkeys. In a Hindu context, the monkeys are also like gods, as are all sentient beings. Therefore the gods are like monkeys, and it shows.

Balinese Hinduism has a unique worldview, synthesising traditional brahmanic theology with various indigenous ideas and iconography. One of its more compelling contributions is the concept of Tri Hita Karana – the “three ways to happiness”. This philosophy describes three harmonious relationships that must be maintained to thrive in our precarious world:

1. The relationship between hu-

mans and the gods.

2. The relationship between humans and their fellows.

3. The relationship between humans and the natural world.

Bali's tropical forests, growing from rich volcanic soil, obviously inspired the last item.

During my three-week stay on the island, I spent a lot of time in Hindu temples. For many days, I enjoyed a spirited conversation with a dreadlocked brahmin while staying at his family shrine. During our discussions, this priest returned again and again to “the Natural” as the hard and fast order of our world – the ultimate guide to behaviour.

For him, “the Natural” encompasses both human and animal life, as well as the divine order. In the Hindu conception, our souls have journeyed through many animal forms, including other primates. You see this expressed in the way Balinese Hindus – just like the devotees of Mother India – pay respect to our long-tailed cousins. That is, if they're not chasing them away with slingshots or wooden planks.

As with most places in Bali, the Monkey Forest is dotted with various Hindu shrines and temples. Their frescoes depict primates fighting lions, or humans, or each other. More than a few are of Hanuman,



the monkey god. In this image, he smashes a mountain. In that one, he leaps over the sea. In another, he kneels in prayer to Vishnu incarnate. For centuries, Hindu priests have kept incense burning before these idols.

One detailed statue, prominently placed in a paved square, depicts a goofy monkey stroking his massive dong with a wide grin on his face. Definitely a crowd-pleaser. For the Hindu artists who created these images, animal behaviour serves as a window into human nature, just as it does for anyone with eyes to see.

These crazy macaques do the damndest things. Every now and then, one would sneak up and steal a snack from some lady's purse. At one point, a male and a female started fucking on a bridge railing as pedestrians passed by. What surprised me was that they indulged multiple positions. If they were trying to impress us, they succeeded.

The little bastards can be mean as all hell, too. A few had nasty scars and crippled limbs. One afternoon I saw two males play tug-of-war with a baby monkey who screeched in fear and pain. When the larger male finally won, he simply discarded the baby, who ran to his mother and buried his tiny face in her bosom.

The most fascinating behaviour was the macaques' primitive grasp of tools. They exhibited their skills for us multiple times.

For instance, there was a sprinkler system in one part of the park. An older male was screwing around and accidentally flipped the lever, sending up a cold spray. You could tell it freaked him out.

He knew that he did it, too, and



FAMILY AFFAIR: The Sacred Monkey Forest at Ubud in Bali.

apparently felt the need to fix it. The little fellow brought various objects over – leaves, a piece of wood, a stone – and pressed them onto the blasting nozzle, trying to repair what he'd broken. The look on his face was a mix of intense concentration and confusion. There was a Pandoran metaphor in his visage as uncontrollable forces poured forth.

In another instance, a baby monkey gripped a large shard of broken glass and was scraping it against the sidewalk intently. He would scrape and scratch, then pause to look at his work. Eventually an adult female came over to take charge. She screeched at the baby and snatched the glass away from him.

The adult then sat down with the shard and began scraping the pavement herself. She would turn the shard over and over, studying its details, then attempt whatever she was trying to accomplish again.

Even if this was just an exploration of possibilities, it's clear that

humans share a need to experiment – to fiddle with “the Natural” – with our long-tailed relatives. If these furry monsters had the funding and political cover, they'd probably jab chips into our brains and make us play video games.

What is holy to the Hindu becomes a commodity to the Western visitor. Ubud was once a bohemian artist community. By late 2019, when I passed through, it had become a decadent wasteland of trendy coffee shops, hokey boutiques, and sidewalks teeming with Euros in yoga pants who tune in to the cosmos by way of mystic crystals and slime-green smoothies.

Even so, there's real value in a visit to the Sacred Monkey Forest, or any of its many cognates across the Hindu world – or any place that arboreal primates co-inhabit with their earthbound cousins. Each encounter is like an evolutionary family reunion.

We naked apes share a noble claudistic lineage with macaques. Their cognition mirrors our own, as do their grins and grimaces. Our base instincts are laid bare in their uninhibited interactions. These pink-faced critters are basically little people who aren't ashamed to throw turds at their enemies. Even the hardest man has to respect that.

Hindus believe that monkeys are holy for good reasons. We would do well to draw insight from their example. Both of them, I mean. **CT**

*Joe Allen writes about race, robots, and religion. Presently, he lives in the western shadow of the Rocky Mountains. Read his weekly newsletter at [www.JOEBOT.xyz](http://www.JOEBOT.xyz)*

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C.J. HOPKINS

# The Covidian Cult (Part II)

You need to understand the Six Conditions of Mind Control if you want to see how quickly we're heading along the path to global totalitarianism

**B**ack in October of 2020, I wrote an essay titled *The Covidian Cult* (see CT 215), in which I described the so-called “New Normal” as a global totalitarian ideological movement. Developments over the last six months have borne out the accuracy of that analogy.

A year after the initial roll-out of the utterly horrifying and completely fictional photos of people dropping dead in the streets, the projected 3.4 percent death rate, and all the rest of the official propaganda, despite the absence of any actual scientific evidence of an apocalyptic plague (and the abundance of evidence to the contrary), millions of people continue to behave like members of an enormous death cult, walking around in public with medical-looking masks, robotically repeating vacuous platitudes, torturing children, the elderly, the disabled, demanding that everyone submit to being injected with dangerous experimental “vaccines”, and just generally acting delusional and psychotic.

How did we ever get to this point ... to the point where, as I put it in *The Covidian Cult*, “instead of the cult existing as an island within the dominant culture, the cult has become the dominant culture, and those of us who have not joined the

cult have become the isolated islands within it?”

To understand this, one needs to understand how cults control the minds of their members, because totalitarian ideological movements operate more or less the same way, just on a much larger, societal scale. There is a wealth of research and knowledge on this subject (I mentioned Robert J. Lifton in my earlier essay), but, to keep things simple, I'll just use Margaret Singer's “Six Conditions of Mind Control” from her 1995 book, *Cults in Our Midst*, as a lens to view the Covidian Cult through. (The italics are Singer. The commentary is mine.)

## Six Conditions of Mind Control

*1. Keep the person unaware of what is going on and how she or he is being changed a step at a time. Potential new members are led, step by step, through a behavioural-change program without being aware of the final agenda or full content of the group.*

Looking back, it is easy to see how people were conditioned, step by step, to accept the “New Normal” ideology. They were bombarded with terrifying propaganda, locked down, stripped of their civil rights,

forced to wear medical-looking masks in public, to act out absurd “social-distancing” rituals, submit to constant “testing”, and all the rest of it. Anyone not complying with this behavioural-change program or challenging the veracity and rationality of the new ideology was demonised as a “conspiracy theorist,” a “Covid denier,” an “anti-vaxxer”, in essence, an enemy of the cult, like a “suppressive person” in the Church of Scientology.

*2. Control the person's social and/or physical environment; especially control the person's time.*

For over a year now, the “New Normal” authorities have controlled the social/physical environment, and how New Normals spend their time, with lockdowns, social-distancing rituals, closure of “non-essential” businesses, omnipresent propaganda, isolation of the elderly, travel restrictions, mandatory mask-rules, protest bans, and now the segregation of the “Unvaccinated”. Basically, society has been transformed into something resembling an infectious disease ward, or an enormous hospital from which there is no escape. You've seen the photos of the happy New Normals dining out at restaurants, relaxing at the beach, jogging, attending school, and so



on, going about their “normal” lives with their medical-looking masks and prophylactic face shields. What you’re looking at is the pathologisation of society, the pathologisation of everyday life, the physical (social) manifestation of a morbid obsession with disease and death.

### *3. Systematically create a sense of powerlessness in the person.*

What kind of person could feel more powerless than an obedient New Normal sitting at home, obsessively logging the “Covid death” count, sharing photos of his medical-looking mask and post-“vaccination” bandage on Facebook, as he waits for permission from the authorities to go outdoors, visit his family, kiss his lover, or shake hands with a col-

league? The fact that in the Covidian Cult the traditional charismatic cult leader has been replaced by a menagerie of medical experts and government officials does not change the utter dependency and abject powerlessness of its members, who have been reduced to a state approaching infancy. This abject powerlessness is not experienced as a negative; on the contrary, it is proudly celebrated. Thus the mantra-like repetition of the “New Normal” platitude “Trust the Science!” by people who, if you try to show them the science, melt down completely and start jabbering aggressive nonsense at you to shut you up.

*4. Manipulate a system of rewards, punishments and experiences in such a way as to inhibit behaviour*

*that reflects the person’s former social identity.*

The point here is the transformation of the formerly basically rational person into an entirely different cult-approved person, in our case, an obedient “New Normal” person. Singer gets into this in greater detail, but her discussion applies mostly to subcultural cults, not to large-scale totalitarian movements. For our purposes, we can fold this into Condition 5.

*5. Manipulate a system of rewards, punishments, and experiences in order to promote learning the group’s ideology or belief system and group-approved behaviours. Good behaviour, demonstrating an understanding and acceptance of the group’s beliefs, and compliance are rewarded, while questioning, expressing doubts or criticising are met with disapproval, redress and possible rejection. If one expresses a question, they are made to feel that there is something inherently wrong with them to be questioning.*

OK, I’m going to tell you a little story. It’s a story about a personal experience, which you may also have also experienced. It’s a story about a certain New Normal who has been harassing me for several months.

He is a former friend/colleague from the theatre world who has gone full “New Normal” and is absolutely furious that I have not. So outraged is he that I have not joined the cult that he has been going around on the Internet referring to me as a “conspiracy theorist” and suggesting that I’ve had some kind of nervous breakdown and require immediate psychiatric treatment because I do not believe the official “New Normal” narrative. Now, this would not be a very big deal, except that he is impugning my character and attempting to damage my reputation on the Facebook pages of other thea-



tre colleagues, which he feels entitled to do, given that I am a “Covid denier”, a “conspiracy theorist”, and an “anti-vaxxer”, or whatever, and given the fact that he has the power of the state, the media, etc, on his side.

This is how it works in cults, and in larger totalitarian societies. It isn't usually the Gestapo that comes for you. It's usually your friends and colleagues. What my former friend is doing is working that system of rewards and punishments to enforce his ideology, because he knows that most of my other colleagues in the theatre world have also gone full “New Normal”, or at least are looking the other way and staying silent while it is being implemented.

This tactic, obviously, has backfired, primarily because I do not give a fuck what any New Normals think of me, whether they work in the theatre world or anywhere else, but I am in a rather privileged position, because I have accomplished what I wanted to accomplish in the theatre, and would rather stick my hand in a blender than submit my novels to corporate publishers for review by “sensitivity readers”, so there isn't much to threaten me with. That, and I have no children to support, or administrations to answer to (unlike, for example, Mark Crispin Miller, who is currently being persecuted by the “New Normal” administration at NYU).

The point is, this kind of ideological conditioning is happening everywhere, every day, on the job, among friends, even among families. The pressure to conform is intense, because nothing is more threatening to devoted cultists, or members of totalitarian ideological movements, than those who challenge their fundamental beliefs, confront them with facts, or otherwise demonstrate that

They have power of governments, the media, the police, the culture industry, academia, and the compliant masses on their side

their “reality” isn't reality at all, but, rather, a delusional, paranoid fiction.

The key difference between how this works in cults and totalitarian ideological movements is that, usually, a cult is a subcultural group, and thus non-cult-members have the power of the ideology of the dominant society to draw on when resisting the mind-control tactics of the cult, and attempting to de-program its members ... whereas, in our case, this balance of power is inverted. Totalitarian ideological movements have the power of governments, the media, the police, the culture industry, academia, and the compliant masses on their side. And, thus, they do not need to persuade anyone. They have the power to dictate “reality.” Only cults operating in total isolation, like Jim Jones' People's Temple in Guyana, enjoy this level of control over their members.

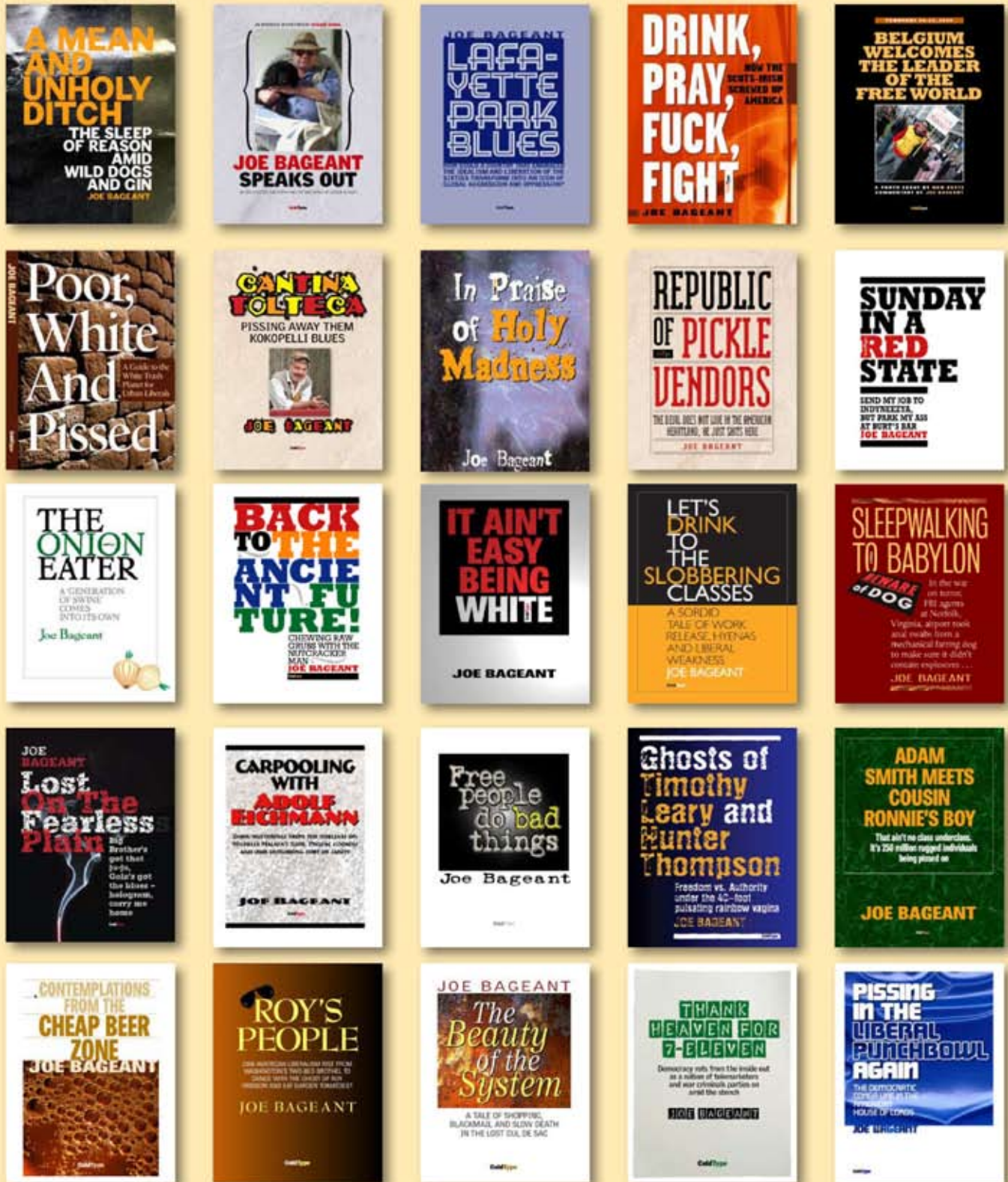
This pressure to conform, this ideological conditioning, must be fiercely resisted, regardless of the consequences, both publicly and in our private lives, or the “New Normal” will certainly become our “reality.” Although we “Covid deniers” are currently outnumbered by the Covidian cultists, we need to behave as if we are not, and hold to reality, facts, and real science, and treat the New Normals as exactly what they are, members of a new totalitarian movement, delusional cultists run

amok. If we do not, we will get to Singer's Condition 6 ...

*6. Put forth a closed system of logic and an authoritarian structure that permits no feedback and refuses to be modified except by leadership approval or executive order. The group has a top-down, pyramid structure. The leaders must have verbal ways of never losing.*

We're not there yet, but that is where we're headed ... global pathologised totalitarianism. So, speak up. Call things what they are. Confront the “former friends” in your life. Although they tell themselves that they're trying to help you “come to your senses”, or “see the truth”, or “trust the Science”, they are not. They are cultists, desperately trying to get you to conform to their paranoid beliefs, pressuring you, manipulating you, bullying you, threatening you. Do not engage them on their terms, or let them goad you into accepting their premises. (Once they've sucked you into their narrative, they've won.) Expose them, confront them with their tactics and their motives. You will probably not change their minds in the least, but your example might help other New Normals whose faith is slipping to begin to recognise what has been done to their minds and break with the cult. **CT**

**C.J. Hopkins** is an award-winning American playwright, novelist and political satirist based in Berlin. His plays are published by Bloomsbury Publishing and Broadway Play Publishing, Inc. His dystopian novel, *Zone 23*, is published by Snoggsworthy, Swaine & Cormorant. Volumes I and II of his *Consent Factory* Essays are published by Consent Factory Publishing. He can be reached at [www.cjhopkins.com](http://www.cjhopkins.com) or [www.consentfactory.org](http://www.consentfactory.org).



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LEFT: AUGUST 27, 2015 – A family of refugees crawls under the border fence that Hungary is setting up along the border to Serbia. The barbed wire catches the little girl's hair and it costs some precious seconds to get her free. The man holding the fence doesn't manage to get through before the Hungarian border police arrive at the spot, but an hour and 20 minutes later he takes the chance again and crosses.

JACOB EHRBAHN

# Chasing the dream of freedom

Jacob Ehrbahn spent five years chronicling the lives of desperate people fleeing from war, political suppression, and poverty. He met them in the Mediterranean, in refugee camps, under motorway bridges, in run-down factories, and at border crossings, where they live in inhumane conditions



RIGHT: September 16, 2015 – A group of young demonstrators succeed in making an opening in the barrier at the border crossing and the police draw back 100 metres. Rumours circulate that the border has been opened, so now families with children and older people also stream toward the police cordon in the hope of entering Hungary. All at once the area is filled with tear gas. The police cordon quickly advances and starts beating everyone and everything. Chaos breaks out. People bleed, scream and fall on top of each other while trying to escape.



ABOVE: JUNE 29, 2015 – A dinghy with Syrians and Afghans arrives on Lesbos. There is a great sense of relief. Many weep with joy. One man lights a signal flare and people dance, sing, pray and take pictures of each other. The joy is replaced by disappointment when they learn that they will have to walk more than 60 kilometres to a reception centre.

Wars in Afghanistan, Syria and other countries have generated a massive stream of refugees toward Europe. Between spring 2015 and autumn 2020, Danish photojournalist Jacob Ehrbahn undertook numerous trips to document the lives of the refugees and migrants who dream of a better life in Europe.

In the resulting book, *A Dream of Europe*, published this month by

Dewi Lewis Publishing, we meet people who have fled from war, political suppression, and poverty. We meet them far out in the Mediterranean in Libyan waters, where some are fighting a losing battle against death by drowning, and at various locations around Europe – in refugee camps, under motorway bridges, in run-down factory buildings and at border crossings, where they live in inhumane conditions. There are young men, women, children, and



entire families. People living in free fall, struggling each day to hold on to their hope for a better life.

In Spring 2020 Ehrbahn visited the Moria camp on Lesbos, where around 20,000 people – 40 percent of them children – were living in extremely primitive conditions. According to Doctors Without Borders, many had lost their will to live with a growing number exhibiting self-harming behaviour, and many, suffering from anxiety, becoming so-





cially withdrawn. Six months later the camp was burnt down and Ehrbahn again visited Moria to document the aftermath.

Yet in the midst of the misery, some people are able to adapt to the most inhumane conditions and create an everyday life with a structure of sorts. It is also possible to catch a glimpse of occasional life-affirming moments, such as when children can forget time and space for a while and just laugh and play, or when very

young men inside a worn-out industrial building can make an effort to prepare the best possible meal out of very few ingredients.

A Dream of Europe reminds us that on the other end of policy decisions and behind the numbers and statistics, there are real people with hopes and dreams.

Danish photojournalist Jacob Ehrbahn, works for the prestigious na-

tional newspaper *Politiken*, and has covered major international news stories as well as the daily lives of people world-wide.

Ehrbahn has received numerous awards including World Press Photo awards, Pictures of the Year International awards, NPPA Best of Photojournalism awards and PDN Photo Annual awards.

He has been named Danish Press Photographer of the Year three times.





ABOVE, FEBRUARY 5, 2017 – A group of five boys from Eritrea sneak onto a goods lorry at a petrol station on the outskirts of the French port of Calais. They hope the goods lorry will drive them to England through the Channel Tunnel, or aboard one of the many ferries that sail day and night. The boys know they will probably be discovered at a checkpoint before they leave France. That is why they hide one member of the group extra carefully in the lorry. If just one makes it across, it is a success. It is only possible to seek asylum in England if one is found on English soil, so the boys have to try again and again.



ABOVE: MARCH 6, 2020 – More than 100 refugees from Afghanistan and Syria have settled in an abandoned building at the edge of the town of Edirne. Among them are Mohammad Omid, 33, and his wife Rima, 29. One of their four children, Mohammad Akbar, sits on his mother's lap, while daughter Zohaer, three, lies in the foreground. The child on the right is part of a neighbouring family.



ABOVE: SEPTEMBER 10, 2020 – The last residents of the Moria camp salvage what they can and leave the burning ruins. No deaths related to the burning down of the camp have been reported.





Worldpressphoto.org



Photographer Jacob Ehrbahn



## A DREAM OF EUROPE

Jacob Ehrbahn

Published by Dewi Lewis Publishing

[www.dewilewispublishing.com](http://www.dewilewispublishing.com)

US\$35 / Canada \$47 / UK £40

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NINA BURLEIGH

# Down the Pandemic Memory Hole

Why we forget epidemics – and why this one must be remembered

The second Moderna shot made me sick – as predicted. A 24-hour touch of what an alarmed immune system feels like left me all the more grateful for my good fortune in avoiding the real thing and for being alive at a time when science had devised a 95 percent effective vaccine in record time.

To distract myself from the fever as I tried to sleep, I visualised strands of synthetic messenger RNA floating into my cells to produce the alien spike protein that attracted my warrior T-cells. I drifted off envisioning an epic micro-battle underway in my blood and had a series of weird nightmares. At about two a.m., I woke up sweating, disoriented, and fixated on a grim image from one of the studies I had consulted while writing my own upcoming book, *Virus: Vaccinations, the CDC, and the Hijacking of America's Response to the Pandemic*, on the Covid-19 chaos of our moment. In his *Vaccine: The Controversial Story of Medicine's Greatest Lifesaver*, Arthur Allen described how, in the days of ignorance – not so very long ago – doctors prescribed “hot air baths” for the feverish victims of deadly epidemics of smallpox or yellow fever, clamping them under woollen covers in closed rooms with the windows shut.

Mildly claustrophobic at the best of times, my mind then scabbled to other forms of medical persecution I'd recently learned about. In the American colonies of the early 18th-century, for example, whether or not to take the Jenner cowpox vaccine was a matter of religious concern. Puritans were taught that they would interfere with God's will if they altered disease outcomes. To expiate that sin, or more likely out of sheer ignorance, medical doctors of the day decreed that the vaccine would only work after weeks of purging, including ingesting mercury, which besides making people drool and have diarrhoea, also loosened their teeth. “Inoculation meant three weeks of daily vomiting, purges, sweats, fevers”, Allen wrote.

To clear my thoughts, to forget, I opened my window, let in the winter air, and breathed deep. I then leaned out into the clean black sky of

the pandemic months, the starlight brighter since the jets stopped flying and we ceased driving, as well as burning so much coal.

Silence. An inkling of what the world might be like without US

Chilled, I lay back down and wondered: What will the future think of us in this time? Will people recoil in horror as I had just done in recalling, in feverish technicolor, the medically ignorant generations that came before us?

When America reached the half-million-dead mark from Covid-19 at the end of February, reports compared the number to our war dead. The pandemic had by then killed more Americans than had died in World War I, World War II, and the Vietnam War combined – and it wasn't done with us yet. But the Covid dead had not marched into battle. They had gone off to their jobs as bus drivers and nurses and store clerks, or hugged a grandchild, or been too close to a health-care worker who arrived at a nursing home via the subway.

Every November 11, on Veterans Day, our world still remembers and celebrates the moment World War I officially ended. But the last great pandemic, the influenza epidemic

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Will people recoil in horror as I had just done in recalling the medically ignorant generations that came before us?





FLU VICTIMS: One of the wards for medical cases at Base Hospital, Dijon, France (1919).

of 1918-1920 that became known as “the Spanish flu” (though it wasn’t faintly Spain’s fault, since it probably began in the United States), which infected half a billion people on a far less populated planet, killing an estimated 50-million to 100-million of them – including more soldiers than were slaughtered in that monumental war – fell into a collective memory hole.

When it was over, our grandparents and great-grandparents turned away and didn’t look back. They simply dropped it from memory. Donald Trump’s grandfather’s death from the Spanish flu in 1919 changed the fortunes of his family forever, yet Trump never spoke of it – even while confronting a similar natural disaster. Such a forgetting wasn’t just Trumpian aberrance; it was a cultural phenomenon.

That virus, unlike Covid-19, mainly killed young healthy people. But there are eerie, even uncanny, similarities between the American experience of that pandemic and this one. In the summer of 1919, just after the third deadly wave, American cities erupted in race riots. As with the summer of 2020, the 1919 riots were sparked by an incident in the Midwest: a Chicago mob stoned a black teenager who dared to swim off a Lake Michigan beach that whites had unofficially declared whites-only. The boy drowned and, in the ensuing week of rioting, 23 blacks and 15 whites died. The riots spread across the country to Washington, DC, and cities in Nebraska, Tennessee, Arkansas, and Texas, with black veterans who had served in World War I returning home to second-class treatment and an increase in

Ku Klux Klan lynchings.

As today, there were similar controversies then over the wearing of masks and not gathering in significant numbers to celebrate Thanksgiving. As in 2020-2021, so in 1918-1919, frontline medics were traumatised. The virus killed within hours or a few days in a particularly lurid way. People bled from their noses, mouths, and ears, then drowned in the fluid that so copiously built up in their lungs. The mattresses on which they perished were soaked in blood and other bodily fluids.

Doctors and nurses could do nothing but bear witness to the suffering, much like the frontliners in Wuhan and then New York City in the coronavirus pandemic’s early days. Unlike today, perhaps because

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it was wartime and any display of weakness was considered bad, the newspapers of the time also barely covered the suffering of individuals, according to Alex Navarro, editor-in-chief of the University of Michigan's *Influenza Encyclopedia* about the 1918 pandemic. Strangely enough, even medical books in the following years barely covered the virus.

Medical anthropologist Martha Louise Lincoln believes the tendency to look forward – and away from disaster – is also an American trait. “Collectively, we obviously wrongly shared a feeling that Americans would be fine”, Lincoln said of the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic. “I think that’s in part because of the way we’re conditioned to remember history ... Even though American history is full of painful losses, we don’t take them in”.

*Guardian* columnist Jonathan Freedland argues that pandemic forgetting is a human response to seemingly pointless loss, as opposed to a soldier’s death. “A mass illness does not invite that kind of remembering”, he wrote. “The bereaved cannot console themselves that the dead made a sacrifice for some higher cause, or even that they were victims of an epic moral event, because they did not and were not”.

Instead, to die of Covid-19 is just rotten luck, something for all of us to forget.

Given the absence of dead heroes and a certain all-American resistance to pointless tragedy, there are other reasons we, as Americans, might not look back to 2020 and this year as well. For one thing, pandemic profiteering was so gross and widespread that to consider it closely, even in retrospect, might lead to demands for wholesale change that no one in authority, no one in this

Until the 20th-century, few people survived childhood without witnessing or suffering from the agonies of infectious diseases

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(or possibly any other recent US government) would be prepared or motivated to undertake.

In just the pandemic year 2020, this country’s billionaires managed to add at least a trillion dollars to their already sizeable wealth in a land of ever more grotesque inequality. Amazon’s Jeff Bezos alone packed in another \$70-billion that year, while so many other Americans were locked down and draining savings or unemployment funds. The CEOs of the companies that produced the medical milestone mRNA vaccines reaped hundreds of millions of dollars in profits by timing stock moves to press releases about vaccine efficacy.

No one today dares ask such rich men to sacrifice for the rest of us or for the rest of the world.

The pandemic might, of course, have offered an opportunity for the government and corporate leaders to reconsider the shareholder model of for-profit medicine. Instead, taxpayer money continued to flow in staggering quantities to a small group of capitalists with almost no strings attached and little transparency.

A nation brought to its knees may not have the resources, let alone the will, to accurately remember how it all happened. Congress is now investigating some of the Trump administration’s pandemic deals. The House Select Committee on the Coronavirus Crisis has uncovered clear evidence of its attempts to cook

and politicise data. And Senator Elizabeth Warren led somewhat fruitful efforts to expose deals between the Trump administration and a small number of health-care companies. But sorting through the chaos of capitalist mischief as the pandemic hit, all those no-bid contracts cut without agency oversight, with nothing more than a White House stamp of approval affixed to them, will undoubtedly prove an Augean stables of a task.

In addition, looking too closely at the tsunami of money poured into Big Pharma that ultimately did produce effective vaccines could well seem churlish in retrospect. The very success of the vaccines may blunt the memory of that other overwhelming effect of the pandemic, which was to blow a hole in America’s already faded reputation as a health-care leader and as a society in which equality (financial or otherwise) meant anything at all.

Forgetting might prove all too comfortable, even if remembering could prompt a rebalancing of priorities from, for instance, the military-industrial complex, which has received somewhere between 40 percent and 70 percent of the US discretionary budget over the last half century, to public health, which got 3 percent to 6 percent of that budget in those same years.

For most Americans, the history of the 1918 flu shares space in that ever-larger tomb of oblivion with the history of other diseases of our great-grandparents’ time that vaccines have now eradicated.

Until the 20th-century, very few people survived childhood without either witnessing or actually suffering from the agonies inflicted by infectious diseases. Parents routinely lost children to disease; people regu-



larly died at home. Survivors – our great-grandparents – were intimately acquainted with the sights, smells, and sounds associated with the stages of death.

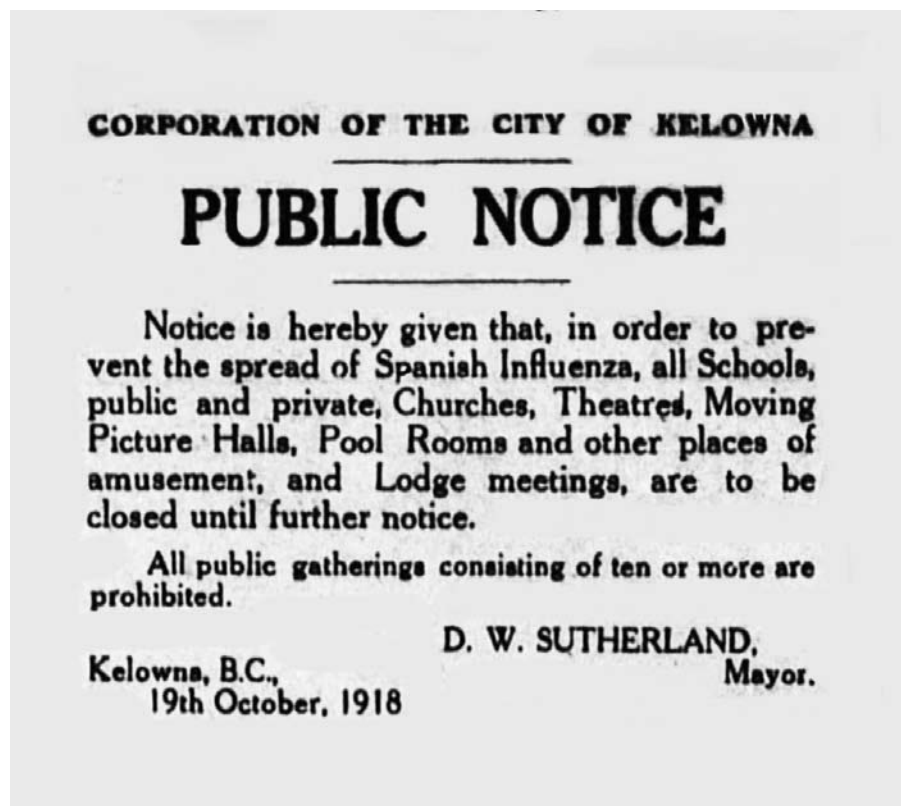
Viewed from above, vaccines are a massive success story. They've been helping us live longer and in states of safety that would have been unimaginable little more than a century ago. In 1900, US life expectancy was 46 years for men and 48 for women. Someone born in 2019 can expect to live to between 75 and 80 years old, although due to health inequities, lifespans vary depending on race, ethnicity, and gender.

The scale of change has been dramatic, but it can be hard to see. We belong to the most medically protected generation in human history and that protection has made us both complacent and risk averse.

The history of 20-century vaccine developments has long seesawed between remarkable advances in medical science and conspiracy theories and distrust engendered by its accidents or failures. Almost every new vaccine has been accompanied by reports of risks, side effects, and sometimes terrible accidents, at least one involving tens of thousands of sickened people.

Children, however, are now successfully jabbed with serums that create antibodies to hepatitis B, measles, mumps, rubella, diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis – all diseases that well into the twentieth century spread through communities, killing babies or permanently damaging health. A number of those are diseases that today's parents can barely pronounce, let alone remember.

The catastrophe of the Spanish flu globally and in this country (where perhaps 675,000 Americans were estimated to have died from it) had,



DEJA VU: Public notice warning of lockdown in Kelowna, BC, Canada.

until Covid-19 came along, been dropped in a remarkable manner from American memory and history. It lacked memorial plaques or a day of remembrance, though it did leave a modest mark on literature. *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, Katherine Anne Porter's elegiac short story, for instance, focused on how the flu extinguished a brief wartime love affair between two young people in New York City.

We are very likely to overcome the virus at some point in the not-too-distant future. As hard as it might be to imagine right now, the menace that shut down the world will, in the coming years, undoubtedly be brought to heel by vaccines on a planetary scale.

And in this, we've been very, very lucky. Covid-19 is relatively benign compared with an emergent virus with the death rates of a MERS or Ebola or even, it seems, that 1918

flu. As a species, we will survive this one. It's been bad – it still is, with cases and hospitalisations remaining on the rise in parts of this country – but it could have been so much worse. Sociologist and writer Zeynep Tufekci has termed it “a starter pandemic”. There's probably worse ahead in a planet that's under incredible stress in so many different ways.

Under the circumstances, it's important that we not drop this pandemic from memory as we did the 1918 one. We should remember this moment and what it feels like because the number of pathogens waiting to jump from mammals to us is believed to be alarmingly large. Worse yet, modern human activity has made us potentially more, not less, vulnerable to another pandemic. A University of Liverpool study published in February 2021 found at least 40 times more mammal species



could be infected with coronavirus strains than were previously known. Such a virus could easily recombine with any of them and then be passed on to humanity, a fact researchers deemed an immediate public health threat.

In reality, we may be entering a new “era of pandemics.” So suggests a study produced during an “urgent virtual workshop” convened in October 2020 by the United Nations Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (ISPBS) to investigate the links between the risk of pandemics and the degradation of nature. Due to climate change, intense agriculture, unsustainable trade, the misuse of land, and nature-disrupting production and consumption habits, more than five new infectious diseases emerge in people every year, any one of which could potentially

Under the circumstances, it’s important that we not drop this pandemic from memory as we did the 1918 one

spark a pandemic.

That ISPBS study predicted that “future pandemics will emerge more often, spread more rapidly, do more damage to the world economy, and kill more people than Covid-19, unless there is a transformative change in the global approach to dealing with infectious diseases”.

Is our species capable of such a change? My inner misanthrope says no, but certainly the odds improve if we don’t delete this pandemic from history like the last one. This, after all, is the first pandemic in which the

Internet enabled us to bear witness not only to the panic, illness, and deaths around us, but to the suffering of our entire species in every part of the globe in real time. Because of that alone, it will be difficult to evade the memory of this collective experience and, with it, the reminder that we are all made of the same vulnerable stuff.

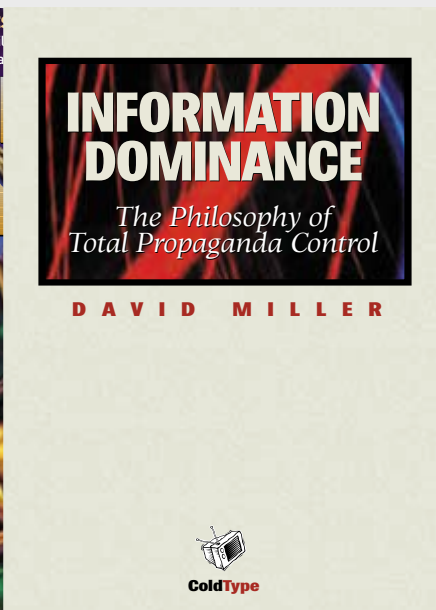
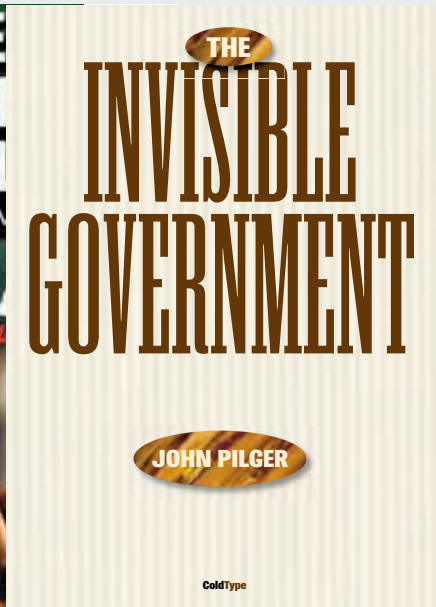
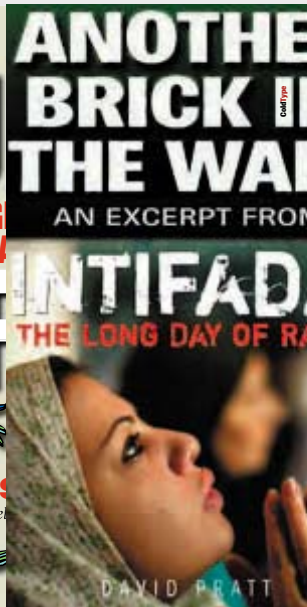
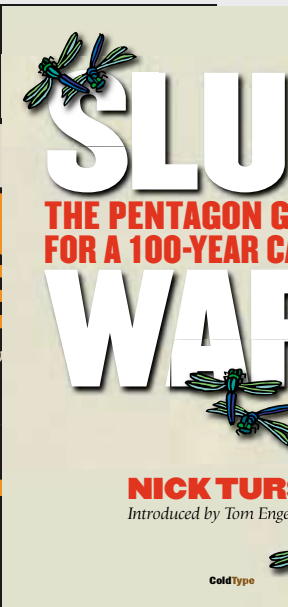
**Nina Burleigh** is a journalist of American politics and the author of six previous books. Her seventh, *Virus: Vaccinations, the CDC, and the Hijacking of America’s Response to the Pandemic* (Seven Stories Press, to be published this month) is a real-life thriller that delves into the official malfeasance behind America’s pandemic chaos and the triumph of science in an era of conspiracy theories and contempt for experts. This essay first appeared at [www.tomdispatch.com](http://www.tomdispatch.com).



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TREVOR GRUNDY

# The dark side of a 'decent' state

Rwanda is said to be one of few African states where decency and dignity have been restored after decades of destruction. Not so, claims new book

Until recently, historians have been disinclined to dig too deeply into the individual psychologies, or the political backgrounds, of the journalists and authors who covered Africa from Ghana's independence in 1957 to South Africa's first democratic elections in 1994.

With few exceptions, they believed that once the hand of whiteness was removed from around the necks of tens of millions of dirt-poor Africans, new tribal-free leaders of courage, integrity and vision would arise, like Phoenixes from the ashes of colonialism.

It was a warm and wonderful dream.

Today, there are only three or four countries in the world's hungriest continent who are free from ruthless, on-the-make politicians who breed corruption and fuel long suppressed anger

For years, Paul Kagame's Rwanda has been presented to the world as one of the few where decency and dignity have been restored after decades of chaos and destruction.

Paul Kagame – like Benito Mussolini before him – makes trains (and their equivalents

in Rwanda) run on time. In Rwanda, the streets are spotless and the head of state uses donor aid intelligently. So if there's a bit of brutality and personal bravado in the background to national renewal, who really cares?

Michela Wrong does and she has painted a literary picture of another, darker, side of Rwanda, one that is not shown to the world in galleries owned by the Davos in-crowd who hail Paul Kagame as the poster-boy for international donor/aid projects, not only in Africa but throughout the world.

Wrong's latest book, *Do Not Disturb: The Story of a Political Murder and an African Regime Gone Bad*, stands out as the most ambitious attempt so far to tell the dark story of that tiny country in Central Africa, and spell-out its importance as a

conduit for the supply of essential minerals to the western world.

Her book is important, revealing and timely as we prepare for next month's bi-annual meeting of 54 leaders of the Commonwealth (CHOGM) to be held Rwanda's capital, Kigali, where the streets may be clean, but where the opposition is silent or in prison.

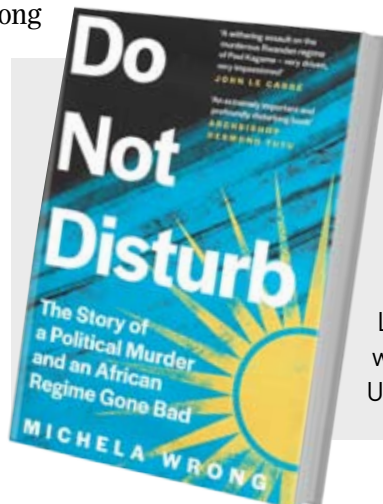
There can be few readers of *ColdType* who are not aware of the genocide that followed the destruction of a plane as it prepared to land at Kigali on the night of April 6, 1994, killing Rwandan president Juvénal Habyarimana and Burundian president Cyprien Ntaryamira.

This was followed by a hundred days of mass slaughter – a genocide that claimed the lives of between 800,000 to a million people, most of

them Tutsis, victims of their great tribal rivals, the Hutus

Even now, there is no way of identifying the men who fired the missiles that destroyed that plane.

What is certain, however, is that this callous act was the spark that set alight



**DO NOT DISTURB**  
The Story of a Political Murder and an African Regime Gone Bad

Michela Wrong

Published by Fourth Estate, London

[www.4thestate.co.uk](http://www.4thestate.co.uk)

UK £20 / US \$25 / Canada \$39



The Rwanda Genocide Memorial in Kigali remembers the 800,000 people killed in 100 days of slaughter in 1980. Many sites around Rwanda now stand as memorials to the genocide. The remains of those killed stand as a testament to what took place.

a fire that led to a genocide in Central Africa that rivalled the Holocaust in World War II, Pol Pot's slaughter in Cambodia, and the starvation of millions of Ukrainians in the 1930s when Stalin ran the USSR.

Wrong, like everyone else of importance in the Western media, was not in Rwanda when the slaughter started, or even when it ended towards the end of June 1994. While most of the world's press was in South Africa bursting with enthusiasm for the birth of the Rainbow Nation that was born after the ANC's overwhelming victory at the April 1994 general election, she was in Kinshasa, working as a stringer for Reuters and the BBC. When she finally got to Kigali, she sustained her own core belief that things would come right for Rwanda – even after the mysterious death in 1990 of that

country's well-loved RPF head and former Ugandan Army commander, General Frederick Rwigyema – by backing Paul Kagame.

**T**here are two main strands in this cleverly constructed book.

The first is a brave attempt to tell the dark story of Rwanda and the region's troubled history. I agree with Howard W. French, professor at the Columbia School of Journalism, who spent years covering Africa for the *New York Times*, that Wrong's version is as good as it gets.

The cycle of tragedy started under European rule when first the Germans and then the Belgians ran Rwanda and its equally small neighbour, Burundi. Historians tell us that the white invaders spun racial fantasies about their colonies' two main

ethnic groups while favouring the long-legged, tall "aristocratic" Tutsis rather than the majority small, squat, heavily built Hutus

In Rwanda, the Belgians strongly preferred the admission of Tutsis into schools and within the colonial administration. Then in 1959 – three years before independence – the Belgians abruptly reversed course, fearful that Tutsi leaders and intellectuals were too close to Marxism.

Hutus swept to power in Rwanda's 1961 election and started Hutu programmes against the minority Tutsis.

With Belgian approval, the newly empowered Hutu abolished the Tutsi monarchy and the king's followers began pouring into neighbouring countries, especially Uganda. To make matters worse, the Tutsis carried out a coup in Burundi that led to



yet another massacre ignored by the West – this time of Hutus by Tutsis.

The region was a field of gunpowder waiting for someone or something to strike a match and blow the whole place to smithereens. That much-dreaded spark came on April 6 when that ill-fated plane was shot down over Kigali, killing two presidents.

The second strand of this most worthwhile book is a mixture of Michela Wrong's personal experience of the men she knew who served the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) and Kagame loyally and who later distanced themselves from this African despot, all of them shattered and disillusioned following displays of ruthlessness worthy of any of the Great Dictators of the 1930s.

Of her own slow donkey ride towards Damascus, she writes, "There came a day when, with a near audible mental ping, I realised I no longer believed most of the key 'truths' upon which the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) had built its account, and hadn't for ages. It felt like a relief. Shibboleths can weigh heavily on the soul".

Indeed, the bulk of this book is about the fate of those once closest to Kagame, men she says "who had lost faith in the man and the project and found themselves out in the freezing cold, struggling to make sense of their own personal trajectories".

These men included Patrick Karegeya, Rwanda's one-time head of external security, who was murdered in a Johannesburg hotel in 2014 by still unknown assassins; and the charismatic General Fred Rwigyema, former chief of the Ugandan army, the inspirational head of the RPF, who was killed in mysterious circumstances in 1990. Assassination attempts were also made on General Kayumba Nyamwasa, former head of military intelligence, commander

"Fred Rwigyema is that most dangerous of things ... a symbol of the Utopia for which Rwandans still pine ..."

of gendarmerie, army chief of staff, former Rwandan ambassador to India and a founder member of the Rwanda National Congress (RNC), one of today's leading opposition groups in Rwanda.

Wrong writes of General Rwigyema, "Unblemished by age or the corruption of office, beyond the reach of any presidential re-writing of the national narrative, he was the hero taken before the genocide that poisoned everything it touched. Forever young, forever handsome, forever brimming with unfulfilled promise, Fred Rwigyema is that most dangerous of things, the future the RPF promised but failed to deliver, a symbol of the Utopia for which Rwandans still pine".

Wrong is clearly amazed that Paul Kagame escapes criticism in the western world as he spies on his own people, suppresses the press, jails and tortures opposition leaders and silences anyone who complains too loudly.

She writes: "Kagame's regime, whose deplorable record on human rights abuses at home is beyond debate, has also been caught red-handed attempting the most lurid of assassinations on the soil of foreign allies, not once but many times".

She adds, "Western funding for his aid dependent country has not suffered, the admiring articles by

foreign journalists have not ceased, sanctions have not been applied and the invitations to Davos have not dried up".

It took me a week to read Michela Wrong's book. I count not a second wasted. My admiration for her achievement is boundless. What great courage she shows: to shed long held beliefs and admit you were misled and wrong is a hard thing to do, especially for a writer who made her name on the *Financial Times*, one of the world's most respected newspapers.

This book is full of anecdotes and quotes, the most pertinent of which, I believe, is one by Franz Fanon, that neatly dovetails with the author's present mood and feelings about Africa, even about herself. "Sometimes," Fanon writes in his book *Black Skin, White Masks*, "people hold a core belief that is very strong. When they are presented with evidence that works against that belief, the new evidence cannot be accepted. It would create a feeling that is extremely uncomfortable, called cognitive dissonance. And because it is so important to protect the core belief, they will rationalise, ignore and even deny anything that doesn't fit in with that core belief".

This widely-respected woman has written a book that is history from the view of the little person looking up, instead of the big one looking down. I hope the Commonwealth champions of human rights meeting in Kigali in June will take lessons from her in courage, frankness and verve.

**CT**

*Trevor Grundy is a British journalist who lived and worked in Central, Eastern and Southern Africa from 1966-1996. His website is [www.trevorgrundy.news](http://www.trevorgrundy.news)*



JOHN W. WHITEHEAD & NISHA WHITEHEAD

# Comply or die

If you want to emerge from a police encounter with life and body intact, you'd better comply, submit, obey orders, and do whatever a cop tells you to do

*“If you don’t want to get shot, tased, pepper-sprayed, struck with a baton or thrown to the ground, just do what I tell you. Don’t argue with me, don’t call me names, don’t tell me that I can’t stop you, don’t say I’m a racist pig, don’t threaten that you’ll sue me and take away my badge. Don’t scream at me that you pay my salary, and don’t even think of aggressively walking towards me.”*  
– Officer with the Los Angeles Police Department

Americans aren’t dying at the hands of police because of racism. For that matter, George Floyd didn’t die because he was black and the cop who killed him is white.

Floyd, who died after a Minneapolis police officer knelt on his neck for more than nine minutes, died because America is being overrun with militarised cops – vigilantes with a badge – who have almost absolute discretion to decide who is a threat, what constitutes resistance, and how harshly they can deal with the citizens they were appointed to

“serve and protect.”

These warrior cops may get paid by the citizenry, but they don’t work for us and they certainly aren’t operating within the limits of the US Constitution. As retired Philadelphia police captain Ray Lewis warns, “The system is corrupt. Police really are oppressing not only the black community, but also the whites. They’re an oppressive organisation now controlled by the one percent of corporate America. Corporate America is using police forces as their mercenaries”.

Now, not all cops are guns for hire, trained to act as judge, jury



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and executioner in their interactions with the populace.

However, the unfortunate reality we must come to terms with is that the good cops – the ones who take seriously their oath of office to serve and protect their fellow citizens, uphold the Constitution, and maintain the peace – are increasingly being outnumbered by those who believe the lives (and rights) of police should be valued more than citizens.

It doesn't matter where you live – big city or small town – it's the same scenario being played out over and over again in which government agents, hyped up on their own authority and the power of their uniform, ride roughshod over the rights of the citizenry.

Indeed, if you ask police and their enablers what Americans should do to stay alive during encounters with law enforcement, they will tell you to comply, cooperate, obey, not resist, not argue, not make threatening gestures or statements, avoid sudden movements, and submit to a search of their person and belongings during encounters with the police.

In other words, it doesn't matter if you're in the right, it doesn't matter if you're being treated with less than the respect you deserve: if you want to emerge from a police encounter with your life and body intact, then you'd better comply, submit, obey orders, respect authority and generally do whatever a cop tells you to do.

In this way, the old police motto to “protect and serve” has become “comply or die.”

This is the unfortunate, misguided, perverse message that has been beaten, shot, tasered and slammed into our collective consciousness over the past few decades, and it has taken root.

This is how we have gone from

Americans as young  
as four years old are being  
shackled, tasered  
and held at gun point  
for not being quiet,  
and just being childlike

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a nation of laws – where the least among us had just as much right to be treated with dignity and respect as the next person (in principle, at least) – to a nation of law enforcers (revenue collectors with weapons) who treat “we the people” like suspects and criminals.

As a result, Americans as young as four years old are being leg shackled, handcuffed, tasered and held at gun point for not being quiet, not being orderly and just being childlike – i.e., not being compliant enough.

Americans as old as 95 are being beaten, shot and killed for questioning an order, hesitating in the face of a directive, and mistaking a policeman crashing through their door for a criminal breaking into their home – i.e., not being submissive enough.

And Americans of every age and skin colour are continuing to die at the hands of a government that sees itself as judge, jury and executioner over a populace that have been prejudged and found guilty, stripped of their rights, and left to suffer at the hands of government agents trained to respond with the utmost degree of violence.

At a time when growing numbers of unarmed people have been shot and killed for just standing a certain way, or moving a certain way, or holding something – anything – that police could misinterpret to be a gun, or igniting some trigger-centric fear in a police officer's mind that has nothing to do with an actual

threat to their safety, even the most benign encounters with police can have fatal consequences.

The problem, as one reporter rightly concluded, is “not that life has gotten that much more dangerous, it's that authorities have chosen to respond to even innocent situations as if they were in a warzone”.

Warrior cops – trained in the worst case scenario and thus ready to shoot first and ask questions later – are definitely not making us or themselves any safer.

Worse, militarised police increasingly pose a risk to anyone undergoing a mental health crisis or with special needs whose disabilities may not be immediately apparent or require more finesse than the typical freeze-or-I'll-shoot tactics employed by America's police forces. Indeed, disabled individuals make up a third to half of all people killed by law enforcement officers. (People of colour are three times more likely to be killed by police than their white counterparts.)

If you're black and disabled, you're even more vulnerable.

Specifically, what we're dealing with today is a skewed shoot-to-kill mindset in which police, trained to view themselves as warriors or soldiers in a war, whether against drugs, or terror, or crime, must “get” the bad guys – i.e., anyone who is a potential target – before the bad guys get them.

This nationwide epidemic of court-sanctioned police violence carried out with impunity against individuals posing little or no real threat has all but guaranteed that unarmed Americans will keep dying at the hands of militarised police.

Consider just some of the scenarios in which unarmed Americans have been shot and killed by police:

- Killed for taking public tran-

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sit. Oscar Grant, travelling home on a train packed with New Year's Eve revellers, was pulled off the train while police investigated reports of fighting, shoved against a wall, punched in the head, kned in the face, then shot and killed by police while lying face down on a train platform.

- Killed for standing in a "shooting stance". In California, police opened fire on and killed a mentally challenged – unarmed – black man within minutes of arriving on the scene, allegedly because he removed a vape smoking device from his pocket and took a "shooting stance".

- Killed for holding a cell phone. Police in Arizona shot a man who was running away from US Marshals after he refused to drop an object that turned out to be a cellphone.

- Killed for displaying air fresheners from a rearview mirror. Daunte Wright was shot and killed during a traffic stop over an expired registration and a state law prohibiting motorists from hanging air fresheners and other items from their rearview mirrors. Police claimed to have mistakenly used a gun instead of a Taser.

- Killed for behaving oddly and holding a baseball bat. Responding to a domestic disturbance call, Chicago police shot and killed 19-year-old college student Quintonio LeGrier who had reportedly been experiencing mental health problems and was carrying a baseball bat around the apartment where he and his father lived.

- Killed for opening the front door. Bettie Jones, who lived on the floor below LeGrier, was also fatally shot – this time, accidentally – when she attempted to open the front door for police.

- Killed for being a child in a car pursued by police. Jeremy David

## Atlanta police shot and killed an unarmed man who was reported to have been "acting deranged ...crawling around on the ground naked"

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Mardis, six years old and autistic, died after being shot multiple times by Louisiana police in the head and torso. Police opened fire on the car – driven by Jeremy's father, Chris Few, who was also shot – and then allegedly lied, claiming that they were attempting to deliver an outstanding warrant, that Few resisted arrest, that he shot at police (no gun was found), and that he tried to ram his car into a police cruiser. Body camera footage refuted the police's claims.

- Killed for approaching police with a metal spoon. In Alabama, police shot and killed a 50-year-old man who reportedly charged a police officer while holding "a large metal spoon in a threatening manner".

- Killed for holding a tree branch. Georgia police shot and killed a 47-year-old man wearing only shorts and tennis shoes who, when first encountered, was sitting in the woods against a tree, only to start running towards police holding a stick in an "aggressive manner."

- Killed for crawling around naked. Atlanta police shot and killed an unarmed man who was reported to have been "acting deranged, knocking on doors, crawling around on the ground naked". Police fired two shots at the man after he reportedly starting running towards them.

- Killed for hunching over. Responding to a domestic trouble call, multiple officers with the Baltimore County police forced their way inside a home where they proceeded

to open fire on an unarmed 41-year-old man who was hunched over in a defensive posture. The man was killed in front of his two young daughters and their mother.

- Killed because a police officer accidentally pulled out his gun instead of his taser. An Oklahoma man suspected of trying to sell an illegal handgun was shot and killed after a 73-year-old reserve deputy inadvertently fired his gun instead of his taser. "Oh! I shot him! I'm sorry!" the deputy cried out.

- Killed for wearing dark pants and a basketball jersey. Donnell Thompson, a mentally disabled 27-year-old described as gentle and shy, was shot and killed after police – searching for a carjacking suspect reportedly wearing similar clothing – encountered him lying motionless in a neighbourhood yard. Police "only" opened fire with an M4 rifle after Thompson first failed to respond to their flash bang grenades and then started running after being hit by foam bullets.

- Killed for telling police you lawfully own a firearm. Philando Castile was shot and killed during a routine traffic stop allegedly over a broken tail light. As he was reaching for his license and registration, Castile explained to police that he had a conceal-and-carry permit. That's all it took for police to shoot Castile four times in the presence of his girlfriend and her 4-year-old daughter.

Killed for leaving anywhere at all when a police officer pulls up. Deravis Caine Rogers was killed after starting to drive away from an apartment complex right around the same time as a police officer pulled up. Despite the fact that the police officer had no reason to believe Rogers was a threat or was suspected of any illegal activity, the officer fired into Rogers' passenger side window.

- Killed for driving while deaf. In



North Carolina, a state trooper shot and killed 29-year-old Daniel K. Harris – who was deaf – after Harris initially failed to pull over during a traffic stop.

- Killed for shopping at Walmart. John Crawford III was shot and killed by police responding to reports of an armed man in an Ohio Walmart. Crawford, shopping and talking on his phone, had been holding an unpackaged pellet gun that had been sitting on a store shelf.

- Killed for being homeless. Los Angeles police shot an unarmed homeless man after he failed to stop riding his bicycle and then proceeded to run from police.

- Killed for brandishing a shoe-horn. John Wrana, a 95-year-old World War II veteran, lived in an assisted living centre, used a walker to get around, and was shot and killed by police who mistook the shoehorn in his hand for a 2-foot-long machete and fired multiple beanbag rounds from a shotgun at close range.

- Killed for playing in a park. Tamir Rice was shot and killed in an Ohio park when a police officer mistook the 12-year-old's toy airsoft pistol for a real gun.

- Killed for having your car break down on the road. Terence Crutcher, unarmed and black, was shot and killed by Oklahoma police after his car broke down on the side of the road. Crutcher was shot in the back while walking towards his car with his hands up.

- Killed for being in your own apartment. Botham Jean was shot and killed when a police officer entered Jean's unlocked apartment, mistaking it for her own and mistaking Jean for a burglar.

- Killed for staying up late. Atatiana Jefferson, up late playing video games with her 8-year-old nephew, was shot and killed after neighbours

## This lawlessness on the part of law enforcement, a characteristic of a police state, is made possible in large part by police unions

who were concerned about that the lights were on in the house asked police to do a wellness check.

- Killed for holding a garden hose. California police were ordered to pay \$6.5-million after they opened fire on a man holding a garden hose, believing it to be a gun. Douglas Zerby was shot 12 times and pronounced dead on the scene. This is what constitutes “law and order” in the American police state.

Making matters worse, when these officers, who have long since ceased to be peace officers, violate their oaths by bullying, beating, tasing, shooting and killing their employers – the taxpayers to whom they owe their allegiance – they are rarely given more than a slap on the hands before resuming their patrols.

This lawlessness on the part of law enforcement, an unmistakable characteristic of a police state, is made possible in large part by police unions which routinely oppose civilian review boards and resist the placement of names and badge numbers on officer uniforms; police agencies that abide by the Blue Code of Silence, the quiet understanding among police that they should not implicate their colleagues for their crimes and misconduct; prosecutors who treat police offences with greater leniency than civilian offences; courts that sanction police wrongdoing in the name of security; and legislatures that enhance the

power, reach and arsenal of the police, and a citizenry that fails to hold its government accountable to the rule of law.

Indeed, not only are cops protected from most charges of wrongdoing – whether it's shooting unarmed citizens (including children and old people), raping and abusing young women, falsifying police reports, trafficking drugs, or soliciting sex with minors – but even on the rare occasions when they are fired for misconduct, it's only a matter of time before they get re-hired again.

Much of the “credit” for shielding these rogue cops goes to influential police unions and laws providing for qualified immunity, police contracts that “provide a shield of protection to officers accused of misdeeds and erect barriers to residents complaining of abuse”, state and federal laws that allow police to walk away without paying a dime for their wrongdoing, and rampant cronyism among government bureaucrats.

It's happening all across the country. This is how perverse justice in America has become.

If you're starting to feel somewhat overwhelmed, intimidated and fearful for your life and your property, you should be, because as I point out in my book *Battlefield America: The War on the American People*, the only truly compliant, submissive and obedient citizen in a police state is a dead one. **CT**

*John W. Whitehead is a constitutional lawyer and founder and president of the Rutherford Institute. His books *Battlefield America: The War on the American People* and *A Government of Wolves: The Emerging American Police State* are available at [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com).*

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# THE TRIALS OF JULIAN ASSANGE



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CAITLIN JOHNSTONE

# The aliens are *not* coming

We gaze at the stars, wondering if we'll colonise our planetary neighbours, while destroying the planet upon which we are perfectly adapted to live

**U**FOs have been in the news again. Routinely seeing headlines about this phenomenon in mainstream news outlets would have been unthinkable a few short years ago, but now it just shows up as one more feature on our continually expanding haunted hayride into infinite weirdness.

So what's the deal here? Are they military aircraft? Are they a cold war psyop? Are they natural phenomena?

Or are they extraterrestrials?

The preceding questions are intriguing, but we all know that last one is what's generating the most thought and discussion.

For me, though, it's actually kind of the least interesting possibility, and I'll tell you why. If there are indeed extraterrestrials, and if they have indeed solved the puzzle of interstellar space travel and noticed us and decided to pay us regular visits for their own secret alien reasons,

I don't think it would have any actual effect on life on this planet. We're simply not mature enough as a species to ever interact with them.

I mean, look at US. We're gazing up at the stars, wondering if there's intelligent life up there, while rapidly killing off mysterious giant-brained leviathans who live in our own oceans, whose experience of consciousness we know essentially nothing about.

We're gazing up at the stars,

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wondering if we'll get colonise our desert rock planetary neighbour one day, while destroying our own planet upon which we are perfectly adapted to live. We don't even know if humans are truly separable from their ecosystem any more than a ripple is separable from the pond, and we're already thinking of space colonisation as a sensible Plan B for when we destroy our home.

I mean, would you interact with us? Seriously, would you? Why would you see that as being in your interest? Why would you even see it as being in our interest? Because here's the thing: a lot of UFO enthusiasts harbour a hope that at some point the aliens are going to intervene and help US And they just won't. That will not happen. This movie has no ET ex machina ending.

Extraterrestrials would not intervene to help us solve the existential crises which we have created for ourselves for the same reason we created those crises in the first place: we are not mature enough. Do you really believe an alien civilisation would gift us with free energy so we stop filling our atmosphere with carbon or whatever? It would be like ten days before we figured out how to turn it into a weapon.

I mean look what happened when we discovered nuclear energy. We came within a hair's breadth from ending the world, not just once, but multiple times. And we've still got those horrible armageddon weapons pointed at each other. What could extraterrestrials possibly give us that

## We need to stop trying to run away from ourselves, turn around, and face our dilemma head-on

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we wouldn't use to make things far worse than they already are?

The only way an alien civilisation could possibly save us from ourselves would be to forcibly stop us from doing what we've been doing, and does that make sense either? Could an advanced civilisation become advanced without developing a deep respect for sovereignty? After all it's a lack of respect for sovereignty that is causing most of our problems on this planet. If we respected national sovereignty military interventionism wouldn't be a thing. If we respected personal sovereignty everything from corporate exploitation to government oppression to rape and murder would stop happening. Respect for sovereignty would be paramount in an advanced civilisation.

I think if there are indeed ETs and deep space travel is indeed scientifically possible, they'd see fit to leave us alone and not interfere for the same reason you don't open a bird's egg to try and help it grow. We need to be left on our own to mature.

A very possible answer to the Fer-

mi paradox is that we haven't met the aliens because a civilisation far more advanced than our own would have matured emotionally and spiritually beyond the need to sail around the galaxy molesting the natives like a bunch of 15th-century Europeans. They, unlike us, would not be craning their necks scanning around the universe for more stuff to take.

No, we are on our own for this test. We have the total sovereign freedom to pass the test or fail it. Whether they exist or not, the aliens are not coming to help US

Our species is like a guy whose personal life is complete chaos, but he keeps trying to find peace by chasing after a bunch of external attainments and accomplishments. Thinking we can flee to space if we trash this world is far, far dumber than planning on buying a new house because you can't be bothered tidying up the one you have, and that's really dumb. We need to stop looking to the stars as a path out of this mess, either by leaving our home or by being rescued by ET, and we must begin taking care of each other and our ecosystem. We need to stop trying to run away from ourselves, turn around, and face our dilemma head-on.

Forget close encounters of the third kind. We need a close encounter with US **CT**

*Caitlin Johnstone is an Australian blogger, who blogs at [www.caitlinjohnstone.com](http://www.caitlinjohnstone.com). Her latest book is *Notes From The Edge of the Narrative Matrix*.*

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## TAXI: Journey Through My Windows 1977-1987

Joseph Rodriguez

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New York City in the late '70s was a collection of villages with its downtown scene, midtown workers, and uptown elegance. It was also a city that was more integrated than ever before or ever would be again. All of the city's humanity met in its streets with layered soundtracks of salsa, rock, disco, reggae, and soon hip-hop booming for all to groove to.

But, NYC was also a place of chaos and mayhem. Teetering on the brink of bankruptcy with rampant crime it was the city's drug users, dealers, and pimps and prostitutes who ruled the streets of Manhattan.

The grittiness of the city was a beacon and a promise to many outsiders, those who didn't quite fit into any mould, and a vibrant LGBTQ community became the nexus of an underworld of sex workers who liked to party.

For a NYC cabbie such as Joseph Rodriguez, the hot spots to pick up fares were clubs like the Hellfire, Mineshaft, The Anvil, The Vault, and Show World. Losing his first



JOSEPH RODRIGUEZ

# What the cabbie saw





"This is an after-after-hours club that was right across from the Film Forum in West Houston Street. This place stayed open from like five in the morning to five in the afternoon"





ABOVE: "I was getting coffee on 58th Street, and I saw this Fiorucci model walking down the sidewalk with a stylist. There was a truck full of guys in the street, yelling, "Hey mami, what's up?" and because the guy was looking at her, he runs straight into the car in front of them".

camera and lens in a classic '70s New York stabbing and mugging, Rodríguez's wounds healed and he armed himself with a new camera to document what he saw on the job: hookers getting off their shifts, transvestites and S&M partiers doing' it in the back seat or somehow pulling off an unlikely costume change from bondage gear to emerge from the cab clean-cut in an oxford and khakis ready to face unwitting family and friends.. **CT**

*Joseph Rodríguez is the author of Spanish Harlem, part of the "American Scene" series, published by the National Museum of American Art/ D.A.P., as well as East Side Stories: Gang Life in East Los Angeles, Juvenile, Flesh Life Sex in Mexico City, and Still Here: Stories After Katrina, published by powerHouse Books.*



ABOVE I had this regular who was a sex worker. I would pick her up all the time around daybreak, and drive her home to Brooklyn. This one night, she gets in the cab, and wants to make a stop to pick up her money stash in some bushes where she'd hidden it. We pull off, and stop at a red light — then from out of nowhere, her pimp jumps in the back seat ..."



ABOVE: "14th Street & West Side Highway. That's the back of the Anvil. These guys would come outside to take a leak. And of course they're having a conversation, so who knows what happened after that".



ABOVE: "I had been working some of the grittiest clubs all morning on a Sunday. Picking up guys from the Anvil and taking them uptown. And on the way back downtown, there was this family going to church. Smiling little kids, all dressed in their Sunday best.



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CONN HALLINAN

# Day of the Drone

They're cheaper than conventional weapons, but the use of drones in modern warfare is not the 'magic bullet' our leaders would have us believe

In the aftermath of the recent war between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh region, drone warfare is being touted as the latest breakthrough in military technology, a “magic bullet” that makes armoured vehicles obsolete, defeats sophisticated anti-aircraft systems, and rout entrenched infantry.

While there is some truth in the hype, one needs to be especially wary of military “game changers”, since there is always a seller at the end of the pitch. In his examination of the two major books on drones – Christian Brose’s *The Kill Chain: Defending America in the Future of High-Tech Warfare*, and Michael Boyle’s *The Drone Age* – military analyst Andrew Cockburn points out that the victims of drones are mostly civilians, not soldiers. While drones can take out military targets, they are more commonly used to assassinate people one doesn’t approve of. A case in point was former President Trump’s drone strike that killed Qasem Solemani, a top Iranian general, a country we are not at war with.

In just the first year of his administration, Trump killed more people – including 250 children – with drones in Yemen and Pakistan than President Barack Obama did in eight years. And Obama was no slouch in

this department, increasing the use of drone attacks by a factor of 10 over the administration of George W. Bush.

Getting a handle on drones – their pluses and minuses and the moral issues such weapons of war raise – is essential if the world wants to hold off yet another round of massive military spending and the tensions and instabilities such a course will create.

That drones have the power to alter a battlefield is a given, but they may not be all they are advertised. Azerbaijan’s drones – mostly Turkish Bayraktar TB2s and Israeli Harpys, Orbiter-1Ks, and Harops – did, indeed, make hash of Armenian tanks and armoured vehicles and largely silenced anti-aircraft systems. They also helped Azeri artillery target Armenian positions. But the Azerbaijanis won the recent war by slugging it out on the ground, with heavy casualties on both sides.

As military historian and editor of the *Small Wars Journal*, Lt. Col Robert Bateman (ret.) points out, drones were effective because of the Armenian’s stunningly incompetence in their use of armour, making no effort to spread their tanks out or camouflage them. Instead, they

bunched them up in the open, making them sitting ducks for Turkish missile firing drones and Israeli “suicide” drones.

“While drones will be hailed as the straw that broke the camel’s back in this war”, he writes, “Azerbaijani success is also attributed to good ol’ fashioned mechanised infantry operations that took territory, one square kilometer at a time”.

Turkey has made widespread use of drones in Syria, Iraq, and Libya, and they again have played a role on the battlefield. But Turkish drones have mainly been used to assassinate Kurdish leaders in Iraq and Syria. Last April a Turkish drone killed two Iraqi generals in the Kurdish autonomous zone of northern Iraq.

In July 2020, Turkey deployed drones in Syria to block an offensive by the Damascus government against Turkey’s allies in Idlib Province, but failed to stop President Bashar al-Assad’s forces from reclaiming large hunks of territory. In short, they are not always “game changers”.

The selling point for drones is that they are precise, cheap – or relatively so – and you don’t have a stream of body bags returning home. But drones are not all-seeing, unless they are flying at low altitudes,



**READY TO KILL:** Engineers and maintainers conduct routine service and maintenance on a Reaper unmanned drone at Kandahar Airfield in Afghanistan.

thus making it easier to shoot them down. The weather also needs to be clear, and the area smokeless. Otherwise what drones see are vague images. In 2010 a US drone took out what it thought was a caravan of Taliban trucks carrying weapons. But the trucks were filled with local peasants and the “weapons” were turkeys. The drones incinerated 23 civilians.

Nor do they always live up to their reputation for accuracy. In a 2012 test, the Air Force compared a photo of a base taken by the highly touted Gorgon Stare cameras mounted on a Predator drone and the one on Google Earth. The images were essentially identical, except Gorgon Stare cost half a trillion dollars and Google Earth was free. “In neither”, says Cockburn, “were humans dis-

tinguishable from bushes”.

Drones have killed insurgent leaders in Syria, Somalia, Iraq, and Afghanistan with virtually no effect on those wars. Indeed, in the case of Afghanistan, the assassination of first tier Taliban leaders led to their replacement by far more radical elements. The widespread use of drones in the US war on drugs has also been largely a failure. Drug cartels are bigger and more dangerous than ever, and there has been no reduction in the flow of drugs into the country.

They do keep the body bag count down, but that raises an uncomfortable moral dilemma: If war doesn’t produce casualties, except among the targeted, isn’t it more tempting to fight them? Drone pilots in their air-conditioned trailers in southern

Nevada will never go down with their aircraft, but the people on the receiving end will eventually figure out some way to strike back. As as the attack on the World Trade towers and recent terrorist attacks in France demonstrate, that is not all that hard to do, and it is almost inevitable that the targets will be civilians. Bloodless war is a dangerous illusion.

Drones certainly present problems for any military. For one thing, they are damned hard to spot. Most are composed of non-metallic substances, like Kevlar, and they have low heat signatures because their small motors run on batteries. Radar doesn’t pick them up and neither do infrared detectors. The Yemen-based Houthi drones that hit Saudi Arabian oil facilities at



Abqaiq and Khurais in 2019 slipped right through the radar systems of three anti-aircraft networks: the US Patriot system, the French supplied Shashine surface-to-air-missile system, and the Swiss Oerlikon 35mm radar directed cannons.

Those drones were produced on a 3-D printer supplied to the Houthis by Iran.

Drones also raised havoc with Armenia's far more capable Russian-made S-300 air defence system, plus several other short and medium range systems. Apparently the drones were not detected until they struck, essentially obliterating Armenia's anti-aircraft system.

The Russians claim that they beat off drone attacks on their two bases in Syria, Khmeimim Air Base and the naval base at Tartus, with their Pantsir air defense system. But those drones were rather primitive. Some were even made of plywood. Pantsir systems were destroyed in Nagorno Karabakh, and Turkish drones apparently destroyed Pantsirs in Libya.

The problem is that even if you do detect them, a large number of drones – a so-called “swarming attack” similar to the one that struck

The US is currently working on weapons that use artificial intelligence and will essentially be able to “decide” on their own what to attack

the Saudis – will eventually exhaust your ammunition supply, leaving you vulnerable while reloading.

The US is working on a way to counter drones with directed energy weapons, including the High Energy Laser Weapons System 2, and a microwave system. At a cost of \$30 million, Raytheon is building prototypes of both. President Biden's Defense Secretary, Gen. Lloyd Austin (ret.), formerly served on the company's board of directors.

If drones rely on GPS systems to navigate, they can be jammed or hacked, as the Iranians successfully did to a large US surveillance drone in 2010. Some drones rely on internal maps, like the one used in the US Tomahawk cruise missile. It appears that the drones and cruises that hit Saudi Arabia were running on a guidance system similar to the Tomahawk. Of course that makes

your drone or cruise missile autonomous, something that raises its own moral dilemmas. The US is currently working on weapons that use artificial intelligence and will essentially be able to “decide” on their own what to attack. Maybe not “Terminator”, but headed in that direction.

Drones are enormously useful for a range of tasks, from monitoring forest fires to finding lost hikers. They are cheap to run and commercial prices are coming down. Turning them into weapons, however, is not only destabilising, it puts civilians at risk, raises serious moral issues about who bears the cost of war, and in the long run will be very expensive. Drones may be cheap, but anti-aircraft systems are not.

India and Pakistan are in the middle of a drone race. Germany is debating whether it should arm its drones. Mexican drug cartels are waging war against one another using drones.

An international convention on drone use should be on any future arms control agenda. **CT**

*Conn Hallinan can be read at [www.dispatchesfromtheedgeblog.wordpress.com](http://www.dispatchesfromtheedgeblog.wordpress.com) and at [www.middleempireseries.wordpress.com](http://www.middleempireseries.wordpress.com).*

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NEWS | VIEWS | OPINIONS

# INSIGHTS

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GEORGE MONBIOT

## Sea change

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When the BBC made a film about the crisis in our oceans, it somehow managed to avoid naming their greatest cause of ecological destruction: the fishing industry. The only significant sequence on fishing in 2017's *Blue Planet II* was a heartwarming story about how kind Norwegian herring boats are to orcas. It presented industrial fishing not as the greatest threat to sealife, but as its saviour.

It's as if you were to make a film about climate breakdown without revealing the role of fossil fuel companies. Oh, hang on, the BBC did that, too. In 2006, its documentary *The Truth about Climate Change* mentioned fossil fuel companies only as part of the solution, because one of them was experimenting with carbon capture and storage. These films consisted of effete handwringing about a scarcely-defined problem, followed by a suggestion that we should "do something", while offering no hint of what this something might be.

They are symptomatic of a dis-



Photo: Michelle Dennis / Freemages

**ALL AT SEA:** "Commercial fishing is the greatest cause of the death and decline of marine animals".

ease that afflicts most of the media, most of the time: a phobia about confronting power. Though the BBC has subsequently made some better films, it still tends to direct us away from the massive commercial assaults on our life support systems, and towards the issues I call micro-consumerist bollocks (MCB), such

as plastic straws and cotton buds. I see MCB as a displacement activity: a safe substitute for confronting economic power. Far from saving the planet, it distracts us from systemic problems and undermines effective action.

The central premise of neo-liberalism is that the locus of



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decision-making can be shifted from democratic government to the individual, working through “the market”. Rather than using politics to change the world for the better, we can do it through our purchases. If neoliberals even half-believed this nonsense, you’d expect them to ensure we are as knowledgeable as possible, so that we can exercise effective decision-making in their great consumer democracy. Instead, the media keeps us in a state of almost total ignorance about the impacts of our consumption.

But one of our bubbles of ignorance has just been burst. On a small budget, with the first film they’ve ever made, Ali Tabrizi and Lucy Tabrizi have achieved what media giants have repeatedly failed to do: directly confronted power. Their film *Seaspiracy* has become a number one on Netflix in several nations, including the UK. (Disclosure: I’m a contributor). At last people have started to wake up to the astonishing fact that when you drag vast nets over the sea bed, or set lines of hooks 45 kilometres long, or relentlessly pursue declining species, you might just, well, you know, have some effect on ocean life.

The film gets some things wrong. It cites an outdated paper about the likely date of the global collapse of fisheries. Two of its figures about bycatch are incorrect. It confuses carbon stored by lifeforms with carbon stored in seawater. But the thrust of the film is correct: industrial fishing, an issue woefully neglected by the media and conservation groups, is driving many wildlife populations and ecosystems around the world towards collapse. Vast fishing ships from powerful nations deprive local

people of their subsistence. Many “marine reserves” are a total farce, as industrial fishing is still allowed inside them. In the EU, the intensity of trawling in so-called protected areas is greater than in unprotected places. “Sustainable seafood” is often nothing of the kind. Commercial fishing is the greatest cause of the death and decline of marine animals. It can also be extremely cruel to humans: slavery and other gross exploitations of labour are rampant.

Only 6.2 percent of the world’s marine fish populations, according to the latest assessment by the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation, are neither “fully fished” nor “overfished”, and they continue to decline. “Fully fished” means that fish are being caught at their “maximum sustainable yield”: the most that can be taken without crashing the stock.

This is a central aim of fisheries management. But from the ecologist’s perspective, it often means grossly over-exploited. As the work of Professor Callum Roberts shows, populations of fish and other marine animals were massively greater before industrial fishing began, and the state of the seabed, in many areas, entirely different. Even “well-managed” fishing at maximum yields prevents the restoration of rich and abundant ecosystems.

I agree, however, that details also matter, and while all films – like all journalism and all science – make mistakes, we should be sticklers for the facts. So why did the fisheries scientists who are screaming about the errors in *Seaspiracy* not complain about the

far greater misrepresentations and omissions in *Blue Planet II* and the BBC’s follow-up series, *Blue Planet Live*?

*Blue Planet Live* took distraction and deflection to a whole new level. Though it focused largely on plastics, it failed to mention the plastics industry. It was as if plastic, climate breakdown and fishing pressure all materialised out of thin air. As it swerved round powerful interests, most of the solutions it proposed were tiny technological sticking plasters: rescuing orphaned seals, seeding coral, removing hooks from the mouths of sharks. Some of its claims were not just wrong but hilarious. For example, it stated that we can “rid our oceans of plastics” through beach cleans.

So why the silence? Perhaps because some fisheries scientists, as the great biologist Ramsom Myers pointed out, have come to identify with the industry on which their livelihoods depend. While they seem happy for outrageous distortions that favour industrial fishing to pass, they go berserk about much smaller mistakes that disfavour it.

To me, the problem is symbolised by two words I keep stumbling across in scientific and official papers: “underfished” and “underexploited”. These are the terms fisheries scientists use for populations that are not “fully fished”. The words people use expose the way they think, and what powerful, illuminating, horrible words these are. They seem to belong to another era, when we believed in the doctrine of dominion: humans have a sacred duty to conquer and exploit the Earth. I suspect some people are so angry because

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it's not just malpractice Seaspiracy exposes, but an entire worldview.

It's time to see the oceans in a new light: to treat fish not as seafood but as wildlife; to see their societies not as stocks but as populations; and marine food webs not as fisheries but as ecosystems. It's time we saw their existence as a

wonder of nature, rather than an opportunity for exploitation. It's time to redefine our relationship with the blue planet. **CT**

*George Monbiot is a columnist for the Guardian, where this article first appeared. His website is [www.monbiot.com](http://www.monbiot.com).*

last month -- all US forces will be withdrawn from that country.

What Biden didn't say was as significant as what he did say. He declared that "US troops, as well as forces deployed by our NATO allies and operational partners, will be out of Afghanistan" before Sept. 11. And "we will not stay involved in Afghanistan militarily".

But President Biden did not say that the United States will stop bombing Afghanistan. What's more, he pledged that "we will keep providing assistance to the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces", a declaration that actually indicates a tacit intention to "stay involved in Afghanistan militarily".

And, while the big-type headlines and prominent themes of media coverage are filled with flat-out statements that the US war in Afghanistan will end come September, the fine print of coverage says otherwise.

The banner headline across the top of the *New York Times* home page during much of the day of Biden's announcement proclaimed: "Withdrawal of US Troops in Afghanistan Will End Longest American War". But, buried in the 32nd paragraph of a story headed "Biden to Withdraw All Combat Troops From Afghanistan by Sept. 11", the *Times* reported, "Instead of declared troops in Afghanistan, the United States will most likely rely on a shadowy combination of clandestine Special Operations forces, Pentagon contractors and covert intelligence operatives to find and attack the most dangerous Qaeda or Islamic State threats, cur-

Photo: Reese Erlich



BOMB VICTIMS: Guljumma, 7, and her father, Wakil Tawos Khan, at the Helmand Refugee Camp District 5 in Kabul, Afghanistan, on August 31, 2009.

NORMAN SOLOMON

## US war on Afghanistan will continue

When I met a seven-year-old girl named Guljumma at a refugee camp in Kabul a dozen years ago, she told me that bombs fell early one morning while she slept at home in southern Afghanistan's Helmand Valley. With a soft, matter-of-fact voice, Guljumma described what happened. Some

people in her family died. She lost an arm.

Troops on the ground didn't kill Guljumma's relatives and leave her to live with only one arm. The US air war did.

There's no good reason to assume the air war in Afghanistan will be over when -- according to President Biden's announcement



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rent and former American officials said”.

Matthew Hoh, a Marine combat veteran who in 2009 became the highest-ranking US official to resign from the State Department in protest of the Afghanistan war, told my colleagues at the Institute for Public Accuracy, “Regardless of whether the 3,500 acknowledged US troops leave Afghanistan, the US military will still be present in the form of thousands of special operations and CIA personnel in and around Afghanistan, through dozens of squadrons of manned attack aircraft and drones stationed on land bases and on aircraft carriers in the region, and by hundreds of cruise missiles on ships and submarines”.

We scarcely hear about it, but the US air war on Afghanistan has been a major part of Pentagon operations there. And for more than a year, the US government hasn’t even gone through the motions of disclosing how much of that bombing has occurred.

“We don’t know, because our government doesn’t want us to”, diligent researchers Medea Benjamin and Nicolas Davies wrote in March. “From January 2004 until February 2020, the US military kept track of how many bombs and missiles it dropped on Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria, and published those figures in regular, monthly Airpower Summaries, which were readily available to journalists and the public. But in March 2020, the Trump administration abruptly stopped publishing US Airpower Summaries, and the Biden administration has so far

not published any either”.

The US war in Afghanistan won’t end just because President Biden and US news media tell us so. As Guljumma and countless other Afghan people have experienced, troops on the ground aren’t the only measure of horrific warfare. No matter what the White House and the headlines say, US taxpayers won’t stop subsidising the killing in Afghanistan until there is an end to the bombing and “special operations” that remain

shrouded in secrecy. **CT**

**Norman Solomon** is the national director of *RootsAction.org* and the author of many books including *War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death*. He was a Bernie Sanders delegate from California to the 2016 and 2020 Democratic National Conventions. Solomon is the founder and executive director of the *Institute for Public Accuracy*.

SAM PIZZIGATI

## What can we do to start civilising the rich?

What makes a society civilised? In a word: limits. Civilised societies – to protect and enhance the greater good – set limits on how people behave.

We limit, for instance, how fast motorists can drive. We limit how many ducks hunters can shoot. We limit how much noise our neighbours can make late at night.

But we have one aspect of contemporary life where no limits ever seem to apply: We let our wealthiest keep getting ever wealthier. And the pace of that enriching is ever quickening.

Back in 1982, the year *Forbes* started listing America’s 400 richest on an annual basis, the nation sported a mere 13 billionaires, and the richest on that list had just \$2-billion. The combined wealth

of all 400 on that initial *Forbes* list totalled \$91.8-billion, about \$252-billion in today’s dollars. By 1990, our billionaire population had jumped to 66, and the combined wealth of those billionaires alone had hit \$240-billion, nearly the wealth of the entire 1982 *Forbes* top 400.

And then the real fun began, as the Institute for Policy Studies and Americans for Tax Fairness detailed last month. By the year 2000, our US billionaire cohort had more than quadrupled in size over the 1990 level, to 298 super rich, and their collective net worth had soared to \$1.7-trillion, seven times the 1990 total. By 2020, our billionaire class had swelled to 614, nearly ten times the 1990 total.

That upsurge has spilled into 2021. Our US billionaires, just over

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three months into the new year, now count 719 three-comma souls in their ranks. They hold an astounding \$4.56-trillion in wealth.

The worldwide billionaire population, meanwhile, has leaped by 660 over the past year, to over 2,750. The United States is still leading the billionaire pack, but China, with nearly 700, is coming up quick. The world's 20 richest individuals now hold more wealth than the entire bottom half of humanity.

Can the world's wealth continue to concentrate this intensely forever? The simple answer: Nothing in human affairs goes on forever. But can we point to any hopeful indications that a turnaround – some real limits – may actually be approaching? We certainly can, if we look closely enough.

One positive sign came at the policy convention of Canada's New Democratic Party, that nation's leading progressive party over recent decades and the current majority party in British Columbia. The delegates to this NDP convention resolved that Canada should raise the tax rate on personal income over \$1-million to 80 percent and start levying an additional 1 percent annual tax on those with private fortunes over \$20-million.

Other delegates at the NDP convention wanted the party to take even stronger steps and rallied around a proposal to place a 100 percent tax on wealth over \$1-billion. In effect, these delegates were proposing a lid – a limit – on the wealth of the wealthy.

If the convention had adopted

that limit, mainstream commentators would have no doubt dismissed its supporters as silly and politically unmoored radicals. But over on the other side of the Atlantic no one can dismiss the UK's Deborah Hargreaves so easily, and she's talking limits, too.

Hargreaves, a former financial editor of the *Financial Times* and business editor at the *Guardian*, rates as one of the UK's most respected economic commentators.



Art: PkHere.com

In 2010, she chaired the High Pay Commission, an independent inquiry into compensation throughout the UK private and public sectors that brought together leading figures from British business, labor, and civil society.

In 2011, this Commission published an exhaustive report that spelled out why “excessive top pay is deeply damaging to the UK as a whole”, and recommended a dozen modest steps that could help restore more appropriate compensation patterns, everything from requiring investment fund managers to report how they vote on corporate executive pay packages to including employee representatives on corporate pay panels.

Also included in these recom-

mendations: a call for a “permanent body to monitor high pay”, That permanent body, the High Pay Centre, launched in 2011 with Hargreaves as the founding director. Earlier this month, in the first of a series of events to mark the Centre's tenth anniversary, Hargreaves looked back on the past decade and made clear that modest steps to rein in outrageous executive compensation can no longer suffice.

“We have been tinkering around the edges of corporate governance”, she noted. “We've created this system that has allowed greed and a sense of entitlement to accrue rewards to those who are already extremely wealthy and highly paid. I think we have to start thinking big, start talking about bolder measures”.

And what sort of boldness does Hargreaves have in mind?

In the UK, top business executives as late as 1979 were making less than 20 times average worker pay. At Barclays, the top exec that year pulled down just 14.5 times the banking giant's average employee pay. By 2011, the Barclays gap between top and average pay had widened to 75 times. In 2019, the Barclays chief exec pocketed 140 times the bank's average worker pay.

But these numbers can seem almost egalitarian compared to corporate pay gaps in the United States. In 2018, 50 US corporations paid their top execs over 1,000 times their median worker pay. Typical CEOs in the United States now annually walk off with over 300 times their worker



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compensation.

Stats like those have lawmakers in Washington advancing a new “Tax Excessive CEO Pay Act”. legislation that would subject corporations with CEO-median worker pay gaps over 50:1 to higher taxes. Legislation along similar limiting lines has, to be sure, been before Congress in one form or another for over 30 years. But this legislation has heavy Capitol Hill hitters behind it. Its lead sponsor,

Senator Bernie Sanders, currently chairs the powerful Senate Budget Committee.

Civilization marches on. **CT**

**Sam Pizzigati** co-edits *Inequality.org*. His latest books include *The Case for a Maximum Wage* and *The Rich Don't Always Win: The Forgotten Triumph over Plutocracy that Created the American Middle Class, 1900-1970*. Follow him at @Too\_Much\_Online.

But US executives of the oil giants testified to Congress that there had not been a deepwater rig disaster “in over 50 years” despite knowing that their platform in the Caspian had blown out just months earlier. Interior caved to the pressure, let BP drill, and drill using a supremely dangerous method, ignorant of the prior blow-out.

And did I mention that Chevron named a super-tanker after Bush’s US Secretary of State, its former board member? The VLCC Condoleezza Rice.

While I had to cross the planet to confirm BP’s cover-up of the prior blow-out, our source for the State Department’s complicity came from another courageous source closer to home. Bradley, now Chelsea, Manning, passed the Bush crew’s secret cables to my colleagues at the *Guardian*.

I arrived on the Gulf Coast long after BP ads declared, “The water is clean and the beaches open!” However, because I wouldn’t join BP’s Potemkin tours of “clean” beaches, I had to charter a boat and wade ashore. To BP’s disapproval, I spoke with the line of black people picking up hunks of oil. For the clean-up, they were given kitty litter scoopers tied to sticks.

BP’s white straw bosses, sipping sparkling water under tents, had given the workers little booties to put over their feet. My beach companion, Professor Rick Steiner, then Chairman of the Biology Department at the University of Alaska, an expert in oil contamination, was freaked out, watching the workers dancing in cancer-causing poison. BP did not give them the hazmat suits the oil companies were required to provide during

GREG PALAST

## Deepwater Horizon and corporate homicide

**O**n April 20, 2010, eleven men on the Deepwater Horizon were incinerated when the BP/Transocean oil rig blew out and exploded.

“Accident”?!

That’s the official line, and I could have swallowed it – except for a message I received from a very nervous source floating in the Caspian Sea. The source told me he’d been an eye-witness to the BP/Transocean oil rig blow-out – not the one in the Gulf, but an IDENTICAL blow-out in the Caspian that happened just 17 months before its Gulf companion exploded.

The hunt for the truth took me to Baku, Azerbaijan, in Central Asia (and detention by dictatorship’s not-so-secret police), meetings with MI-6 sources in London, and beaches on the Gulf Coast and in the Arctic. Watch this video – [\[youtube.com/watch?v=NIVUjDR-b7Y&feature=youtu.be\]\(http://youtube.com/watch?v=NIVUjDR-b7Y&feature=youtu.be\) – from my investigation for Britain’s Channel 4 Dispatches. It ran world-wide... except in the USA.](http://www.</a></p></div><div data-bbox=)

If you don’t know about the earlier blow-out, it’s because BP didn’t tell you, didn’t tell anyone but its drilling partners Exxon and Chevron – and in a top secret cable, George W. Bush’s State Department. The oil company chiefs kept the devastating information tightly concealed – even though US law required they report such rig failures to the US Department of Interior.

**I**f BP had reported the disaster to Interior, the 11 men would be alive today, because Interior’s experts had tried to stop BP from drilling in the unstable deep waters of the Gulf.

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the clean-up in Alaska.

For sucking fumes in the hot Mississippi sun, BP paid little more than the minimum wage. Rafael Gill told me, “I lost everything” in the spill. As the oil sloshed ashore, the Gulf Coast casinos and tourist joints where he worked shut down. To feed his kids, their food was limited to hot dogs and bologna sandwiches. “Sometimes I don’t eat”, he said, so his children could.

He kept working as he talked, scared to lose the job, and careful never to let his kitty litter scooper go deeper than a quarter inch below surface of the sand, as BP demanded.

Why a quarter inch? Dr. Steiner took a spade and dug about eight inches when he hit the ooze. BP only wanted to give the beach a nice facial for the TV crews.

The night the Deepwater Horizon blew, I was with the dead rig workers’ attorney, Daniel Becnel. We watched the TV screen, with fire vessels spritzing water on the massive oil blaze, as effective as a couple bottles of seltzer on a burning skyscraper. Twenty years earlier, I had directed an investigation of fraud in the Exxon Valdez crack up, so I happen to know a fair amount about oil spill containment. As an investigator, I also know a lot about bullshit. This wasn’t spill containment, this was bullshit.

Containing an oil spill at sea isn’t rocket science. Basically, you surround a stricken rig or vessel with rubber, and suck the oil

out. Under federal regulation, no oil company can drill unless the rubber “boom” and a “skimmer” sucker-ship is within four hours of the rig. It took four days to get sufficient boom to the Deepwater Horizon, though by that time, the slick was bigger than Jamaica, impossible to surround.

For this reporter, it was déjà



ABLAZE: The Deepwater Horizon in April 2010.

vu all over again. What I saw happening in the Gulf was exactly what happened in Alaska 21 years before when the Exxon Valdez hit on the very spot where the oil shippers promised to keep their rubber boom. But the promised containment equipment wasn’t there.

And who lied to safety inspectors in Alaska about the rubber boom? The company legally in charge of shipping safety: British Petroleum.

And once again, here in the Gulf, there was no boom, no skimmer vessel. Once again, it was BP who made the promise in writing – but found it cheaper to give Raphael Gill a pooper scooper and minimum wage, to pay off a few widows, to pay off a few politicians,

than to spend the billions required annually to keep our coasts safe and their workers alive.

And when I say, “pay off politicians”, the price varies from nation to nation. Les Abrahams, former MI6 agent and BP executive noted that while US regulators were influenced by Super Bowl tickets and other cheap favours, the Caspian oily-garchs were substantially more expensive. Abrahams and Lord Browne of Mattingly, then BP’s Chairman, handed the Azerbaijan’s president a check for \$30-million.

BP denies the payment was a bribe, but one of its board members, also a member of Parliament, did not deny to my team at Channel 4 Britain, that BP obtained the oil drill-

ing contract in that nation by providing the guns and intelligence to overthrow the elected government.

But that’s another story, another book. It’s called *Vultures Picnic*. Here’s an excerpt: [www.gregpalast.com/deepwater-horizon-the-untold-story/](http://www.gregpalast.com/deepwater-horizon-the-untold-story/) **CT**

**Greg Palast** (*Rolling Stone*, *Guardian*, *BBC*) is the author of *The New York Times* bestsellers, *The Best Democracy Money Can Buy* and *Billionaires & Ballot Bandits*, out as major motion non-fiction movie: *The Best Democracy Money Can Buy: The Case of the Stolen Election*, available on Amazon and Amazon Prime. His website is [www.gregpalast.com](http://www.gregpalast.com)



Photo: Scott Lewis / Flickr.com



**SHOPFLOOR CONCERN:** Amazon workers are unhappy with constant monitoring of every second of their workdays by management at the company's huge warehouses

GRANVILLE WILLIAMS

## Amazon tactics beat union drive – for now

The vote to organise an Amazon warehouse in Bessemer, Alabama made global news. It was a David vs Goliath struggle and we now know the outcome of the ballot. It wasn't good news for trade unionists.

The Amazon warehouse at Bessemer, near Birmingham, Alabama, opened a year ago, just as the pandemic took hold. It was part of a major expansion at the company that accelerated during the pandemic. Last year, Amazon grew by more than 400,000 employees in the United States, where it now has almost a million workers, making it the second largest employer after Walmart.

The unionisation effort came when a small group of workers at Bessemer approached the local branch of the retail workers' union (RWDSU) last summer. They were frustrated at how Amazon constantly monitored every second of their workday through technology, and they felt that their managers were not willing to listen to their complaints.

Organisers appeared to have strong support early on, getting at least 2,000 workers to sign cards saying they wanted an election, enough for the National Labor Relations Board, which conducts union elections, to approve a vote.

It's quite clear that the erosion of

that initial support was due to one factor – the long-drawn out timescale for voting. The election was conducted by mail, a concession to the pandemic. Instead of holding an election over just a few days, workers had more than a month to complete and mail in their ballots. This gave Amazon the opportunity to mount a sustained, anti-union drive within the Bessemer warehouse. The company has a track record on how to do this effectively.

As the union drive heated up, Amazon used direct communications to undermine the pro-union support. "Where will your dues go?" Amazon asked in posters inside the warehouse which also circulated on social media. Another proclaimed, "Unions can't. We can".

And there were regular face-to-face meetings with Amazon workers. Amazon set up a website to tell workers that they would have to skip dinner and school supplies to pay their union dues. Amazon also asked county officials to increase 'maximum green times' on the warehouse stoplight to clear the parking lot faster. This made it difficult for union canvassers to approach potential voters as they left work.

There has been some analysis of the factors which saw the union drive defeated by a 2 to 1 margin. One of the best observers of what happened at Amazon is Mike Elk of *PayDay Report*. He points out that when the union started its campaign last June outrage over unsafe working conditions during Covid-19 was raw but, "while they had an outpouring of initial momentum and interest, they never developed a strong organising com-

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mittee that took the time to build trust through shop-floor action and organising”.

Given the alertness of Amazon management to any union activity in the Bessemer plant, that may have been a big ask.

Mike Elk’s interviews with people who were uncertain about the union are very revealing. He notes, “Initial union enthusiasm support collapsed under the weight of a sophisticated anti-union campaign by Amazon that combined threats of job loss with promises of improvement if workers rejected the union. Many workers that voted against the union, admitted that they knew little about unions.

“This allowed the company through anti-union meetings to create fear over the change that unions could bring, warning work-

ers that their wages may actually decrease under a contract or worse that their facility may close”.

**Editor’s Update:** Amazon defeated the union drive in Bessemer, but the fight for union recognition continues across the US

Candice Bernt reports on the website Truthout.org, “Now, as the Retail, Wholesale, and Department Store Union (RWDSU) seeks a second election through the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), filing official objections Friday charging Amazon with engaging in illegal interference to defeat the union, Staten Island ‘JFK8’ warehouse workers with The Congress of Essential Workers (TCOEW) tell Truthout they aren’t deterred by the outcome. Rather, their on-the-ground experiences in

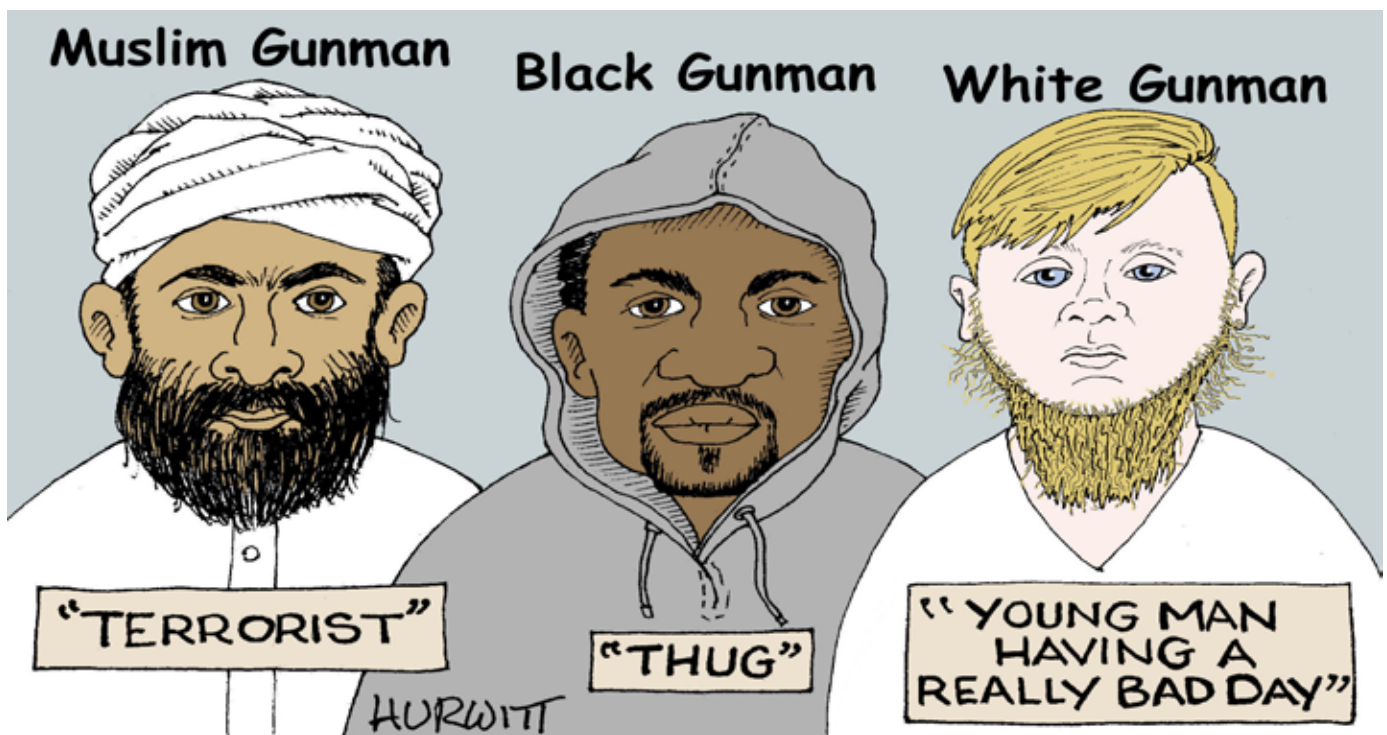
Alabama, where the unionisation effort gained national attention but ultimately failed, have taught them hard lessons that will inform their own approach to unionising JFK8.

“‘We all wanted the union push to be successful in Alabama, especially with the odds being totally against them, being that Alabama is a nonunion state. But the fact that they had the opportunity to vote as a facility was historic,’ JFK8 warehouse worker Derrick Palmer told Truthout. ‘We have to take the bruises and pick it up where they left off. If anything it started a movement. It’s going to be like a domino effect.’” **CT**

*Granville Williams is the editor of MediaNorth – [www.medianorth.org.uk](http://www.medianorth.org.uk). This article was first published at [www](http://www).*

## HURWITT’S EYE

MARK HURWITT





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