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**CONFESSIONS OF A FAILED LUDDITE** | Joe Allen  
**THE GREAT GAME OF SMASHING COUNTRIES** | John Pilger  
**HOW SNAKE OIL GOT A BAD NAME** | Caitjan Gainty

Issue 227

# ColdType

WRITING WORTH READING ■ PHOTOS WORTH SEEING

October 2021



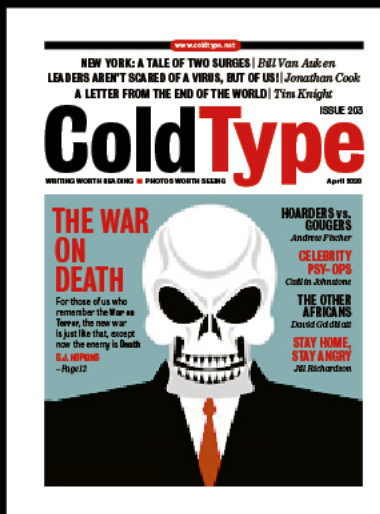
## AN EMPIRE BUILT ON BLOOD

Extinction Rebellion  
activists wage 14-days  
of protest in London

*8-pages of photos  
by Ron Fassbender*

– PAGE 20

**PLUS:** SAM PIZZIGATI | GEORGE MONBIOT | WILLIAM D. HARTUNG | TREVOR GRUNDY | PHILIP KRASKE  
CAITLIN JOHNSTONE | EDWARD CURTIN | JANE BRAXTON LITTLE | ROGER A. DEAKINS | AND MORE



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**Cover:** Extinction Rebellion activist dressed as a banker writhes in a pool of fake blood outside the London Stock Exchange. By Ron Fassbender – Page 20

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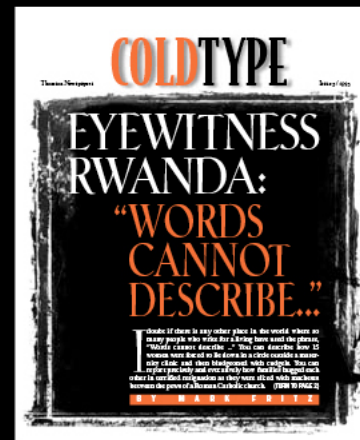
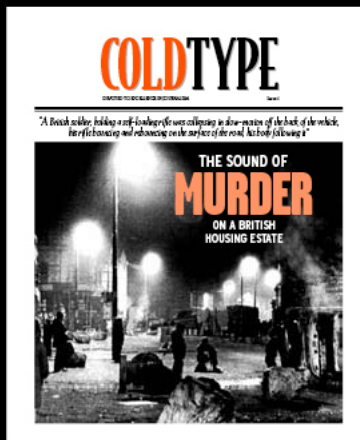
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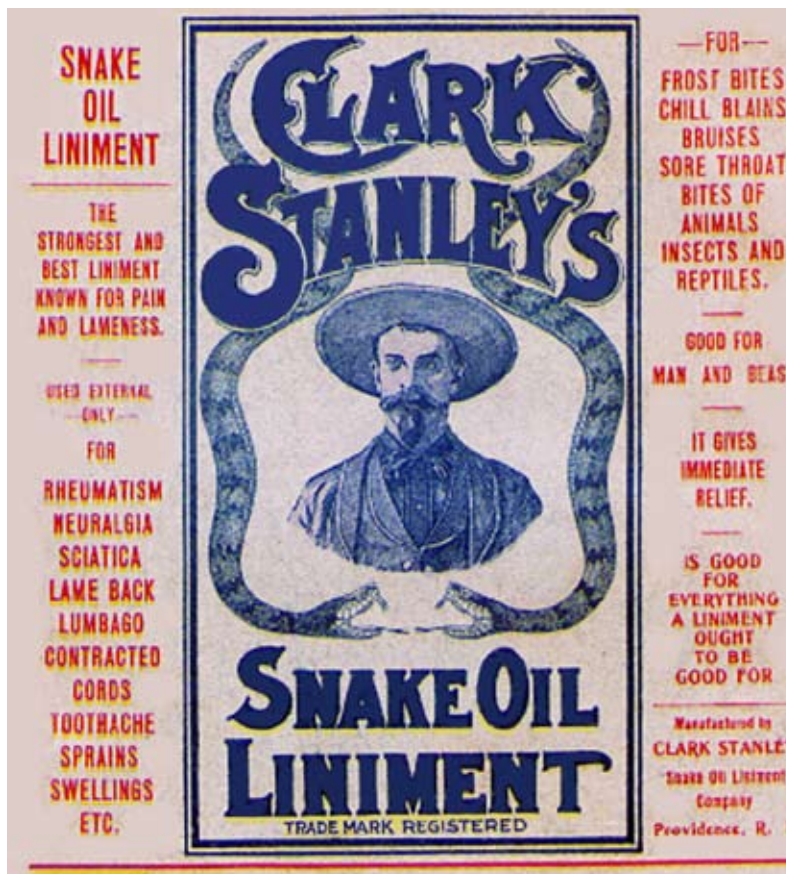


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## INSIGHTS

During the Covid pandemic, the pejorative term “snake-oil salesman” has been bandied about a lot. It’s been used, perhaps with a tinge of 1980s nostalgia, to describe convicted fraudster and serial opportunist Jim Bakker, whose colloidal Silver Solution required only some deft rebranding to become a specific curative for Covid-19. For this, the televangelist found himself on the receiving end of multiple cease-and-desist letters, followed by lawsuits, from several US states. This past June, at least one suit was settled when Bakker agreed to return the “donations” his ministry had collected in exchange for his product.

Then there are the “Snake-Oil Salesmen of the Senate”, as a *New York Times* opinion piece labelled them. This referred to a collection of Republican senators and the medical experts they had invited to a hearing about hydroxychloro-



Texas cowboy Clark Stanley, born in 1854, was the self-styled ‘Rattlesnake King,’ who marketed snake oil as a patent medicine.

CAITJAN GAINTY

## How snake oil got a bad name

Public Domain

quine, a drug hyped early in the pandemic by Donald Trump as something he had a “really good feeling” about.

The opinion piece’s author, Ashish Jha, dean of the Brown University School of Public Health, had warned at the hearing against deploying the drug against Covid. Dr Peter McCullough, a cardiologist at Baylor University Medical Center, described Jha’s testimony as “reckless and dangerous for the nation”.

Just to confuse matters, Floridian reptile squalene – actual snake oil – has been proposed by scientists for use in Covid vaccines. Its use would serve double duty: it would help to boost the immune system response, while also helping control the population of invasive Burmese pythons ravaging wildlife populations in Florida’s everglades.

Each of these cases quite aptly recalls the long, fraught history of snake oil. This therapy changed in

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reputation over several centuries from the tried and true (especially for ailments like rheumatism) to the dark and dangerous; from a symbol of the unregulated populism of American medicine in the late 19th-century, to a barb in the early 20th-century that people in the medical business used to ridicule the competition.

Until the late 19th-century, snake oil actually led a decidedly uncontroversial existence. Across many cultures and countries and over several centuries, its qualities – among which are an abundance of omega-3 fatty acids – made it the go-to medicine for many ailments. Though medical journals of the late 19th-century denounced the stuff as one of the “ancient medical delusions” imported from Europe, a more common attribution was to Native Americans, who had purportedly passed on therapeutic knowledge of snake oil to early European settlers.

There are other origin stories. One wildly popular and oft-republished late-19th-century newspaper article credited “African voodoo doctors” as snake oil’s source. Another version had Chinese migrants bringing it with them in the 1840s, spreading it across the country as they laid the tracks of the transcontinental railroad and used it to ease the pain in their aching joints.

Wherever it came from originally, snake oil was all the rage during

the mid-19th-century, boosted by American “medicine shows” and the salespeople who worked them. It was the “cure for Rheumatism, Deafness, Catarrh, Hay Fever, Cramps, Pain and Sore Throat of any nature”, ran one typical advertisement. One company promised to pay \$1,000 to anyone whose rheumatism was not “cured or helped” by its Rattle Snake Oil. Another, selling Dr White Eagle’s Indian Rattle Snake Oil, offered to send anyone with 50 cents (plus 10¢ for postage) a trial bottle contain-

ads to get to the good stuff. And while they understood that what was on offer might not be especially effective, the bottled snake oil also wasn’t much less effective than something an orthodox medical practitioner might have on offer. And it was far, far cheaper.

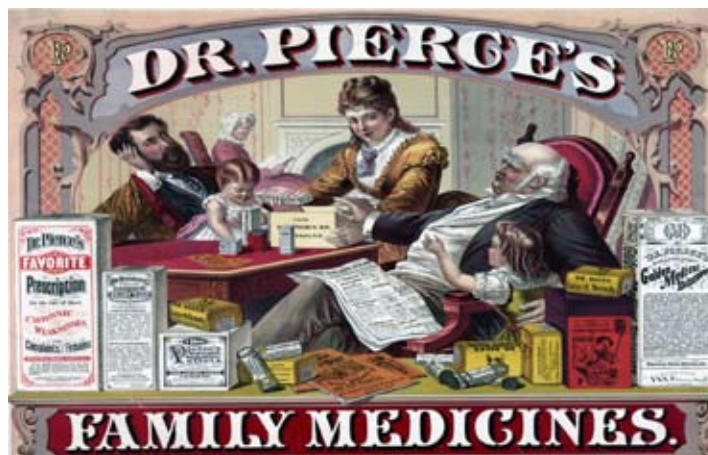
For their part, hucksters at these shows knew they’d see these same audiences again the next time through, so their aspiration was not the quick grift but, in fact, something more like brand loyalty. If theirs was a con, it was a very long con that was hardly distinguishable at the time from the way other medical practitioners operated.

What really sealed the fate of snake oil salespeople, as the scammers and fraudsters we now take them to be, was not new information about the effectiveness of their wares, but rather the shifting fortunes of the medical marketplace. The 1906

Pure Food and Drug Act threw up new barriers to exactly the kind of unregulated interstate commerce that drove the medicine shows.

At the same time, professional medical organisations like the American Medical Association (AMA) began a powerful marketing campaign to discredit the competition, regardless of its ability to address and treat illness. Those who had been equal players in the 19th-century medical market place suddenly found themselves standing on the wrong side of history in the early 20th.

Public Domain



Poster from 1874 shows the different medicinal products available from one company.

ing enough oil to prove its worth as the cure to “any ordinary case of rheumatism or catarrh”.

To be sure, many who hawked their wares at these travelling medicine-shows rivalled Jim Bakker in their audacious manipulation of audiences, most of whom were enticed there by the highly acclaimed free entertainment (Harry Houdini got his start on the medicine-show circuit).

But medicine-show audiences were likely far cannier than they have been given credit for – they knew they had to wait through the

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Given the contempt shown for the medicine show by groups like the AMA, it was somewhat ironic that another powerful medical association, the American College of Surgeons, adopted much the same format to hawk its own product: the standardised hospital. Sandwiching sermons of medical orthodoxy within a lineup of entertaining films, music and other exciting events, the college worked to convert the crowd from patent medicines to the care offered by their local hospital.

If the audience was sceptical and impatient for the show to go

on, they had a right to be, since hospitals had long been notorious deathtraps. But both the familiarity of the format and the demonstrable improvements made to hospitals over this period made the traveling shows a raging success. Yesterday's snake-oil sales tactics had become good medical practice. **CT**

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independence. More in-depth reports have also appeared in the *Miami Herald* ("France pulled off one of the greatest heists ever. It left Haiti perpetually impoverished"), *France 24* ("France must return the billions extorted from Haiti") and ABC News ("How colonial-era debt helped shape Haiti's poverty and political unrest").

In a remarkable act of imperial humiliation, two decades after independence Haiti began paying France a huge indemnity for lost property. After years of pressure, 12 French warships with 500 cannons were dispatched to Haiti's coast in 1825. Under threat of invasion and the restoration of slavery, Francophile Haitian president Jean-Pierre Boyer agreed to pay French slaveholders 150-million francs for lost land and now-free Haitians. Paris also demanded preferential commercial agreements and French banks loaned Haiti the money at remarkably high interest rates.

In 1825 the debt of independence represented about 300 percent of the country's GDP. While the principal was later reduced, the interest Haiti paid was exorbitant.

It took Haiti 122 years to pay the debt. In 1898 half of government expenditures went to paying France and French banks while that sum reached 80 percent in 1914. (The debt was bought by US banks during the 1915-34 occupation and the final payments made to them.)

The agreement Haiti made with France had many deleterious impacts. The 50 percent reduction in duties on French goods undercut

YVES ENGLER

## Haiti's debt of independence

In the vast history of imperialist exploitation, few episodes match the depravity of Haiti's debt of independence. Military blackmail of a small country by a superpower, prioritising "property rights" over human rights, racial capitalism, a sellout "light skinned" local bourgeoisie and the way our past haunts the present are all part of the story.

After winning their liberation from slavery and colonial rule in a war that killed half the population, Haitians were forced to pay their former masters an astronomical sum for their freedom. This oppressive debt Haiti paid to secure its independence is finally becoming

part of the mainstream narrative about that country's impoverishment. In a startling example of the media recognising the debt of independence, a 200-word *Journal de Montreal* introduction to Haiti's vulnerability to earthquakes noted: "Earthquakes as devastating as that of Saturday in Haiti have already occurred in 2010, 1887, 1842, 1770 and 1751... This poverty is due in large part to the exorbitant debt Haiti had to pay France for its independence. Converted into today's money, the debt is equivalent to \$30-billion Canadian."

In recent weeks CNN, Reuters, the *New York Times*, CBC and others have all referenced the debt of

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Haitian industry. To make the first payment of 30-million francs to compensate French slave owners the government shuttered every school in the country. It has been labelled the first ever structural adjustment program and contributed to the Haitian government's long-standing under-investment in education.

To find the money to pay France, President Boyer implemented the 1826 rural code, the foundation for “legal apartheid” between urban and rural people. In the countryside, movement was restricted, socialising after midnight banned, small-scale commerce limited, all in the name of increasing export crops to generate cash to pay France. The peasantry paid money to the state, receiving little in return.

Paying French slave owners had another damaging effect. A central motivation in agreeing to the debt was to solidify Haiti's standing as an internationally recognised independent nation. Instead, it began a vicious cycle of debt peonage that undercut Haitian sovereignty.

To pay the first instalment of the indemnity Haiti took out an onerous loan from French banks. As part of securing debt payments, French bankers set up the Banque Nationale de la Republique d'Haiti in 1880. Effectively the country's treasury, tax revenue was deposited there and it printed Haiti's money.

Growing consciousness of the debt of independence is largely due to the Jean-Bertrand Aristide government's push for restitution. In the lead-up to Haiti's 200-year

anniversary, the Haitian government instigated a commission to estimate the cost of the ransom, which they put at \$21-billion. The Aristide government called for its restitution and instigated legal proceedings to force Paris to pay. The demand was part of why France (along with Canada and the US) helped overthrow Aristide in 2004 and the coup government dropped the issue.

In another move that garnered significant attention to the debt, a group of mostly Canadian activists published a fake announce-



Haitian leader Henri Christophe.

ment indicating that France would repay the debt. Tied to France's Bastille Day and the devastating 2010 earthquake, the stunt forced Paris to deny it. Calling themselves the Committee for the Reimbursement of the Indemnity Money Extorted from Haiti (CRIME), they subsequently launched a public letter signed by many prominent individuals.

While the media should be commended for linking Haiti's impoverishment to its debt of independence, it would help people make sense of the situation there today

if they mentioned another point of history.

Right from the beginning most Haitians opposed paying the debt. Only a small elite desperate for international recognition and trade agreed to it. In response to an earlier French push for reparations, leader of Haiti's north, Henri Christophe said: “Is it possible that they wish to be recompensed for the loss of our persons? Is it conceivable that Haitians who have escaped torture and massacre at the hands of these men, Haitians who have conquered their own country by the force of their arms and at the cost of their blood, these same free Haitians should now purchase their property and persons once again with money paid to their former oppressors?”

For Christophe, and most Haitians, the answer was clear. But the son of a French tailor, Boyer was willing to sell out the revolution and vast majority of Haitians to improve his and the merchant class' immediate standing. Unfortunately, the light skinned elite who succumbed to France's demands two centuries ago largely continue to rule Haiti.

The same racial, class and ideological dynamics that led Haitian officials to compensate Paris for defeating slavery and colonialism remain in place today. The media should also talk about that. **CT**

**Yves Engler** is the author of 12 books. His latest is *Stand on Guard For Whom? — A People's History of the Canadian Military*. His web site is [www.yvesengler.com](http://www.yvesengler.com).



# INSIGHTS

Staff Sgt. Gary A. White / US Army



AN END TO ALL THIS? A US soldier shoots at the enemy during a firefight at an Afghan police checkpoint in Kunar Province, Afghanistan, on Sept. 18, 2010.

NORMAN SOLOMON

## Joe Biden fuels Afghan ‘madness of militarism’

Joe Biden provided a stirring sound bite on August 26 when he spoke from the White House just after suicide bombers killed 13 US troops and 170 Afghans at a Kabul airport: “To those who carried out this attack, as well as anyone who wishes America harm, know this: We will not forgive. We will not forget. We will hunt you down and make you pay”. But the president’s pledge was a prelude to yet another episode of what Martin Luther King Jr. called “the madness of militarism”.

The US quickly followed up on Biden’s vow with a drone strike in Afghanistan’s Nangarhar province that the Pentagon said killed

two “high-profile” ISIS-K targets. Speaking to media with standard reassurance, an Army general used artful wording to declare: “We know of zero civilian casualties”. But news reporting told of some civilian deaths. And worse was soon to come.

On August 29, another American drone attack – this time near the Kabul airport – led to reliable reports that the dead included children. The *Washington Post* reported the following day that family members said the US drone strike “killed 10 civilians in Kabul, including several small children”.

According to a neighbour who saw the attack, the newspaper added, “the dead were all from a single extended family who were exiting a car in their modest driveway when the strike hit a nearby vehicle”.

Words that Biden used on August 26, vowing revenge, might occur to surviving Afghan relatives and their sympathisers: “*We will not forgive. We will not forget. And maybe even, “We will hunt you down and make you pay”.*”

Revenge cycles have no end, and they’ve continued to power endless US warfare – as a kind of perpetual emotion machine – in the name of opposing terrorism. It’s a pattern that has played out countless times in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere for two decades. And it should not be a mystery that US warfare has created still more “enemy” combatants.

But neither the US mass media nor official Washington has much interest in the kind of rational caveat that retired US Army Gen. William Odom offered during a C-SPAN interview way back in 2002: “Terrorism is not an enemy. It cannot be defeated. It’s a tactic. It’s about as sensible to say we declare war on night attacks and expect we’re going to win that war. We’re not going to win the war on terrorism”.

By any other name, the “war on terror” became – for the White House, Pentagon and Congress – a political licence to kill and displace people on a large scale in at least eight countries, rarely seen, much less understood. Whatever the intent, the resulting carnage has often included many civilians. The names and faces of the dead

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and injured very rarely reach those who sign the orders and appropriate the funds.

Amid his administration's botch of planning for the pullout, corporate media have been denouncing Biden for his wise decision to finally withdraw the US military from Afghanistan. No doubt Biden hopes to mollify the laptop warriors of the Washington press corps with drone strikes and other displays of air power. But the last 20 years have shown that you can't stop on-the-ground terrorism by

terrorising people from the air. Sooner or later, what goes around comes around. **CT**

**Norman Solomon** is the national director of *RootsAction.org* and the author of 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*.

wrong, wrong, wrong ... the fools who said Allies faced disaster". In the *Guardian*, Christopher Hitchens, recently sanctified by his conversion to US hegemony and war, marked the solemnity of the occasion with the words "Well, ha ha ha, and yah, boo. It was .... obvious that defeat was impossible. The Taliban will soon be history."

The few journalists and other public figures who dissented were added to the *Telegraph's* daily list of "Osama Bin Laden's useful idiots", accused of being "anti-American" and "pro-terrorism", mocked, vilified and de-platformed almost everywhere. In the *Independent*, David Aaronovitch claimed that if you opposed the ongoing war, you were "indulging yourself in a cosmic whinge".

GEORGE MONBIOT

## Bloodhounds: The media's lust for war

Everyone is to blame for the catastrophe in Afghanistan, except the people who started it. Yes, Joe Biden screwed up by rushing out so chaotically. Yes, Boris Johnson and Dominic Raab failed to make adequate and timely provisions for the evacuation of vulnerable people. But there is a frantic determination in the media to ensure that none of the blame attaches to those who began this open-ended war, without realistic aims or an exit plan, then waged it with little concern for the lives and rights of the Afghan people: George Bush, Tony Blair, John Howard and their entourages.

On the contrary, Blair's self-exoneration and transfer of blame to Biden in late August was front-page news, while those who

opposed his disastrous war 20 years ago remain cancelled across most of the media. Why? Because to acknowledge the mistakes of the men who prosecuted this war would be to expose the media's role in facilitating it.

Any fair reckoning of what went wrong in Afghanistan, Iraq, and the other nations swept up in the "war on terror" should include the disastrous performance of the media. Cheerleading for the war in Afghanistan was almost universal, and dissent was treated as intolerable. After the Northern Alliance stormed into Kabul, torturing and castrating its prisoners, raping women and children, the *Telegraph* urged us to "just rejoice, rejoice", while the *Sun* ran a two-page editorial entitled "Shame of the traitors:

Everyone I know in the US and the UK who was attacked in the media for opposing the war received death threats. Barbara Lee, the only member of Congress who voted against the government's authorisation for the use of military force, needed round-the-clock bodyguards. Amid this McCarthyite fervour, peace campaigners such as Women in Black were listed as "potential terrorists" by the FBI. The US Secretary of State Colin Powell sought to persuade the emir of Qatar to censor Al Jazeera, one of the few outlets that consistently challenged the rush to war. When he failed, the US bombed Al Jazeera's office in Kabul.

The broadcast media were almost exclusively reserved for those who supported the adventure. The same thing happened before and during the invasion of Iraq. The

# INSIGHTS

war's opponents received only two percent of the BBC's airtime on the subject. Attempts to challenge the lies that justified the invasion – such as Saddam Hussein's alleged possession of weapons of mass destruction and his supposed refusal to negotiate – were drowned in a surge of patriotic excitement.

So why is the media so blood-thirsty? Why does it love bombs and bullets so much, and diplomacy so little? Why does it take such evident delight in striking a pose atop a heap of bodies, before quietly shuffling away when things go wrong?

An obvious answer is that if it bleeds it leads, so there's an inbuilt demand for blood. I remember as if it were yesterday the moment I began to hate the industry I work for. In 1987, I was producing a current affairs programme for the BBC World Service. It was a slow news day (remember those?), and none of the stories gave us a strong lead for the programme. Ten minutes before transmission, the studio door flew open and the editor strode in. He clapped his hands and shouted "Great! 110 dead in Sri Lanka!". News is spectacle, and nothing delivers spectacle like war.

Another factor is a continued failure to come to terms with our colonial history. For centuries the interests of the nation have been conflated with the interests of the rich, while the interests of the rich depended to a remarkable degree on colonial loot and the military adventures that supplied it. Supporting overseas wars, however disastrous, became a patriotic duty



A WAR IS BORN: How London's *Mirror* newspaper reported the beginning of the war on Afghanistan in its edition of October 8, 2001.

so ingrained as to be reflexive.

For all the breastbeating about the catastrophic defeat in Afghanistan, nothing has been learned. The media still regales us with comforting lies about the war and occupation. It airbrushes the drone strikes in which civilians were massacred and the corruption permitted and encouraged by the occupying forces. It seeks to retrofit justifications to the decision to go to war, above all a determination to secure the rights of women.

But this issue, crucial as it was and remains, didn't feature among the original war aims. Nor, for that matter, did overthrowing the Taliban. The ultra-conservative religious fundamentalists who helped secure George Bush's presidency and promote his wars had more in common with the Taliban than with the brave women seeking liberation. In 2001, the newspapers

now backcasting themselves as champions of women's rights mocked and impeded them at every opportunity. The *Sun* was running photos of topless teenagers on Page 3; the *Mail* ruined women's lives with its Sidebar of Shame; extreme sexism, body shaming and attacks on feminism were endemic.

Those of us who argued against the war possessed no prophetic powers. Twenty years ago, I asked the following questions in the *Guardian* not because I had any special information or insight, but because they were bleeding obvious. "At what point do we stop fighting? At what point does withdrawal become either honourable or responsible? Having once engaged its forces, are we then obliged to reduce Afghanistan to a permanent protectorate? Or will we jettison responsibility as soon as military power becomes impossible to sustain?". But even asking such things made you a pariah.

You can get away with a lot in the media, but not with opposing a war, unless it's for purely strategic reasons. If your motives are humanitarian, you are marked from that point on as a fanatic. Those who make their arguments with bombs and missiles are "moderates" and "centrists". Those who oppose them with words are "extremists". The inconvenient fact that the "extremists" were right and the "centrists" were wrong is being strenuously forgotten. **CT**

George Monbiot's website is [www.monbiot.com](http://www.monbiot.com). This article first appeared in the *Guardian*.



High-flying bird: The Gulfstream G700 ultra-luxury executive jet.

Sam Pizzigati

## Executive flight moves into new dimension

How can we distinguish between decent civilisations and deeply corrupt ones? How can we tell whether a society rates as wise or foolish, moral or vile?

Philosophers have been debating questions like these for several millennia, and those debates will likely go on – knock on wood – for several millennia more. But let’s fix our attention for the moment on just one telling indicator that seems to hold true across wide stretches of human history: In wise societies, those with the most to offer do labour that benefits the many, not the few.

What measure of a society’s core ethos could be simpler to understand – and ace?

In the United States today, at least on this ethical front, we’re not doing much acing. The evidence for that failure abounds. The latest egregious example? Consider the Gulfstream G700, a new flying machine that ranks among the most impressive technical achievements of our time.

Gulfstream Aerospace, a unit of the giant military contractor General Dynamics, birthed the G700 just about two years ago. The G700 doesn’t carry bombs. This incredibly sleek jet carries cor-

porate executives – or, to be more exact, will carry corporate execs when testing on it completes next year.

The tests so far have been going extremely well. The G700 – the “world’s most expensive private jet” – has already set a transatlantic speed record. This all-time best came flying from Gulfstream’s headquarters in Savannah, Georgia to the Middle East city of Doha in Qatar. The G700 flew the 6,711 nautical miles between the two sites in 13 hours and 16 minutes nonstop. Not bad for a plane’s first international run.

Gulfstream Aerospace is positioning the G700 as an “ultra-luxury answer” to the \$75-million Bombardier Global 7500. Potential G700 purchasers, the firm pledges, will get “the tallest, widest, longest cabin in business aviation”. Inside that space, Gulfstream’s flagship private jet “can accommodate a master-bedroom suite with a spa shower” and four other living areas, including a dining area for six.

The plane also features “a new lighting system designed to mimic circadian rhythms, to help travellers sleep on long-haul flights”.

The flying public for the G700 – that slim slice of humanity known as the super rich – is going gaga over Gulfstream’s latest offering. This past July, General Dynamics CEO Phebe Novakovic released Gulfstream’s sales figures for 2021’s first half. From an order perspective, she noted, Gulfstream’s second-quarter results “bordered on spectacular”.

The G700’s price-tag now

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starts at \$78-million. Ten of the jets, all ordered soon after Gulfstream unveiled the G700 two years ago, will be going to Qatar Airways for its Qatar Executive charter service. What makes the G700 so appealing to buyers like Qatar Airways? Not speed alone. Corporate execs can already fly great distances nonstop – really fast – on commercial jets from Boeing. But those Boeing flights have execs rubbing shoulders with the great unwashed, and what self-respecting master of the universe would want to do that?

So, ever eager to please and profit, the aviation industry is designing, engineering, and manufacturing magical aircraft like

the G700, marvels that serve no function other to keep the world's most comfortable in ever-greater comfort.

That comfort comes at a heavy price – for the rest of us. We pay more for products when corporations build into their “expenses” costly perks like rides in luxury private jets. And these private aircraft foul our atmosphere and supercharge climate change. Private jets, notes one European report released this past May, turn out to be “10 times more carbon intensive than airliners on average and 50 times more polluting than trains.”

But the real cost of extravaganc-

es like the G700 may be impossible to calculate. We are wasting the talents of scientists, technicians, and so many more highly skilled people on endeavours that serve only to sweeten the lives of extraordinarily wealthy people.

This makes no sense. More to the point: Societies with extraordinarily wealthy people make no sense.

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.

## HURWITT'S EYE

MARK HURWITT



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JOE ALLEN

# Confessions of a Failed Luddite

The dream world is being digitised.  
Good luck waking up

**T**V was a way of life when I was a kid. Morning, noon, and night, the hypnotic Eye watched over us as we grew into cybernetic rednecks. Out in the East Tennessee foothills, no one knew any better. And if they did, well, they sat glued to the boob tube, anyway.

As I sit here on my laptop, typing out rabid screeds about the perils of technology, the irony is hardly lost on me. Whaddaya do? Perhaps one day clay tablets imprinted with prophecies of a techno cataclysm will be reproduced in primitive sweat shops, then distributed by hand to the chosen few who shall heed the warning. But first I'll need to order a stylus and a few wads of clay from Amazon.

My first realisation that glowing screens hold some hidden evil came as a young boy. Sitting on a recliner, my grandfather pointed to his idiot box and warned, "the TV is the biggest wasteland on earth". He said that many times. Meanwhile, the nightly news unfolded on the hulking set in front of him. Pap was a quality control manager at a Magnavox TV factory, so if anyone should know, it was him.

Truth is, he was a full-on technoholic. The apple doesn't fall far from the tree.

Throughout my childhood, ol' Pap would always have some contraption or another torn apart down in the basement. A radio. A television. A cassette player. He showed me how to crimp wires and solder transistors onto circuit boards, but like most useful skills, it never really stuck with me. What did stick was the notion that these machines were the product of actual hands, simple enough to be grasped by human minds.

Today, no one person understands every component of advanced computer systems. Yes, certain people know everything about, say, the processing units. Others understand the working memory or storage device. One expert knows certain software codes in and out. Another has mastered the user interface. But as a whole, the sprawling Machine interlaced throughout our society is beyond comprehension.

We're ants crawling through digital tunnels, blindly following pheromone trails under the orders of an invisible Queen.

The Singularity comes up a lot these days – that fated moment when the Machine will come alive and consume us. One definition of the technological Singularity is the inflection point when AI has surpassed our general intelligence





123rf.com

and its output is incomprehensible to any human being. I'd say that, in a sense, most of us are already there.

As a teenager, I harboured ridiculous ambitions of breaking free of the Machine and setting off on my own into Nature. We're all dumbasses when we're young, but I was a special breed. The impulse was amplified by an encounter with the numinous molecules that form in witch bread.

I'd had many such visions before, and I had many after, but this one rattled me to my core. Laying alone in my bedroom, neurons firing like a lightning storm from my frontal lobe to my visual cortex, I reached down and picked up a photo album that my mother had started for me years ago. I opened it to the first page.

There were three photos there. One was of my father. He was young, shirtless, leaning back on a car. He had a handlebar moustache, curly blonde hair, and a goofy grin like he'd just smoked a half dozen hog-legs. Beside that was a picture of my mother reclining on a couch, also smiling, not much older than me looking back at her from the future.

Below that was a Polaroid of myself at around two or three years-old. I wore yellow pajamas and held a Care Bear in my arms, gazing into the flashing camera with a bashful expression. The photo was taken around the time the wild man and young lady in the pictures above went their separate ways.

As I stared at these synthetic images held in place by clear plastic – dead moments enduring far past their allotted time on earth – colourful geometric patterns began linking them together. The tendrils took on a helical structure. Thin strands of DNA connected mother and father to

their son. These electric molecular strands crawled like serpents from parent to child, twisting together into a new form.

Tears filled my eyes. My body curled around the photo album and I shuddered. My eyes closed, and the first vision came on like a waking dream. It was just as real as the lamp on my nightstand or the sheets on my bed.

*I see a serpent curled around a stone pillar. Letters are carved in the polished rock, but the story is static and incomplete. The serpent's scales are marked with a more complex myth, reflecting the letters in the stone, but changing them, bringing them to life, making them real.*

*The serpent clings tight to the stone. Its body spasms in tandem with my weeping. The morphing letters dance across its scales in an ever evolving story.*

I opened my eyes. The red walls were breathing. A layer of intricate fractals spread out from floor to ceiling. The second vision emerged from those colours, more real than the walls around me. I saw the planet in empty space. Simultaneously, fine details of the bustling activity on its surface were as clear as if I stood in the middle of the action.

*The globe is covered with a thin layer of humans, like insect swarms. They march in streams along concrete channels. These human bugs are amassed at certain points on the globe. Their activity is furious.*

*Up close, I see these people digging metal out of the earth and shaping it with their hands. It emerges in massive serpentine tubes. As these tentacles grow, the people shaping the metal attach themselves in rows. The next in line step forward. They shape the metal in front of them, attach themselves, and are lifted up as the*



The red walls were breathing. A layer of intricate fractals spread out from floor to ceiling. The second vision emerged from those colours

*metallic tentacles surge into the sky.*

*Each person is fitted into place with steel cages. Everyone has a screen just inches in front of their nose. Earphones cover their ears. Their faces glow, their eyes are wild. Images of the end of the world play on the screens: explosions, dismembered bodies, total chaos. The earphones roar with deafening screams. The voices merge into urgent white noise.*

*At the same time, I see the globe from a distance. The mechanical tentacles grow from each bustling human swarm. They encircle the planet like snakes, squeezing the life out, crushing every creature beneath them – even the human scales attached to their long bodies.*

*The last thing these people see is the world ending on the screens in front of their faces.*

When I finally snapped out of it, an unshakable urge to warn everyone came over me. Any schizophrenic reading this knows the deal.

I lifted the green plastic phone off its receiver and started calling my best friends to tell them what's over the horizon. Amazingly, I could remember their numbers, and punched them into the soft rubber buttons one at a time.

The first call was to the Fertile Turtle. It was probably three or four in the morning. His wife and kids were sleeping. His annoyance was obvious when he answered.

"Hello?"

"Bad things. Have to stay off computer. Screen evil. Your daughter is in trouble".

"What?!" he yelled, irritated but now alarmed. "What the fuck are you talking about, Joe?"

"Can't say now. Much drugs. Bad times coming. Machines hurting the earth. Ask me tomorrow".

"Dude, you're fucking crazy". Click.

I had to keep going. I called anyone I knew who had kids. It was the young ones we had to worry about. They'd get the worst of what was coming. The problem was that complete sentences were impossible. Not one of my friends had a clue what I was talking about.

"Must stay away from TV. There is much evil".

"Are you high?" Click.

Had to try again.

"Next generation. Must help".

"Go to sleep, Joe. You need to seek help". Click.

The next morning, I wrote down what I'd seen in my journal. Twenty-five years later, the image of metallic tentacles suffocating the earth has never left me. I can see it now as if it had appeared to me yesterday.

Obviously, a self-induced psychotic episode isn't the best foundation to build one's personal philosophy upon. But as the hippies say – we all have our own, like, sacred paths, man. The imagery was so vivid, so horrifying,



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I'd be a liar if I said that cartoonish vision isn't more real to me than any climate change data-set.

You don't have to be a lunatic to pay attention to your dreams. From my perspective, you'd be crazy to ignore them.

As the months went on, I weened myself off of all intoxicants – especially television and video games. Much of my time was spent in the forest. When I turned eighteen later that summer, I sold my N64 gaming system, plus a few ounces of weed, so I could run off to join a quasi-Luddite commune down in Vero Beach, Florida. This sort of quest would become routine over the years.

A Rainbow Gathering in Montana. Hippie collectives in California. Raves across the Southeast. A chapel of sacred mirrors in New York City. The ruins of a stone monastery in France. A subterranean temple complex in Italy.

Despite my relentless cynicism, I was trying to find some viable alternative to the technodrome. I was seeking a way of life that might survive when the Machine finally runs out of steam and collapses upon us. I met a few brilliant souls along the way. Each one held a piece of the puzzle. Unfortunately, most of the weirdos you find on the fringe have little more to offer than fried synapses and multiple STDs.

Academia wasn't much better. One can have discourse with the finest minds, but with a few precious exceptions, most professors remain grounded in one generic viewpoint or another.

What do we do about mass surveillance? "Vote Democrat". How do we take on Big Tech? "Call it racist, or sexist, or something". Is there any real escape from the digital web that has ensnared the planet? "Read



Unfortunately, most of the weirdos you find on the fringe have little more to offer than fried synapses and multiple STDs

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this book, or that one – available on Kindle”.

The only reasonable solutions I've encountered come from the rural communities who've unplugged, as best they can, and are hunkering down in hopes that the Machine will ultimately pass over. They'd be an encouragement if they weren't so boring.

In the years since that teenage vision, the insidious TV morphed into the ubiquitous PC. Soon, there was a smartphone in every palm. Before long, everybody and their grandma will be wearing their own VR goggles. I've tried to avoid these trendy devices, but here I sit – typing and editing text for an online magazine. Maybe it's just a matter of time.

Come the Eschaton, we'll all be gathered up in The Cloud like angels with wireless wings. It's as if this fate were meant to be. Our virtual madhouse is locked down with encrypted keys. As the future

descends on an electric storm, tech evolution fractures our realities with shattering force.

The Internet has turned many a brilliant thinker into a functionally autistic avatar, unable to hear any voice that doesn't speak to them from the screen. Self-absorption is considered normal. Digital interaction is its own art form. Altruism is just one click away. Buried in handheld displays, we find ourselves alone in the crowd.

All the while, the greater Machine keeps growing. Its tentacles are weapons of war. Precision missiles. Autonomous drones. AI-powered machine gun turrets. Responsive nano-fibre exoskeletons. Fighter jets to be fitted with brain-computer interfaces. Robotic police dogs to patrol the plebs. Inescapable social credit scores.

As artificial intelligence replaces white collar jobs, automation takes over blue collar positions. Billionaires hurl themselves into space. The masses become increasingly disconnected from the earth. In a real sense, the whole world is just one big lithium mine to keep the batteries coming.

Sane people insist that hallucinations are mere illusion. For the most part, they're correct. But every now and then, some higher reality breaks through the veil. There's no more reason for a teenager to believe his own lysergic fantasy than for Philip K. Dick to have trusted the pink beam from VALIS as it drilled into his speed-addled brain.

And yet, for whatever reason, both of those dreams are coming true. **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).*

TREVOR GRUNDY

# Island nation to end link with Royal Family

The royal future in Australia Canada, and New Zealand is also under the political microscope of constitutionalists, politicians and religious leaders

It will be a polite and gentle way of saying “thanks and goodbye” to Queen Elizabeth II on November 30, the 55th anniversary of Barbados’s independence, when it will remove the Queen as its head of state and become a republic.

Remember that date. You might hear the sound of butterflies flapping their wings in faraway places causing an avalanche much closer to home if you’re British.\*

What’s soon to happen in tiny Barbados is the equivalent to someone handing Humpty Dumpty a mask but forgetting to tell him that the wall’s crumbling and about to come crashing down.

The first president of the post November 30 set-up in Barbados will be its present governor-general, Dame Sandra Mason, who now represents the Queen in the tiny Caribbean nation.

“This is the way we want to go”,

*\*The idea that small causes may have large effects in weather was recognised by the French mathematician and engineer Henri Poincaré. The butterfly effect concept has since been used outside the context of weather science as a broad term for any situation where a small change is supposed to be the cause of larger consequences.*



Wikipedia

Barbados Prime Minister Mia Mottley.

said Prime Minister Mia Amor Mottley. “And we want to thank her excellency for so graciously consenting in this manner.

“Barbadians want a Barbadian head of state. This is the ultimate statement of confidence in who we are and what we are capable of achieving,” she added.

In a speech delivered at Bridgetown, capital of this small eastern Caribbean nation (population 290,000) PM Mottley re-assured the country’s small band of British royalists (about three percent of the population) that little will change at the end of next month.

“There will be no change to the name of Barbados. We’re not the Commonwealth of Barbados, we’re

not the Republic of Barbados. Barbados is Barbados”.

A spokesman for Buckingham Palace in London said that if that’s what the people want, that’s what the people get. And to underscore British royalty’s commitment to a future world without racial prejudice, the world was informed that the Queen and her family are 100 percent against racism and are strong supporters of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. This pledge followed accusations by Prince Harry, now in California with his wife Meghan Markle, that certain unnamed members of the royal family are racists.

Harry, who was once voted the most popular man in Britain, is the Queen’s grandson and brother of William, married to Kate Middleton, royalty’s most publicised royal-commoner stand-in for the late Princess Diana.

The Barbados prime minister’s pre-Republic Day speeches give fresh meaning to the French saying – *Plus ça change, plus c’est meme chose* (the more things seem to change, the more they stay the same”.

But hang about. That’s not all she said. She also spoke about modernising Barbados’s constitution, as soon as the island settles into its

new status of republic.

“We feel that, if we are going to have a new constitution eventually, that is going to reflect who we are in the third decade of the 21st-century.”

Her Majesty and her advisers far away in London hope that the links between the two countries will continue into the future. But they should not be too complacent.

The flapping of so many wings in the Caribbean and other parts of the world could cause an avalanche at Buckingham Palace.

The move towards republicanism in Barbados comes at an interesting time for Barbados will be following in the footsteps of other Caribbean countries which have opted for a home-grown head of state rather than a foreigner so far away.

Guyana became a republic in 1970, followed by Trinidad and Tobago and Dominica in 1978. Now commonwealth watchers in London say the announcement from Barbados have seen social media users in other Caribbean islands urging their government to follow suit.

The Queen is head of state in

an increasing number of the Queen’s subjects have started to see the Royal Family as a farcical institution that is well past its sell-by date

several Caribbean islands, including Antigua, the Bahamas, Grenada, Jamaica, St Kitts and Nevis, St Lucia and St Vincent and the Grenadines, the leaders of whom will all be closely watching events in Barbados.

Meanwhile, the Royalty’s future in Australia Canada, and New Zealand is also under the political microscope of various constitutionalists, politicians and religious leaders from the slavishly loyal Church of England.

The Big Question is a simple one: Who needs the Royal Family?

Next year marks Elizabeth’s Diamond Jubilee – 70 years as Queen. She was crowned at Westminster Abbey in 1952 and has reigned longer than any other king or queen. But next year she’ll be 96; her eldest son and heir to the

throne, Prince Charles, will be 73. He’s very unpopular, despite what royalist scribblers say. As for his brother, Andrew, who hopes to make a public comeback in time for the Queen’s final circus, the least said the better.

But come hell or high water, they’ll all be with her, rings on their fingers and bells on their toes, at the latest celebrity circus for the rich, the privileged, the greedy and the nation’s most useless people.

However, an increasing number of her subjects have started to see the Royal Family as a farcical institution that is well past its sell-by date.

How long can the circus tricks go on? When will the lion turn on its tamer? When will the audience pick up the bucket full of water and toss it into the face of the clown?

For the answers, you should cup you ear, and turn your head towards the Caribbean.

Can’t you hear it? The sound of those tiny butterfly wings? **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).*

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RON FASSBENDER

# An empire built on blood

Extinction Rebellion activists wage 14-days of protest in London

*“If governments are serious about the climate crisis, there can be no new investments in oil, gas and coal, from now, from this year.”*

Fatih Birol, International Energy Agency executive director, May 2021.

As the UK prepares to host the COP26 climate talks, widely seen as pivotal in combating the climate crisis, Extinction Rebellion activists took to the London streets for two weeks of non-violent and often very creative civil disobedience with one principle demand of government and business – an immediate halt to all new fossil fuel investments. Despite facing a large police presence and 500+ arrests, roving protests targeted the City of London financial district, highlighting its current role bankrolling fossil fuel extraction as well as its colonial roots, together with areas of government and commerce.

Meanwhile, the Conservative government led by Boris Johnson proposes a new coal mine in Cumbria, the Cambo oil field off the coast of Scotland, airport runway expansion and a £27-billion road programme. – RF



## DAY 1

Above: The opening ceremony saw the entrance of Guildhall, in the City, occupied and covered in “blood”

Right: Police prepare to remove occupiers





## DAY 2

Left:  
Come to  
the table  
- a 4-metre  
high pink  
one erected  
in a road  
junction, for  
climate talks

## DAY 3

Right: XR samba drummers getting into the groove

Below: Activists locked on to Mother Earth and to a giant sea buoy. It took several hours for cops to remove them.



## DAY 4

Right: Despite a huge police presence, activists rapidly erected and locked-on to a huge pink structure in Oxford Circus





## DAY 6

Above: Marvina Newton, founder of United for Black Lives, embraced by XR's Red Rebel Brigade.

Left: Faceless financiers, bankrolling the climate and biodiversity crisis

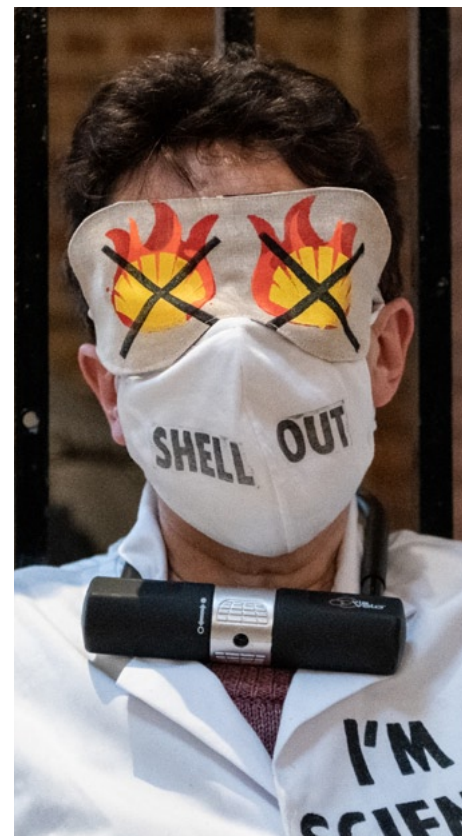
## DAY 7

Right:  
XR offshoot  
'Animal  
Rebellion' joins  
the annual  
National Animal  
Rights march  
from Smithfield  
Market,  
highlighting the  
contribution of  
meat  
to CO2  
emissions



## DAY 8

Right:  
Mother Earth  
sheds a tear  
outside the  
Science  
Museum  
Far Right:  
Scientists  
lock-on and  
occupy the  
museum  
overnight,  
demanding  
they drop  
sponsorship  
by oil giant  
Shell of their  
climate change  
exhibition



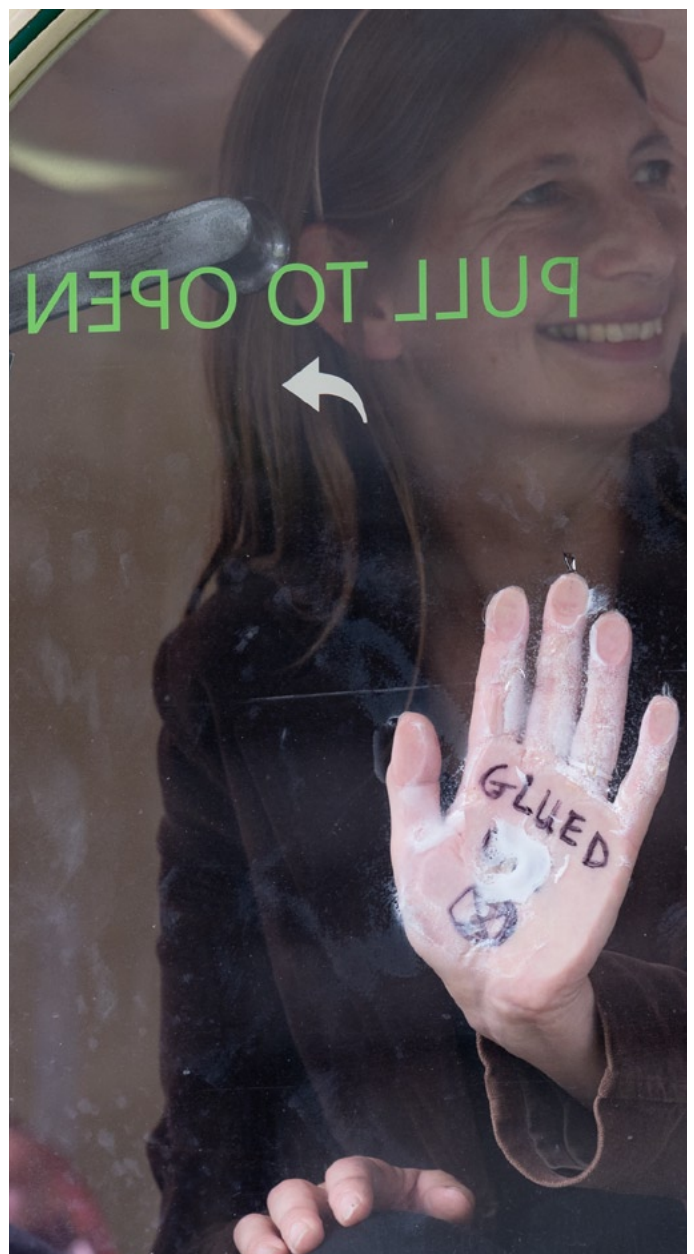




## DAY 10

Left:  
Bus  
immobilised  
near London  
Bridge,  
destination  
- Extinction

Below:  
Glued-on  
passenger  
watches the  
party outside



## DAY 9

Above, Top: Assembling at London Bridge, destination unknown

Above, Centre: Tower Bridge occupied with a caravan, which receives a pink paint job

Above, Bottom: Tea is served on Tower Bridge

## DAY 11

Right:  
Bringing the message to the Prime Minister's Downing Street residence  
Below:  
Greenwash, a speciality of Boris Johnson's government



## DAY 12

Right: It's a biodiversity crisis, too  
Far Right: Arrestees prepare to break bail conditions by entering the City of London



## DAY 13

Right:

Lloyd's Insurance (the shiny thing in the background) continue to underwrite fossil fuels

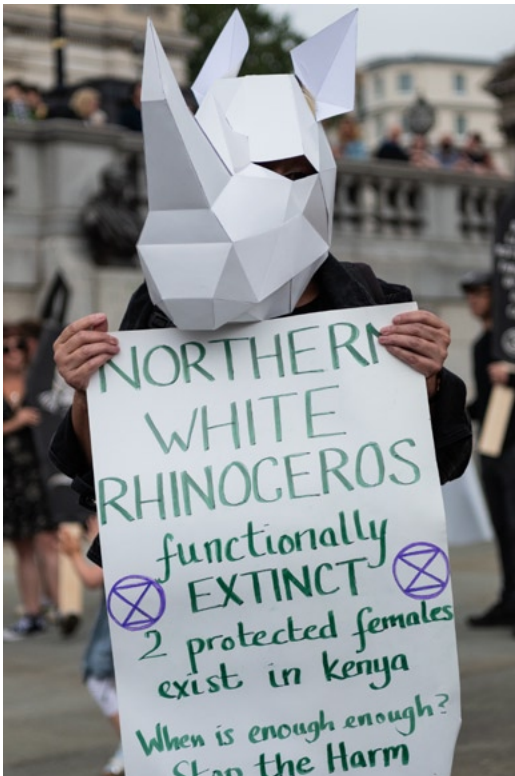
Far Right: Time to stop the harm



## DAY 14

Left: Final day of the 'Impossible Rebellion' sees a March for Nature flood the streets

Below: Jeanne-Luc, the Rebel Octopus, leads the way to Hyde Park



## THE PHOTOGRAPHER

**Ron Fassbender** is a London-based documentary photographer. See more of his work at [www.ronfassbender.com](http://www.ronfassbender.com) and find him on Twitter at [www.twitter.com/TheWeeklyBull](https://www.twitter.com/TheWeeklyBull)

CAITLIN JOHNSTONE

# Australia hurtles to the brink of calamity

Country has not aligned with the US to protect itself from China.  
It has aligned with the US to protect itself from the US

Australia has joined the US and UK in an “enhanced trilateral security partnership” called AUKUS with the unspoken-yet-obvious goal of coordinating escalations against China. Antiwar reports: “President Biden and the leaders of Australia and the UK announced a new military agreement on September 15 aimed at countering China. The pact, known as AUKUS, will focus on the sharing of sensitive military technologies, and the first initiative will focus on getting Australia nuclear-powered submarines.

“US officials speaking to CNN described the effort to share nuclear propulsion with another country as an “exceedingly rare step” due to the sensitivity of the technology. “This technology is extremely sensitive. This is, frankly, an exception to our policy in many respects,” one unnamed official said”.

This deal will replace a planned \$90 billion program to obtain twelve submarines designed by France, an obnoxious expenditure either way when a quarter of Australians are struggling to make ends meet during a pandemic that is four times more likely to kill Australians who



are struggling financially. This is just the latest in Canberra’s continually expanding policy of feeding vast fortunes into Washington’s standoff with Beijing at the expense of its own people.

If readers are curious why Australia would simultaneously subvert its own economic interests by turning against its primary trading partner and its own security interests by feeding into dangerous and unnecessary provocations, I will refer them once again to the jarringly

honest explanation by American political analyst John Mearsheimer at a debate hosted by the Australian think tank Center for Independent Studies in 2019. Mearsheimer told his audience that the US is going to do everything it can to halt China’s rise and prevent it from becoming the regional hegemon in the East, and that Australia should align with the US in that battle or else it would face the wrath of Washington.

“The question that’s on the table is what should Australia’s foreign policy be in light of the rise of China,” Mearsheimer said. “I’ll tell you what I would suggest if I were an Australian.”

Mearsheimer claimed that China is going to continue to grow economically and will convert this economic power into military power to dominate Asia “the way the US dominates the Western Hemisphere”, and explained why he thinks the US and its allies have every ability to prevent that from happening.

“Now the question is what does this all mean for Australia?” Mearsheimer said. “Well, you’re

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in a quandary for sure. Everybody knows what the quandary is. And by the way you're not the only country in East Asia that's in this quandary. You trade a lot with China, and that trade is very important for your prosperity, no question about that. Security-wise you really want to go with us. It makes just a lot more sense, right? And you understand that security is more important than prosperity, because if you don't survive, you're not gonna prosper."

"Now some people say there's an alternative: you can go with China," said Mearsheimer. "Right you have a choice here: you can go with China rather the United States. There's two things I'll say about that. Number one, if you go with China you want to understand you are our enemy. You are then deciding to become an enemy of the United States. Because again, we're talking about an intense security competition."

"You're either with us or against us," he continued. "And if you're trading extensively with China, and you're friendly with China, you're undermining the United States in this security competition. You're feeding the beast, from our perspective. And that is not going to make us happy. And when we are not happy you do not want to underestimate how nasty we can be. Just ask Fidel Castro."

Nervous laughter from the Australian think tank audience punctuated Mearsheimer's more incendiary observations. The CIA is known to have made numerous attempts to assassinate Castro.

So there you have it. Australia is not aligned with the US to protect itself from China. Australia is aligned with the US to protect itself from the US.

This new move happens as Northern Territory Chief Minister Michael Gunner announces his

## The abuses will grow more egregious until the people begin taking action to steer Australia away from the existential dangers it is hurtling toward

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government's policy for Covid-19 restrictions once the territory's population is 80 percent vaccinated which will include "lockouts" during outbreaks wherein people will only be allowed to work and move freely in society if they verify that they are vaccinated using check-in measures which Gunner literally calls a "freedom pass".

"I'll say it again and again. If you want your life to continue close to normal, get your jab," Gunner said. "For vaccinated people, the check-in app will basically be your freedom pass. For people who make the choice to not get vaccinated, no vax means no freedom pass. We're working with other governments now to get this technology ready."

This is in alignment with what we've been told to expect as the rest of Australia prepares to roll out the use of vaccine passports.

And we continue to see other authoritarian escalations in Australia which have nothing to do with Covid as well. Authorities have been proposing new legal provisions which will allow Australian visas to be cancelled and citizenship revoked in entirely secret proceedings based on information provided by secretive government agencies. The horrifying Identify and Disrupt bill which allows Australian police to hack people's devices, collect, delete and alter their information and log onto their

social media was passed through Parliament at jaw-dropping speed last month. Neither of these escalations are Covid-related.

People who just started paying attention to Australian authoritarianism during Covid often get the impression that it's entirely about the virus, but as we discussed previously the actual fundamental problem is that Australia is the only so-called democracy without any kind of statute or bill of rights to protect the citizenry from these kinds of abuses. This is why Australia is looked upon as so freakish by the rest of the western world right now: because, in this sense, it is. People call it a "free country", but there has never been any reason to do so.

Covid has certainly played a major role in the exacerbation of Australian authoritarianism, but it's a problem that was well underway long before the outbreak. Back in 2019 the CIVICUS Monitor had already downgraded Australia from an "open" country to one where civil space has "narrowed", citing new laws to expand government surveillance, prosecution of whistleblowers, and raids on media organizations.

This slide into military brinkmanship and authoritarian dystopia shows no signs of stopping. The abuses of the powerful will continue to grow more egregious until the people open their eyes to what's going on and begin taking action to steer us away from the existential dangers we are hurtling toward on multiple fronts. If there is any good news to be had here, it's that if such a miracle ever occurs it will then be possible to immediately course correct and start building a healthy society together. **CT**

**Caitlin Johnstone** is an Australian blogger. Read more of her work at [www.caitlinjohnstone.com](http://www.caitlinjohnstone.com).

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JANE BRAXTON LITTLE

# How I became a climate refugee

Can my town rebuild after losing everything in California's catastrophic Dixie Fire?

**A**t 10 a.m. on July 22, I interviewed a New York University professor about using autonomous robots, drones, and other unmanned devices to suppress structural and wildland fires. I sent the interview to an online transcription service, walked down the steps of my office and a block to the Greenville post office, where I mailed a check to California Fair Plan for homeowners' fire insurance. I then drove 25 miles to a dental appointment. I was lucky to make it home before burning debris closed the roads.

That night I became a climate refugee, evacuated from my house thanks to the Dixie Fire. Since then, it has scorched a landscape nearly the size of Delaware, destroyed 678 houses and decimated several communities in Indian Valley, where I've been for 46 years. One of them was Greenville, California, a town founded in the Gold Rush era of the 19th-century, where I happen to live. I never imagined myself among the 55-million people worldwide whose lives have been upended by climate change. Maybe no one does until it happens, even though we're obviously the future for significant parts of humanity. Those of us who acknowledge the climate disaster – especially those who write about it

– may be the last to picture ourselves fleeing the catastrophes scientists have been predicting.

Climate change should come as no surprise to any of us, even in Greenville, one of four communities in rural Plumas County tucked into the mountains of the northern Sierra Nevada range, 230 miles northeast of San Francisco. No one would call most of us progressive. We're a social mishmash of loggers, miners, and ranchers, many of whom strongly supported Donald Trump (despite a disparate population of aging hippies living among us). We squabble over water ditches and whose insurance should cover which parade. We picked to death a solar-power project and took five years to decide on a design for a community building. The town has been in decline since I moved there nearly half a century ago, slowly sinking into its dirt foundations.

**D**espite Greenville's insularity, we've had some inkling that the world is changing around us. Old-timers talk about the winters when so much snow fell that they had to shovel from second-story windows to get out of their houses. Last winter, we got less than three feet of snow. In the 1980s, a warm March storm

flooded Indian Valley with melted snow that floated stacks of newly sawn lumber away from a local sawmill into a just-created lake. We all cheered as brazen cowboys lassoed bundles of two-by-fours and hauled them off in their pickup trucks.

In a megadrought-ridden West, precipitation currently is half the normal amount, making it prospectively the driest year since 1894. Today, such modest clues to a changing climate seem quaint indeed in the face of the evidence now bombarding California and the rest of the West. As in recent years, this summer's fires began breaking out here far earlier than usual. Already 647 wildfires have burned 4.9-million acres of the West, an area three times the size of Rhode Island. In California, 31 new fires started on August 30th alone – and any significant rain or snow is still months away.

For me, as for the rest of us in Plumas County, the Dixie Fire delivered the reality of climate change in a raging fury that has forever changed our lives. It started July 13 in the Feather River Canyon, a 5,000-foot gorge that carries water to more than 25-million Californians through the State Water Project. Pacific Gas & Electric Company (PG&E) has built a series of power stations here that dammed the



"The Dixie Fire delivered the reality of climate change in a raging fury that has forever changed our lives".

former trophy-trout stream and converted its cascading energy into electricity, generating around 15 percent of California's hydropower. At approximately seven o'clock that Tuesday morning, a hydroelectric facility lost power at Cresta in the lower Feather River Canyon. Officials later reported a "healthy green tree" leaning perilously against a conductor on a pole with a fire burning on the ground near the base of that tree. By evening, that microblaze had exploded to 1,000 acres.

Over the next 14 days what came to be known as the Dixie Fire whipped up one side of the canyon and down another, driving residents out of the town of Indian Falls and incinerating their homes. It demolished Canyon Dam at the southern end of Lake Almanor. The inhabitants of the towns of Crescent Mills,

then Greenville, and soon after Taylorsville fled. Some of us returned for a night or two, only to heed the sirens blaring from our cell phones mandating another evacuation. We left in a panic: pizza parlours with dough still rising, beauty salons with hair littering the floor, offices with phones ringing. We fled on whatever roads remained open to wherever we could find housing or friends willing to take us in.

On August 4, we watched from our separate hells as a 40,000-foot cloud the colour of bruised flesh collapsed over the ridge west of Greenville. It was soon hurling flaming branches and red-hot embers down the mountainside, torching trees as it roared into town. We were transfixed by horror, snatching previously unimaginable images from Facebook, chasing down Twitter links, and trying to make sense of the devastation evolving on infrared maps.

We were witnessing Greenville's near-obliteration. The Dixie Fire would thunder down Main Street with its Western false fronts and tarnished Gold Rush charm. The 150-year-old warehouse converted to a museum years ago flamed in a blaze of black-and-white photos, historic logging tools, and the genealogy of generations of the Mountain Maidu, the local Native American tribe. Fire gutted the brick-walled Masonic Lodge and the Way Station, our only local watering hole. Much of the town we had fled burned to the ground.

The old-timers didn't tell us about fires like this. I saw nothing remotely as turbulent during a long-ago season as a fire lookout on Dyer Mountain near Lake Almanor. Even firefighters (my husband used to be one of them) hardened by a decade of recent experience say this fire is behaving unlike anything they have ever seen. It has them bamboozled as

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it circles back toward landscapes it's already burned, storming through magic forests of old-growth red fir and stately stands of sugar pines, their foot-long cones just beginning to mature.

Dixie is roaring through forests transformed by a changing climate. The planet is simply hotter than it used to be. Worldwide temperatures have increased 2.04 degrees Fahrenheit since 1901. The United States has been warming even faster, adding 2.7 degrees Fahrenheit since 1970. In the Sierra Nevada, the 450-mile-long tilted block of granite that lies on California's border with Nevada, a recent study by climate scientists at UCLA suggested that temperatures could rise a phenomenal 7 to 10 degrees Fahrenheit by the end of the century. All that heat is grilling brush and small trees practically to the point of spontaneous combustion, priming them for the smallest spark. Scientists say that the number of days when Sierra forests are likely to burn has increased by 5 percent since the 1970s.

Nighttime temperatures are also rising, further confounding the efforts of firefighters to control such blazes. They count on cooler air and higher humidity after dark to help them in aggressive attacks. According to researchers at the Western Regional Climate Center in Reno, California's overnight lows are now running about 2 degrees Fahrenheit above the average for the 1981-2010 period that climate scientists use as a benchmark. Robbed of their after-dark advantages, firefighters report seeing flames torching off the crowns of trees in the middle of the night, something they're not faintly used to.

The Sierra air is drier, too. We used to brag about our low humidity, mocking our East Coast friends dripping sweat on a 90-degree day

## California's overnight low temperatures are now running about 2 degrees F above the average for 1981-2010 that climate scientists use as a benchmark

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while we basked in dry heat. Now, that's a liability. Decreasing relative humidity has helped boost the number of days each year when forests are vulnerable to wildfire. It also accelerates evaporation from leaves, brush, and even dead trees, heightening the risk of intense fires and so exacerbating the challenge for firefighters.

Then there's the wind. Once upon a time, on hot Sierra summer days, we welcomed the breezes that stirred the air and cooled us. This summer, the least stirring of leaves instills fear. Dixie's erratic winds have, in fact, blown flames right back into previously burned areas, circling around the lines firefighters have built to try to control the fire.

Climate change doesn't start wildfires. The vast majority are caused by human activity. But by drying out trees, chaparral, and other vegetation, it creates a warmer, more arid world, one ever more susceptible to extreme fire behaviour. PG&E, which owns more than 130,000 acres of California, has reported an increase in fire vulnerability in the area it serves from 15 percent in 2019 to 50% by 2021.

The utility company has all but admitted responsibility for starting the Dixie Fire. If that proves true it would be the fourth such wildfire linked to it, a record that reeks of blatant neglect of fundamental power-line maintenance. PG&E officials have touted their routine inspec-

tions of the two power poles located where the fire started. They found nothing wrong, they reported to the California Public Utilities Commission. But the company also considers the span of power line near where the fire started to be among the top 20 percent of its distribution lines most likely to ignite a wildfire by tree contact. Keep in mind that the Dixie Fire started less than a mile from where PG&E's power lines started the 2018 Camp Fire, which killed 85 people and burned 18,804 buildings.

Will corporate executives be held accountable for the Dixie Fire? Will they lose any sleep over the burly backhoe operator weeping publicly about the loss of his home with its newly remodelled kitchen? Will they spare a thought for the weary family of seven wandering through Safeway wondering how, as exiles, they'll even pay for their groceries?

All of us who live in the mountainous West have come to expect wildfires. We don't pack up at the first puff of smoke. During the early days after Dixie had started 50 miles down the Feather River Canyon from Greenville, I felt safe. Even when burning trees were visible from my office window as I grabbed photos and notebooks to evacuate, I still felt confident that I would return to my books and 40 years of journalism files, pieces ranging from local murders to ones on refugees from the Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant disaster in Fukushima, Japan, and forest fires burning in the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone in the Ukraine.

It took two more days before the winds shifted, blowing flames down North Canyon toward the town, overwhelming our firefighters. Today, all that's left in Greenville's downtown commercial area is devastation. The



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places I knew for so long are now gone, including Hunter Hardware, the business that welcomed us when my husband and I moved to Indian Valley, two blond toddlers in tow; Sterling Sage, where I bought jewelry for my granddaughter from the town's most dapper businessman; and Village Drug, where our Plumas County supervisor took calls from constituents while dispensing medicines and school supplies. That was, in fact, Greenville's oldest building and housed the office I shared with a poet/playwright and a corporate administrator with a passion for knitting that we liked to call Fiber, Fact, and Fiction. Now, it's all ash.

How do you weigh the loss of such businesses against the hundreds of friends, neighbours, and acquaintances whose homes have been destroyed? Most of us waited days for some kind of confirmation about whether ours had made it or not, hanging on every word from state fire officials who described the advancing flames in twice-daily video meetings. We searched the Internet for shards of information and poured over maps with tiny red heat dots that might spell out our futures.

I danced for joy when I learned that my house had survived, along with the timber-frame barn my husband had built from our own hand-milled timber. My ebullience plummeted into mourning for the sweet recluse who lost his beloved books and the widow whose family photos were all gone. Along Main Street in the town's historic residential area, not a house remains, not even a single standing wall among brick walkways and charred garden plots.

Those 678 homeless neighbours join millions around the world fleeing cyclones, hurricanes, fires, and floods, among other weather events brought to a boil by a changing cli-

## Most of us waited days for confirmation about whether our homes had survived, hanging on every word from state fire officials in twice-daily video meetings

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mate. Like the majority of them, the fire that forced us to leave our homes was local and, given the size of this planet, relatively small-scale. It dominated the news cycle for a week or two before being displaced (without being faintly extinguished) by those fleeing hurricane Ida in Louisiana and political refugees trying to escape Afghanistan.

Greenville has plenty of experience with privation. As the county's least affluent town we've rallied to keep our high school open when county officials planned to close it. We've rallied to install sidewalks and retain a health clinic after our only hospital closed. Today, we are facing a threat like no other. How do you rebuild a community with no post office, no library, and where, in the absence of public transportation, the closest gas station is now a 50-mile round trip? Who will step forward for those too broken to restore themselves?

Greenville and Indian Valley are now poised between devastation and possibility. Even as smoke still rises from the ashes, there are faint signs of hope. The generation that left for far-flung parts of the world has organised online donations and relief sites offering food, laptops, vehicles, and cash to the newly homeless. There are plans to expand the community garden from a concept and empty raised beds to a future

bounty of vegetables, fruits, and flowers. After a century of genocide and abuse, the Mountain Maidu, the area's first residents, have energised us with their vision of land and species restoration as they assume stewardship of around 3,000 acres of their ancestral territories.

It's a long, tough climb from incineration to inspiration for a community that's physically scattered and emotionally shattered. Many of us remain in mind-numbing limbo, still awaiting word from some anonymous official that will allow us to return to homes, if we have them. Those of us allowed back, as my husband and I have been, are halted by National Guard troops and required to show paperwork proving that we belong here. We have little prospect of Internet or landline telephone service any time soon and we no longer expect consistent electricity from PG&E.

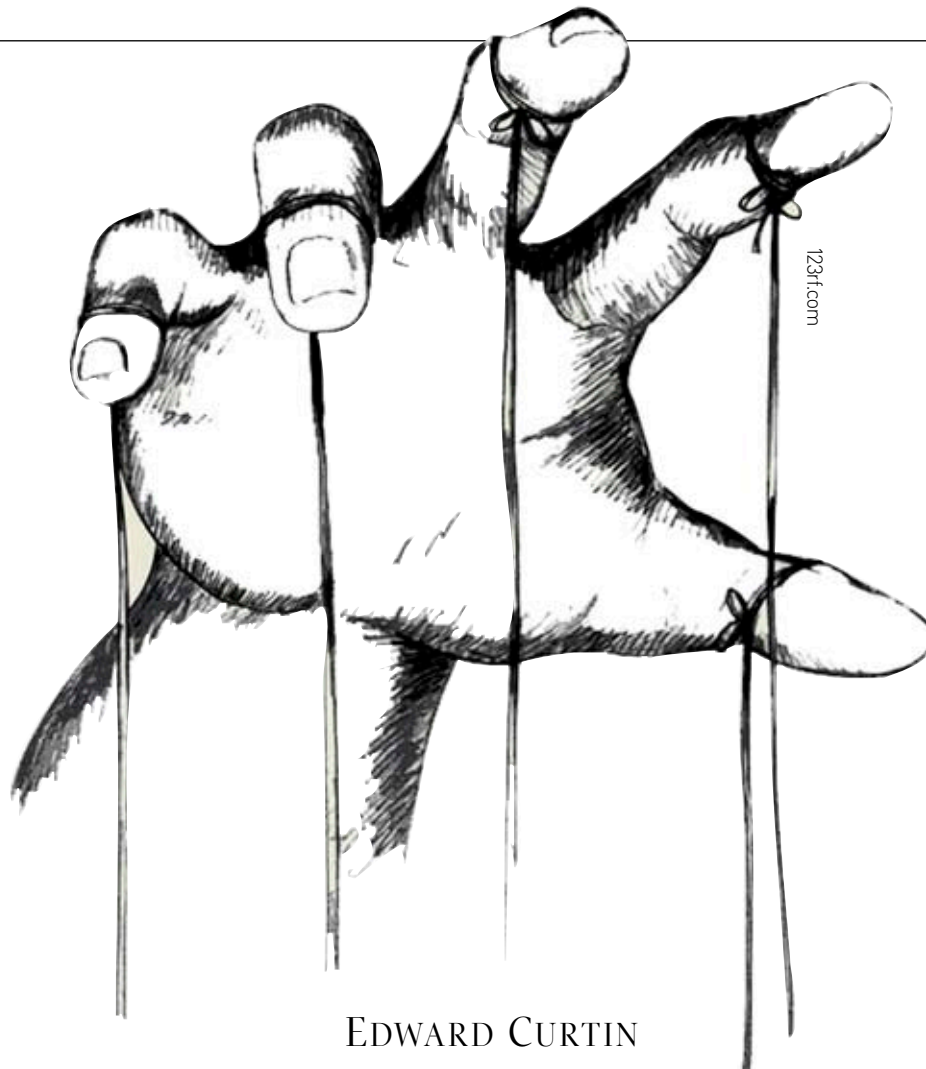
What may save us is the very reputation for defiance that has often been our undoing. We don't accept defeat easily, not even against an adversary as daunting as climate change. As long as the odds are stacked against us, the independent and ornery will respond. If the soul of a community is its resilience, Greenville will revive. Still, we're just a hint of what's to come in this country and on this planet if all of us don't change things in major ways. Remember, you could become a climate refugee, too. **CT**

*Jane Braxton Little is an independent journalist who writes about science and natural resources for publications that include the Atlantic, Audubon, National Geographic, and Scientific American. She moved to Plumas County in 1969 for a summer that has yet to end. This article first appeared at [www.tomdispatch.com](http://www.tomdispatch.com).*

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EDWARD CURTIN

# The bewitchment of propaganda

Masks upon masks are donned to ward off the fear  
that is pumped out through the electronic airwaves

*“We’ll know our disinformation  
is complete when everything the  
America public believe is false.”*  
– William Casey, CIA Director,  
February 1981

**A**ll propaganda succeeds  
because it satisfies needs  
that it has first created. If  
you follow the daily rat-  
a-tat mainstream news

reports and react to them, you will  
be caught in a labyrinth that has  
been set to entrap you. You will keep  
finding that your mind will be like  
a bed that is already made up and  
your daylight hours filled with night-  
mares. What you assume are your  
real needs will be met, but you will  
swiftly tumble into the free-floating  
anxiety that the media has created  
to keep you on edge and confused.

They will provide you with objects  
– Covid-19, the US “withdrawal”  
from Afghanistan, the Russian and  
Chinese “threats,” the need to crack  
down on domestic dissidents, 9/11,  
etc. (an endless panoply of lies) – that  
you can attach your anxiety to, but  
they will be no help. They are not  
meant to; their purpose is to befud-  
dle; to make you more anxious by  
wondering if currently there is any

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contrast between the real world and the apparent one. The corporate mainstream media serve phantasmagoria on a 24/7 basis, all shifting like quicksand. For anyone with a modicum of common sense, this should be obvious. But then again, as Thoreau put it:

“The commonest sense is the sense of men asleep, which they express by snoring”.

Perhaps some health expert will soon recommend that 24 hours of sleep a day is optimal, but maybe I am dreaming or being redundant.

For many decades, the corporate mainstream media and the CIA have been synonymous. They were married down in hell and now daily do the devil’s work up above. Now that news is conveyed primarily through digital media via the internet, their power to induce electronic trances has increased exponentially. Linguistic and visual mind control is their *raison d’être*. Fear is their favourite tactic. And since the fear and anxiety of death is the archetypal source of all anxiety, death becomes a core element in their fear-mongering.

In a recent powerful article, Canadian independent journalist Eva Bartlett, a brave and free war correspondent who has reported from inside Syria and Gaza, has shown how the ongoing Covid-19 “fear porn” spewed out by the media has dramatically increased people’s anxiety levels and thrown so many into a perpetual state of near panic. This, of course, is not an accident.

Fear immobilises people and drives them into a cataleptic state where clear thinking is impossible. They become hypnotized in a “private” space that is actually social, an instantaneous identification

The technology has imprisoned people behind their screens and now the controlling forces are intent on closing this mechanistic circle if they can

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with the media news reports that are addressed to millions but feel personal and greatly exacerbate the great loneliness that lies at the core of high-tech society.

As I have said before, the new digital order is the world of teleconferencing and the online life, existence shorn of physical space and time and people. A world where shaking hands is a dissident act. A haunted world of masked spectres, distorted words and images that can appear and disappear in a nanosecond. A magic show. A place where, in the words of Charles Manson, you can “get the fear”, where fear is king. A locus where, as you stare at the screens, you are no longer there since you are spellbound.

In a high-tech society, loneliness is far more prevalent than in the past. The technology has imprisoned people behind their screens and now the controlling forces are intent on closing this mechanistic circle if they can. They call it The Great Reset.

They have spent decades using technology to invade and pare down people’s inner private space where freedom to think and decide resides.

They have repeated ad nauseam the materialistic mantra that freedom is an illusion and that we are amazing machines determined by our genes and social forces.

They have reiterated that the spiritual and transcendent realms

are illusions.

And they have pushed their transhuman agenda to assert more and more power and control.

This is the essence of the corona crisis and the push to vaccinate everyone.

Drip by drip, year by year, they have cultivated the necessary preconditions and predispositions for this technological fascism with its nihilistic underpinnings to succeed.

When the inner dimension of existence is lost, there is no way to critique the outer world, its politics, and social structure. Dissent becomes a useless passion when people instantly identify with the social. Human nature doesn’t change but social structures and technology do and they can be used to try to destroy people’s humanity. Herbert Marcuse put it clearly long before the latest digital technology:

“This immediate, automatic identification (which may have been characteristic of primitive forms of association) reappears in high industrial civilization; its new ‘immediacy,’ however, is the product of a sophisticated, scientific management and organization. In this process, the “inner” dimension of the mind in which opposition to the status quo can take root is whittled down. The loss of this dimension, in which the power of negative thinking – the critical power of Reason – is at home, is the ideological counterpart to the very material process in which advanced industrial society silences and reconciles the opposition”.

Once upon a time, people sat together and talked. They even touched and shared their thoughts and feelings. They conspired in a most natural way apart from the prying eyes and ears of the electron-

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ic spies. Now so many sit and check their cell phones. They “connect,” thinking they are with it while not knowing they have been lured into another dimension where frenetic passivity reigns and trance states are the rule.

“Propaganda is the true remedy for loneliness,” said Jacques Ellul in his masterpiece, *Propaganda*. He was being simultaneously accurate and facetious. For propaganda provides a doorway to pseudo-community, a place to lose oneself in the group, to satisfy the need to believe and obey in mass technological society where emotional emptiness and lack of meaning are widespread and the need to fill up the empty self is dutifully met by propaganda, which is a drug by any other name, indeed the primary drug. The empty-self craves fulfilment, anything to consume to fill the void that a consumer culture dangles everywhere. Think alike, buy alike, dress alike – and you will be one big happy community. It is all abstract of course, even as its rational character is irrational, but that doesn’t matter a whit since the fear of “not going along” and appearing dissident plagues people.

Now we have endless digital propaganda that is the “remedy” for loneliness. Ah, all the lonely people, keeping their masks in a jar by the side of the door together with Eleanor Rigby. They think they

Propaganda provides  
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know what their masks are for but don’t know why they are lonely or that they have been played with. Masks upon masks are donned to ward off the fear that is pumped out through the electronic airwaves. It is doubtful that many ever heard of William Casey or can imagine the breadth and depth of the propaganda that he and his current protégés in the intelligence agencies and corporate media dispense daily.

“When everything the American people believes is false.” Casey must be smiling in hell.

A grim submissiveness has settled over the lives of millions of hypnotized people in so many countries. Grim, grim, grim, as Charles Dickens wrote of his 1842 visit to the puritanical Shaker religious sect in western Massachusetts. He said:

“I so abhor, and from my soul detest, that bad spirit, no matter by what class or sect it may be entertained, which would strip life of

its healthful, graces, rob youth of its innocent pleasures, pluck from maturity and age their pleasant ornaments, and make existence but a narrow path to the grave....”

And yet, the fundamental things still do apply, as time goes by. Love, glory, loneliness, beauty, fear, faith, and courage. Lovers and true artists, fighters both, resist this machine tyranny and its endless lies because they smell a rat intent on destroying their passionate love of the daring adventure that is life. They feel life is an agon, an arena for struggle, “a fight for love and glory,” a case of do-and-die. They have bullshit detectors and see through the elites’ propaganda that is used to literally kill millions around the world and to kill the spirit of rebellion in so many others. And they know that it is in the inner sanctuary of every individual soul where resistance to evil is born and fear is defeated. They know too that the art and love must be shared and this is how social solidarity movements are created. **CT**

**Edward Curtin’s new book, *Seeking Truth in a Litany of Lies: Critical and Lyrical Essays*, is available from Clarity Press – [www.claritypress.com](http://www.claritypress.com). Price \$18 (e-book) \$26-95 (paperback). Read more of Curtin’s essays at his website [www.edwardcurtin.com](http://www.edwardcurtin.com).**

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Right:  
Before the  
children take  
over, Weston-  
Super-Mare,  
2019

**BYWAYS**

Roger A. Deakins

Published by Damiani  
[www.damianieditore.com](http://www.damianieditore.com)  
US \$55 / Can \$75





Left: The lady wondered why I took this photograph, Weston-Super-Mare, 2004  
Below: I liked the dog's second jump as it looked at the camera, Teignmouth, 2000



ROGER A. DEAKINS

# An excuse to go out walking

Famed movie cinematographer shares personal images taken over half a century

**M**y work as a cinematographer is a collaborative experience”, says Roger A. Deakins. “At least when a film is successful, the results are seen by a wide audience.

“On the other hand, I have rarely shared my personal photographs and never as a collection”, he adds, talking about *Byways*, his first book of photographs, recently published

by the Italian publisher Damiani.

Best known for his movie collaborations with directors including the Coen brothers, Sam Mendes and Denis Villeneuve, the new book by the legendary Oscar-winning cinematographer includes previously unpublished black-and-white photographs spanning five decades, from 1971 to the present.

After graduating from

college, Deakins spent a year photographing life in rural North Devon in England on a commission for the Beaford Arts Centre; these images attest to a keenly ironic English sensibility, and also serve as a record of a time and place of vanished post-war Britain.

“Although photography has remained one of my few hobbies”, says Deakins, “more often it is an excuse to spend many hours

Right: Albuquerque, New Mexico, 2014

Below: This gull is confused by a new addition to the sea front, Paignton, 2015

Bottom: On a train returning from a day of shooting for *The Reader*, Germany, 2007



just walking, my camera over my shoulder and with no particular purpose but to observe”.

“Why a book? Maybe it is vanity. Some of these pictures, especially those from North Devon and the seaside towns of

the South West of England, I wish to see preserved as a record of a time and a place, whilst others are purely images that connect with me as I would hope they do with the viewer. On the other hand, I have rarely shared my personal

photographs and never as a collection. And they are personal.”

Deakins, who was made a knight in the UK’s New Year’s Honours list in 2001, is one of today’s most acclaimed cinematographers, re-





nowned for his vast and varied body of work. He has been nominated for an Oscar 15 times and won the award twice for the films *Blade Runner 2049* and *1917*.

“In the early days of my career

as a cinematographer, my focus was exclusively on my film work and I rarely carried a still camera. Regrettably, with hindsight, this collection contains no images from my time shooting film projects in India, Eritrea, Sudan, Gambia,

Kenya, Zimbabwe or South Africa, though a few do come from one of my first professional assignments, which was to film a documentary aboard one of the entrants in the Whitbread Round the World Yacht Race”.

**CT**

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JOHN PILGER

# The Great Game of smashing countries

Isn't it time to heed the truth of the past so that all this suffering never happens again?

As a tsunami of crocodile tears engulfs Western politicians, history is suppressed. More than a generation ago, Afghanistan won its freedom, which the United States, Britain and their “allies” destroyed.

In 1978, a liberation movement led by the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) overthrew the dictatorship of Mohammad Dawd, the cousin of King Zahir Shar. It was an immensely popular revolution that took the British and Americans by surprise. Foreign journalists in Kabul, reported the *New York Times*, were surprised to find that “nearly every Afghan they interviewed said [they were] delighted with the coup”. The *Wall Street Journal* reported that “150,000 persons ... marched to honour the new flag ... the participants appeared genuinely enthusiastic”.

The *Washington Post* reported that “Afghan loyalty to the government can scarcely be questioned”. Secular, modernist and, to a considerable degree, socialist, the government declared a programme of visionary reforms that included equal rights for women and minorities. Political prisoners were freed and police files publicly burned.

Under the monarchy, life expectancy was thirty-five; one in three children died in infancy. Ninety

percent of the population was illiterate. The new government introduced free medical care. A mass literacy campaign was launched.

For women, the gains had no precedent; by the late 1980s, half the university students were women, and women made up 40 percent of Afghanistan's doctors, 70 percent of its teachers and 30 percent of its civil servants.

So radical were the changes that they remain vivid in the memories of those who benefited. Saira Noorani, a female surgeon who fled Afghanistan in 2001, recalled: “Every girl could go to high school and university. We could go where we wanted and wear what we liked ... We used to go to cafes and the cinema to see the latest Indian films on a Friday ... it all started to go wrong when the mujahedin started winning ...

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Jimmy Carter authorised Operation Cyclone, a “covert action” programme to overthrow Afghanistan's first secular, progressive government

these were the people the West supported.”

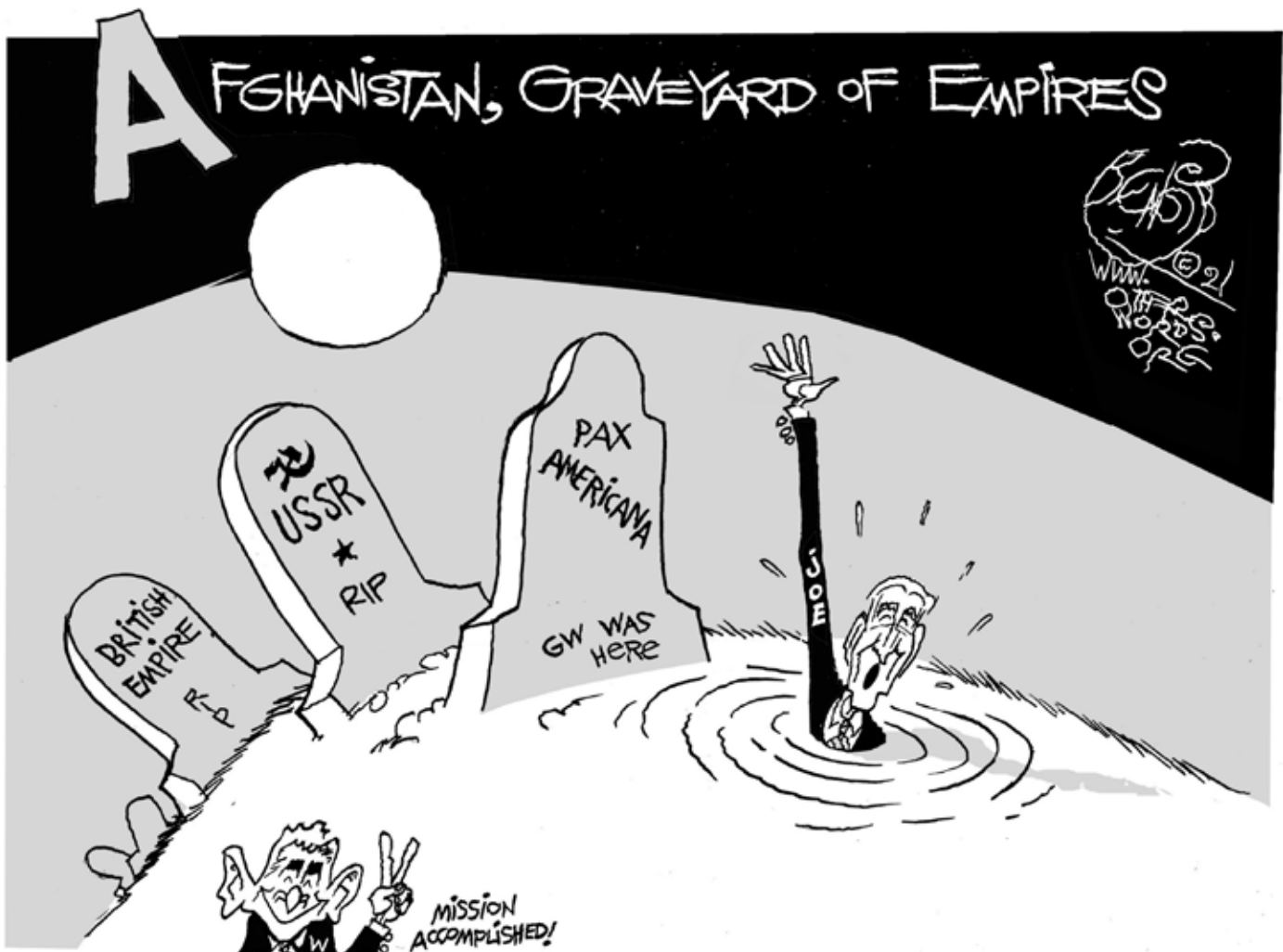
For the United States, the problem with the PDPA government was that it was supported by the Soviet Union. Yet it was never the “puppet” derided in the West, neither was the coup against the monarchy “Soviet backed”, as the American and British press claimed at the time.

President Jimmy Carter's Secretary of State, Cyrus Vance, later wrote in his memoirs: “We had no evidence of any Soviet complicity in the coup”.

In the same administration was Zbigniew Brzezinski, Carter's National Security Adviser, a Polish émigré and fanatical anti-communist and moral extremist whose enduring influence on American presidents expired only with his death in 2017.

On 3 July 1979, unknown to the American people and Congress, Carter authorised a \$500-million “covert action” programme to overthrow Afghanistan's first secular, progressive government. This was code-named by the CIA Operation Cyclone.

The \$500-million bought, bribed and armed a group of tribal and religious zealots known as the mujahedin. In his semi-official history, *Washington Post* reporter Bob Woodward wrote that the CIA



spent \$70-million on bribes alone. He describes a meeting between a CIA agent known as “Gary” and a warlord called Amniat-Melli: “Gary placed a bundle of cash on the table: \$500,000 in one-foot stacks of \$100 bills. He believed it would be more impressive than the usual \$200,000, the best way to say we’re here, we’re serious, here’s money, we know you need it ... Gary would soon ask CIA headquarters for and receive \$10-million in cash”.

Recruited from all over the Muslim world, America’s secret army was trained in camps in Pakistan run by Pakistani intelligence, the CIA and Britain’s MI6. Others were recruited at an Islamic College in Brooklyn, New York – within sight of the doomed Twin Towers. One of

the recruits was a Saudi engineer called Osama bin Laden.

The aim was to spread Islamic fundamentalism in Central Asia and destabilise and eventually destroy the Soviet Union.

**I**n August, 1979, the US Embassy in Kabul reported that *“the United States’ larger interests ... would be served by the demise of the PDPA government, despite whatever setbacks this might mean for future social and economic reforms in Afghanistan”*.

Read again the words above I have italicised. It is not often that such cynical intent is spelt out as clearly. The US was saying that a genuinely progressive Afghan gov-

ernment and the rights of Afghan women could go to hell.

Six months later, the Soviets made their fatal move into Afghanistan in response to the American-created jihadist threat on their doorstep. Armed with CIA-supplied Stinger missiles and celebrated as “freedom fighters” by Margaret Thatcher, the mujahedin eventually drove the Red Army out of Afghanistan.

Calling themselves the Northern Alliance, the mujahedin were dominated by warlords who controlled the heroin trade and terrorised rural women. The Taliban were an ultra-puritanical faction, whose mullahs wore black and punished banditry, rape and murder but banished women from public life.

In the 1980s, I made contact with

the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan, known as RAWA, which had tried to alert the world to the suffering of Afghan women. During the Taliban time they concealed cameras beneath their burqas to film evidence of atrocities, and did the same to expose the brutality of the Western-backed mujahedin. “Marina” of RAWA told me, “We took the videotape to all the main media groups, but they didn’t want to know ...”

In 1996, the enlightened PDPA government was overrun. The President, Mohammad Najibullah, had gone to the United Nations to appeal to for help. On his return, he was hanged from a street light.

“I confess that [countries] are pieces on a chessboard”, said Lord Curzon in 1898, “upon which is being played out a great game for the domination of the world”.

The Viceroy of India was referring in particular to Afghanistan. A century later, Prime Minister Tony Blair used slightly different words. “This is a moment to seize”, he said following 9/11. “The Kaleidoscope has been shaken. The pieces are in flux. Soon they will settle again. Before they do, let us re-order this world around us”.

On Afghanistan, he added this: “We will not walk away [but ensure] some way out of the poverty that is your miserable existence”.

Blair echoed his mentor, President George W. Bush, who spoke to the victims of his bombs from the Oval Office: “The oppressed people of Afghanistan will know the generosity of America. As we strike military targets, we will also drop food, medicine and supplies to the starving and suffering ...”

Almost every word was false.

## I found unexploded American cluster bombs in the rubble of Kabul which were often mistaken for yellow relief packages dropped from the air

Their declarations of concern were cruel illusions for an imperial savagery “we” in the West rarely recognise as such.

In 2001, Afghanistan was stricken and depended on emergency relief convoys from Pakistan. As the journalist Jonathan Steele reported, the invasion indirectly caused the deaths of some 20,000 people as supplies to drought victims stopped and people fled their homes.

Eighteen months later, I found unexploded American cluster bombs in the rubble of Kabul which were often mistaken for yellow relief packages dropped from the air. They blew the limbs off foraging, hungry children.

In the village of Bibi Maru, I watched a woman called Orifa kneel at the graves of her husband, Gul Ahmed, a carpet weaver, and seven other members of her family, including six children, and two children who were killed next door.

An American F-16 aircraft had come out of a clear blue sky and dropped a Mk82 500-pound bomb on Orifa’s mud, stone and straw house. Orifa was away at the time. When she returned, she gathered the body parts.

Months later, a group of Americans came from Kabul and gave her an envelope with fifteen notes: a to-

tal of \$15. “Two dollars for each of my family killed”, she said.

The invasion of Afghanistan was a fraud. In the wake of 9/11, the Taliban sought to distant themselves from Osama bin Laden. They were, in many respects, an American client with which the administration of Bill Clinton had done a series of secret deals to allow the building of a \$3 billion natural gas pipeline by a US oil company consortium.

In high secrecy, Taliban leaders had been invited to the US and entertained by the CEO of the Unocal company in his Texas mansion and by the CIA at its headquarters in Virginia. One of the deal-makers was Dick Cheney, later George W. Bush’s Vice-President.

In 2010, I was in Washington and arranged to interview the mastermind of Afghanistan’s modern era of suffering, Zbigniew Brzezinski. I quoted to him his autobiography in which he admitted that his grand scheme for drawing the Soviets into Afghanistan had created “a few stirred up Muslims”.

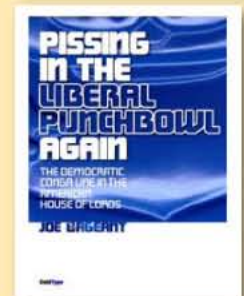
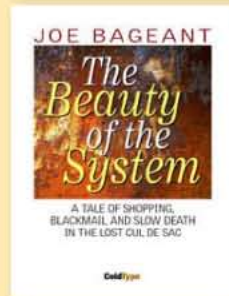
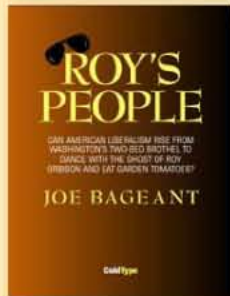
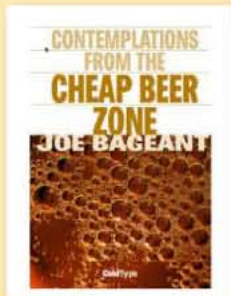
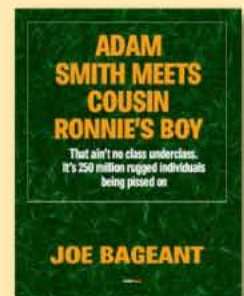
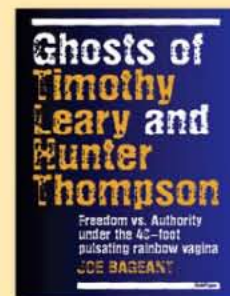
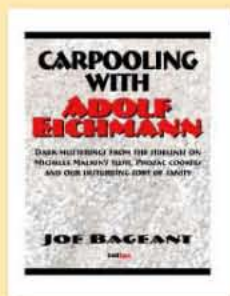
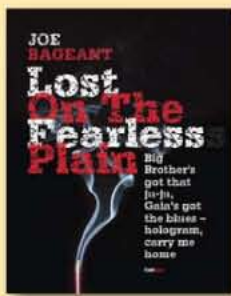
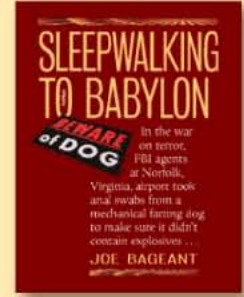
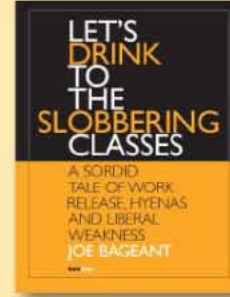
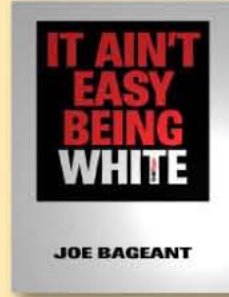
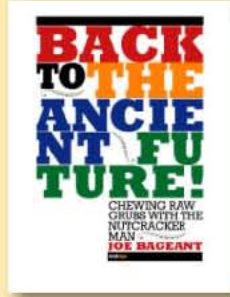
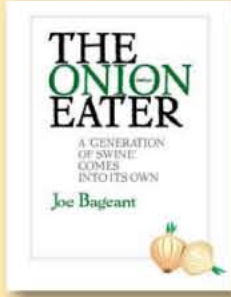
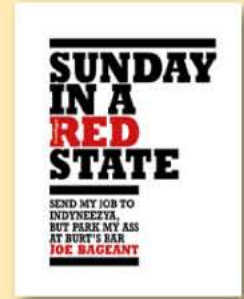
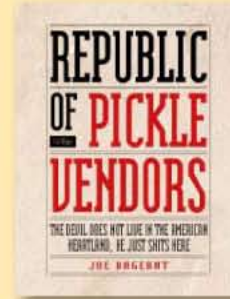
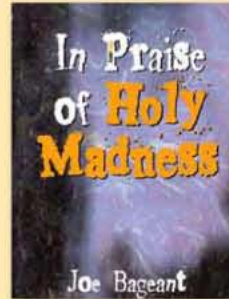
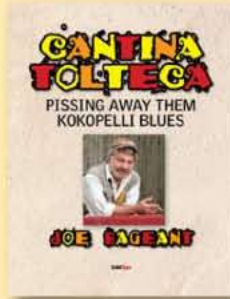
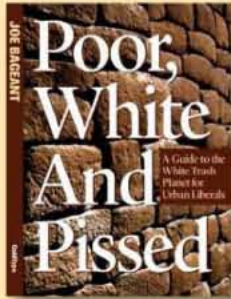
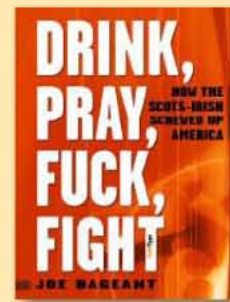
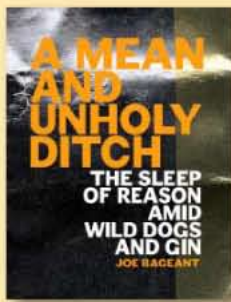
“Do you have any regrets?” I asked.

“Regrets! Regrets! What regrets?”

When we watch the current scenes of panic at Kabul airport, and listen to journalists and generals in distant TV studios bewailing the withdrawal of “our protection”, isn’t it time to heed the truth of the past so that all this suffering never happens again? **CT**

*John Pilger is an award-winning journalist, filmmaker, and author. Read his full biography at his website [www.johnpilger.com](http://www.johnpilger.com), and follow him on Twitter: @JohnPilger.*

● John Pilger’s 2003 film, *Breaking the Silence*, is available to view at [www.johnpilger.com/videos/breaking-the-silence-truth-and-lies-in-the-war-on-terror](http://www.johnpilger.com/videos/breaking-the-silence-truth-and-lies-in-the-war-on-terror)



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WILLIAM D. HARTUNG

# How corporations won the War on Terror

If we don't put a halt to foreign military interventions, the United States can expect decades of more war profiteering by weapons contractors

The costs and consequences of America's 21st-century wars have by now been well-documented – a staggering \$8-trillion in expenditures and more than 380,000 civilian deaths, as calculated by Brown University's Costs of War project. The question of who has benefited most from such an orgy of military spending has, unfortunately, received far less attention.

Corporations large and small have left the financial feast of that post-9/11 surge in military spending with genuinely staggering sums in hand. After all, Pentagon spending has totalled an almost unimaginable \$14-trillion-plus since the start of the Afghan War in 2001, up to one-half of which (catch a breath here) went directly to defense contractors.

The political climate created by the Global War on Terror, or GWOT, as Bush administration officials quickly dubbed it, set the stage for humongous increases in the Pentagon budget. In the first year after the 9/11 attacks and the invasion of Afghanistan, defence spending rose by more than 10 percent and that was just the beginning. It would, in fact, increase annually for the next decade, which was unprecedented in American his-

tory. The Pentagon budget peaked in 2010 at the highest level since World War II – over \$800-billion, substantially more than the country spent on its forces at the height of the Korean or Vietnam Wars or during President Ronald Reagan's vaunted military buildup of the 1980s.

And in the new political climate sparked by the reaction to the 9/11 attacks, those increases reached well beyond expenditures specifically tied to fighting the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. As Harry Stonecipher, then vice president of Boeing, told the *Wall Street Journal* in an October 2001 interview, "The purse is now open... [A]ny member of Congress who doesn't vote for the funds we need to defend this country will be looking for a new job after next November".

Stonecipher's prophecy of rapidly rising Pentagon budgets proved correct. And it's never ended. The Biden administration is anything but an exception. Its latest proposal for spending on the Pentagon and related defence work like nuclear warhead development at the Department of Energy topped \$753-billion for FY2022. And not to be outdone, the House and Senate Armed Services Committees have already voted to add roughly \$24-billion to that staggering sum.

The benefits of the post-9/11 surge in Pentagon spending have been distributed in a highly concentrated fashion. More than one-third of all contracts now go to just five major weapons companies – Lockheed Martin, Boeing, General Dynamics, Raytheon, and Northrop Grumman. Those five received more than \$166-billion in such contracts in fiscal year 2020 alone. To put such a figure in perspective, the \$75-billion in Pentagon contracts awarded to Lockheed Martin that year was significantly more than one and one-half times the entire 2020 budget for the State Department and the Agency for International Development, which together totalled \$44-billion.

While it's true that the biggest financial beneficiaries of the post-9/11 military spending surge were those five weapons contractors, they were anything but the only ones to cash in. Companies benefiting from the buildup of the past 20 years also included logistics and construction firms like Kellogg, Brown & Root (KBR) and Bechtel, as well as armed private security contractors like Blackwater and Dyncorp. The Congressional Research Service estimates that in FY2020 the spending for contractors of all kinds had grown to \$420-billion, or well over half of the total Pentagon budget. Compa-



nies in all three categories noted above took advantage of “wartime” conditions – in which both speed of delivery and less rigorous oversight came to be considered the norms – to overcharge the government or even engage in outright fraud.

The best-known reconstruction and logistics contractor in Iraq and Afghanistan was Halliburton, through its KBR subsidiary. At the start of both the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, Halliburton was the recipient of the Pentagon’s Logistics Civil Augmentation Program contracts. Those open-ended arrangements involved coordinating support functions for troops in the field, including setting up military bases, maintain-

ing equipment, and providing food and laundry services. By 2008, the company had received more than \$30-billion for such work.

Halliburton’s role would prove controversial indeed, reeking as it did of self-dealing and blatant corruption. The notion of privatizing military-support services was first initiated in the early 1990s by Dick

Once it secured its billions for work in Iraq, Halliburton vastly overcharged the Pentagon for basic services, even while doing shoddy work

Cheney when he was secretary of defense in the George H.W. Bush administration and Halliburton got the contract to figure out how to do it. I suspect you won’t be surprised to learn that Cheney then went on to serve as the CEO of Halliburton until he became vice president under George W. Bush in 2001. His journey was a (if not the) classic case of that revolving door between the Pentagon and the defence industry, now used by so many government officials and generals or admirals, with all the obvious conflicts-of-interest it entails.

Once it secured its billions for work in Iraq, Halliburton proceeded to vastly overcharge the Pentagon for basic services, even while doing shoddy work that put US troops

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at risk – and it would prove to be anything but alone in such activities.

Starting in 2004, a year into the Iraq War, the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction, a congressionally mandated body designed to root out waste, fraud, and abuse, along with Congressional watchdogs like Representative Henry Waxman (D-CA), exposed scores of examples of overcharging, faulty construction, and outright theft by contractors engaged in the “rebuilding” of that country. Again, you undoubtedly won’t be surprised to find out that relatively few companies suffered significant financial or criminal consequences for what can only be described as striking war profiteering. The congressional Commission on Wartime Contracting in Iraq and Afghanistan estimated that, as of 2011, waste, fraud, and abuse in the two war zones had already totalled \$31-billion to \$60-billion.

A case in point was the International Oil Trading Company, which received contracts worth \$2.7-billion from the Pentagon’s Defense Logistics Agency to provide fuel for US operations in Iraq. An investigation by Congressman Waxman, chair of the House Government Oversight and Reform Committee, found that the firm had routinely overcharged the Pentagon for the fuel it shipped into Iraq, making more than \$200-million in profits on oil sales of \$1.4-billion during the period from 2004 to 2008. More than a third of those funds went to its owner, Harry Sargeant III, who also served as the finance chairman of the Florida Republican Party. Waxman summarised the situation this way: “The documents show that Mr. Sargeant’s company took advantage of US taxpayers. His company had the only license to transport fuel through Jordan, so he could get away with charging exorbitant

## A significant portion of \$2-billion worth of transportation contracts issued to US and Afghan firms ended up as kickbacks

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prices. I’ve never seen another situation like this”.

A particularly egregious case of shoddy work with tragic human consequences involved the electrocution of at least 18 military personnel at several bases in Iraq from 2004 on. This happened thanks to faulty electrical installations, some done by KBR and its subcontractors. An investigation by the Pentagon’s Inspector General found that commanders in the field had “failed to ensure that renovations... had been properly done, the Army did not set standards for jobs or contractors, and KBR did not ground electrical equipment it installed at the facility”.

The Afghan “reconstruction” process was similarly replete with examples of fraud, waste, and abuse. These included a US-appointed economic task force that spent \$43-million constructing a gas station essentially in the middle of nowhere that would never be used, another \$150-million on lavish living quarters for US economic advisors, and \$3-million for Afghan police patrol boats that would prove similarly useless.

Perhaps most disturbingly, a congressional investigation found that a significant portion of \$2-billion worth of transportation contracts issued to US and Afghan firms ended up as kickbacks to warlords and police officials or as payments to the Taliban to allow large convoys of trucks to pass through areas

they controlled, sometimes as much as \$1,500 per truck, or up to half a million dollars for each 300-truck convoy. In 2009, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated that “one of the major sources of funding for the Taliban is the protection money” paid from just such transportation contracts.

A second stream of revenue for corporations tied to those wars went to private security contractors, some of which guarded US facilities or critical infrastructure like Iraqi oil pipelines.

The most notorious of them was, of course, Blackwater, a number of whose employees were involved in a 2007 massacre of 17 Iraqis in Baghdad’s Nisour Square. They opened fire on civilians at a crowded intersection while guarding a US Embassy convoy. The attack prompted ongoing legal and civil cases that continued into the Trump era, when several perpetrators of the massacre were pardoned by the president.

In the wake of those killings, Blackwater was rebranded several times, first as XE Services and then as Academii, before eventually merging with Triple Canopy, another private contracting firm. Blackwater founder Erik Prince then separated from the company, but he has since recruited private mercenaries on behalf of the United Arab Emirates for deployment to the civil war in Libya in violation of a United Nations arms embargo. Prince also unsuccessfully proposed to the Trump administration that he recruit a force of private contractors meant to be the backbone of the US war effort in Afghanistan.

Another task taken up by private firms Titan and CACI International was the interrogation of Iraqi prisoners. Both companies had interroga-



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tors and translators on the ground at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, a site where such prisoners were brutally tortured.

The number of personnel deployed and the revenues received by security and reconstruction contractors grew dramatically as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan wore on. The Congressional Research Service estimated that by March 2011 there were more contractor employees in Iraq and Afghanistan (155,000) than American uniformed military personnel (145,000). In its August 2011 final report, the Commission on Wartime Contracting in Iraq and Afghanistan put the figure even higher, stating that “contractors represent more than half of the US presence in the contingency operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, at times employing more than a quarter-million people”.

While an armed contractor who had served in the Marines could earn as much as \$200,000 annually in Iraq, about three-quarters of the contractor work force there was made up of people from countries like Nepal or the Philippines, or Iraqi citizens. Poorly paid, at times they received as little as \$3,000 per year. A 2017 analysis by the Costs of War project documented “abysmal labour conditions” and major human rights abuses inflicted on foreign nationals working on US-funded projects in Afghanistan, including false imprisonment, theft of wages, and deaths and injuries in areas of conflict.

With the US military in Iraq reduced to a relatively modest number of armed “advisors” and no American forces left in Afghanistan, such contractors are now seeking foreign clients. For example, a US firm – Tier 1 Group, which was founded by a former employee of Blackwater – trained four of the Saudi operatives involved in the murder of Saudi

Just imagine for a minute where we might really be today if Congress had spent close to \$8-trillion rebuilding this society rather than wrecking distant ones

journalist and US resident Jamal Khashoggi, an effort funded by the Saudi government. As the *New York Times* noted when it broke that story, “Such issues are likely to continue as American private military contractors increasingly look to foreign clients to shore up their business as the United States scales back overseas deployments after two decades of war”.

Add in one more factor to the two-decade “war on terror” explosion of corporate profits. Overseas arms sales also rose sharply in this era. The biggest and most controversial market for US weaponry in recent years has been the Middle East, particularly sales to countries like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which have been involved in a devastating war in Yemen, as well as fuelling conflicts elsewhere in the region.

Donald Trump made the most noise about Middle East arms sales and their benefits to the US economy. However, the giant weapons-producing corporations actually sold more weaponry to Saudi Arabia, on average, during the Obama administration, including three major offers in 2010 that totalled more than \$60-billion for combat aircraft, attack helicopters, armoured vehicles, bombs, missiles, and guns – virtually an entire arsenal. Many of those systems were used by the Saudis in their intervention in Yemen, which has involved the killing of thou-

sands of civilians in indiscriminate air strikes and the imposition of a blockade that has contributed substantially to the deaths of nearly a quarter of a million people to date.

Reining in the excess profits of weapons contractors and preventing waste, fraud, and abuse by private firms involved in supporting US military operations will ultimately require reduced spending on war and on preparations for war. So far, unfortunately, Pentagon budgets only continue to rise and yet more money flows to the big five weapons firms.

To alter this remarkably unvarying pattern, a new strategy is needed, one that increases the role of American diplomacy, while focusing on emerging and persistent non-military security challenges. “National security” needs to be re-defined not in terms of a new “cold war” with China, but to forefront crucial issues like pandemics and climate change.

It’s time to put a halt to the direct and indirect foreign military interventions the United States has carried out in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Somalia, Yemen, and so many other places in this century. Otherwise, we’re in for decades of more war profiteering by weapons contractors reaping massive profits with impunity. **CT**

*William D. Hartung is the director of the Arms and Security Program at the Center for International Policy. This piece is adapted from a new report he wrote for the Center for International Policy and the Costs of War Project at Brown University, “Profits of War: Corporate Beneficiaries of the post-9/11 Pentagon Spending Surge.” This essay was first published at [www.tomdispatch.com](http://www.tomdispatch.com).*

PHILIP KRASKE

# Why do journalists hate 9/11 Truthers?

Sceptics who flag errors in the official 9/11 story are ignored or ridiculed. What has happened to mainstream journalism, the “fifth column” of democracy?

It seems that there are to be no dissenting voices on the twentieth anniversary of 9/11. Even film director Spike Lee was forced by media outcry to edit out of his documentary mini-series the half-hour dedicated to sceptics of the official version of the event. Thus the citizenry has been saved from “a bog of heinously dangerous ideas”.

This phrase comes from Slate.com columnist Jeremy Stahl, for whom the alternative theories of 9/11 are “arguments that have been debunked a thousand times”. This, of course, is nonsense. The debate rages to this day. But as with the issue of vaccination against coronavirus, the mainstream media will not brook the least opposition.

Stahl puts great stock, for example, in the “three-year-long, \$16-million investigation into the collapse of the World Trade Center for the National Institute of Standards and Technology”, as if these numbers and a solemn agency title could not possibly be challenged. It doesn’t seem to occur to him that the US government is itself the accused party here, and in similar circumstances has been caught fudging facts. The NIST report has actually taken heavy criticism from Architects and Engineers for 9/11 Truth, the most important group pushing

alternative theories of the attack.

Why do journalists favour the government version so fiercely? The sheer vitriol of their attacks on Truthers reflects deep personal anger; clearly no Deep State maven stands over them dictating their articles. In theory, the more onerous discoveries of 9/11 investigators – the presence of explosive material in the dust that spread through Manhattan, the dubious cellphone calls made from the hijacked aircraft, the impossibly high speeds of low-altitude flight by three of the airplanes – should be red meat to reporters. But all of it is ignored, if not ridiculed. What has happened to this “fifth column” of democracy?

Before television came along, reporters were hacks: working-class guys who wore their suits poorly and smoked too much. Now they are college grads with master’s degrees and big ambitions. Their role models are the millionaire voices of CNN and Eyewitness News anchorpersons. The Internet pipsqueaks who have to beg for donations every three months don’t have three-car garages and sweet vacations every summer. They may get closer to the truth of issues, but they don’t have source lunches on the company dime.

Journalists don’t take long to understand which side of the bread holds the butter. They jump at the well-paying jobs, and slowly the resistance to any type of “conspiracy theory” builds. They instinctively reject the work of armchair detectives, and on several levels.

**First is the theoretical level:** Reporters ought to be able to ferret out the dirt wherever they see it. But they soon realise they can’t: some stories are simply out of bounds. Imagine the journalists – and there must be a great many of them, especially in the New York and Washington areas – who got great tips in the aftermath of 9/11 and saw Pulitzers for the taking. But their editors rubbed their necks and spiked the stories, telling them *We are not in the conspiracy business*. There is just some news that’s not fit to print, and reporters must stand at the fence and envy those allowed to cross it into the fertile fields beyond.

**Next is the professional level:** The armchair guys have scooped them. They are the ones who debunked the government’s first hypothesis that the Twin Towers “pancaked” down; who discovered that the Fox News helicopter had altered the image of the second plane hitting the South Tower; who called out reporters for saying that Build-

ing Seven had collapsed before it did.

**Then the social level:** Journalists, by the nature of their work, achieve a kind of fame. They are the kind of people that others like to brag about living next to. Television journalists are recognised in the supermarket, print ones publish their lofty opinions to thousands of readers. They get front-row seats at a political campaign, and now and then rub elbows with movie stars and billionaires. Reporters are not hacks anymore and resent the suggestion of the sweaty armchair crowd that they are exactly that.

**The patriotic level.** War brings out the worst in journalists. Among many disheartening stories in Seymour Hersh's memoir *Reporter* is that he alone reported in detail on the order by an American general to attack retreating Iraqis at the end of the Gulf War – this when the Iraqis had been promised safe passage back to their country from Kuwait. The result was a veritable massacre of unarmed men. “It was a reminder of the Vietnam War’s MGR, for Mere Gook Rule”, Hersh wrote: “If it’s a murdered or raped gook, there is no crime”. Weeks before his article, the general got wind of Hersh’s investigation and impugned his integrity; his comments were published widely. Reporters rally both to the flag and the official narrative, and they don’t like seeing either wrinkled.

Twenty long years after 9/11, the patriotic media as one pounced on Spike Lee over his meager half-hour of skepticism, the basic points of which have long ago been circu-



Journalists consider their duty is to steer the public away from “dangerous ideas”, such as those that emerged after 9/11

lated and digested by anyone with an interest in the subject. In his article, Stahl worries that the leader of Architects and Engineers for 9/11 Truth, Richard Gage, “has never had the type of audience that HBO is offering”. He even sent a letter to HBO objecting to Gage’s appearance.

**Which brings us to the top level, that of Thought Police;** its symbol is the White House Correspondents’ Dinner, where pundits, reporters and movie stars alike chortle over the president’s insider humour. Journalists consider themselves a loose sort of club whose duty is to present a smooth narrative and steer the public away from “dangerous ideas”. And the idea that explosives, placed in the buildings weeks before 9/11, brought down the Twin Towers and Building Seven is very dangerous indeed.

So the journalist throws in his or

her lot with the government, which itself enjoys the home-court advantage in foreign and security policy: Americans, rarely interested in either, blithely accept the government version of events. The journalist does the math: if he or she opposes the official version, their stories will go straight on the spike and their jobs will quickly follow; or they can not oppose, keep their jobs and make useful contributions in other areas of particular interest to them. I would bet that Spike Lee made a similar calculation when he returned to his editing room.

Hence 9/11 truth, like a lot of other truths, falls by the wayside. And when somebody comes along and picks one up and begins a crusade, journalists loathe him. “Gage is responsible for peddling some of the most pernicious and long-running lies about the 9/11 attacks”, writes Stahl. Indeed, his article thunders with the rage typical of commentators who have made it big in America’s fraught journalistic landscape.

And having made it big, they are not about to say the system that has set them up with prestige, fame, and a fine lifestyle is full of compromises.

Journalists are conservatives. We cannot depend on them, as CNN reporters nauseatingly aver in their self-congratulatory ads, “to go beneath the surface of a story” and “peel away the layers”. In foreign and security issues, they are fixed like limpets to the story’s surface – and they hate, they despise those free to dig deeper, and who show them up as frauds. **CT**

**Phillip Kraske’s latest book, *A Legacy of Chains*, is published by enCompass Editions. For more information about the book, go to [www.philipkraske.com](http://www.philipkraske.com).**

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