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THE WAR ON IRAQ: 20 YEARS LATER

Endless war and media complicity – David Edwards & David Cromwell
The urbanity of evil – Norman Solomon

Issue 244

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WRITING WORTH READING ■ PHOTOS WORTH SEEING

April 2023



How many of those now
calling for Putin's arrest
were complicit in the
illegal invasion of Iraq?

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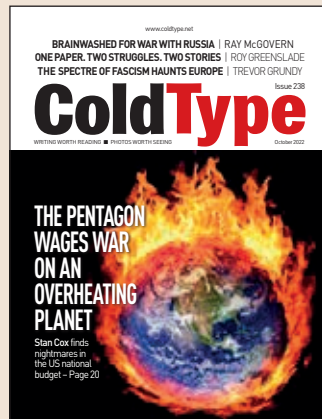
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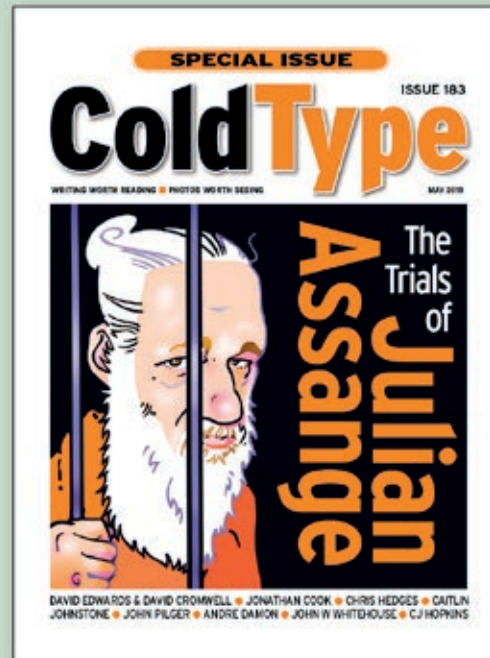
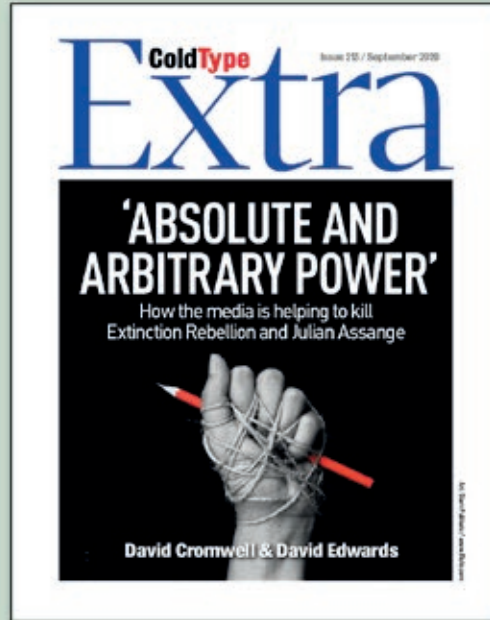
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NEWS | VIEWS | OPINIONS

INSIGHTS



SIGHT FOR FRIGHTENED EYES? Not being able to detect what a clown is thinking or what they might do next puts some people on edge when they are around them, according to new research.

Are you scared of clowns? If so, you are not alone. Coulrophobia, or the fear of clowns, is a widely acknowledged phenomenon. Studies indicate this fear is present among both adults and children in many different cultures. Yet it is not well understood due to a lack of focused research.

While numerous possible explanations of the phobia had been put forward in academic literature, no studies had specifically investigated its origins. So we set out to discover the reasons people are frightened by clowns, and to understand the psychology behind this. We also

SOPHIE SCOREY
JAMES GREVILLE
PHILIP TYSON
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Why are we so scared of clowns?

wanted to explore how common the fear of clowns is in adults and to look at the severity of the fear in those who reported it.

To do this, we devised a psychometric questionnaire to assess the prevalence and severity of coulrophobia. *The Fear of Clowns Questionnaire* was completed by an international sample of 987 people aged between 18 and 77.

More than half the respondents (53.5 percent) said they were scared of clowns at least to some degree, with 5 percent saying they were “extremely afraid” of them. Interestingly, this percentage reporting an extreme fear of clowns is slightly

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higher than those reported for many other phobias, such as animals (3.8 percent), blood/injection/injuries (3.0 percent), heights (2.8 percent), still water or weather events (2.3 percent), closed spaces (2.2 percent), and flying (1.3 percent).

We also found that women are more afraid of clowns than men. The reason for this difference is not clear, but it echoes research findings on other phobias such as the fear of snakes and spiders. We also discovered coulrophobia decreases with age, which again matches up with research into other fears.

Our next step was to explore the origins of people's fear of clowns. A follow-up questionnaire was given to the 53.5 percent who had reported at least some degree of clown fear. This new set of questions related to eight plausible explanations for the origins of this fear, as follows:

- An eerie or unsettling feeling due to clowns' make-up making them look not-quite-human. A similar response is sometimes seen with dolls or mannequins.

- Clowns' exaggerated facial features convey a direct sense of threat.

- Clown make-up hides emotional signals and creates uncertainty.

- The colour of clown make-up reminds us of death, infection or blood injury, and evokes disgust or avoidance.

- Clowns' unpredictable behaviour makes us uncomfortable.

- Fear of clowns has been learned from family members.

- Negative portrayals of clowns in popular culture.

- A frightening experience with a clown.

Intriguingly, we found the final explanation, of having had a scary personal experience with a clown,

had the lowest level of agreement. This indicates that life experience alone is not a sufficient explanation for why people are afraid of them.

In contrast, negative portrayals of clowns in popular culture was a much stronger contributing factor towards coulrophobia. This is understandable since some of the most prominent clowns in books and films are designed to be scary – such as Pennywise, the creepy clown from Stephen King's 1986 novel *It*. (This character most recently featured in two films in 2017 and 2019, with Bill Skarsgård in the starring role.)

However, some people are afraid of Ronald McDonald, the fast food chain mascot, and he is not meant to scare you. This suggests there might be something more fundamental about the way clowns look that unsettles people.

In fact the strongest factor we identified was hidden emotional signals, suggesting that for many people, a fear of clowns stems from not being able to see their facial expressions due to their make-up. We cannot see their "true" faces and

therefore cannot understand their emotional intent. So, for example, we don't know whether they have a frown or a furrowed brow, which would indicate anger. Not being able to detect what a clown is thinking or what they might do next makes some of us on edge when we are around them.

This research has provided some new insights into why people are afraid of clowns – yet more questions remain. For instance, if make-up which masks emotions causes fear, do people who have their faces painted as animals also create the same kind of effect? Or is there something more particular about the makeup of clowns that drives this fear? This is now the focus of our continued research. **CT**

Sophie Scorey is a PhD researcher, James Greville is a lecturer in psychology, Philip Tyson, is an associate professor of psychology, and Shakiela Davies is a lecturer in clinical psychology and mental health, all at the University of South Wales. First published at www.theconversation.com.

ROGER MCKENZIE

Truth, lies, and pipeline sabotage

News reports emerging from Germany and the United States claim that a pro-Ukrainian group was behind the blowing up of the Nord Stream gas pipelines in the Baltic Sea in September 2022.

German daily newspaper *Die Zeit*, public broadcasters ARD and SWR, and the ARD political magazine *Kontraste* reported last month that investigators were able to reconstruct how the pipelines from Russia to Germany were sabotaged

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on September 26, 2022.

Citing several unnamed officials, the investigation by the news outlets revealed that five men and a woman used a yacht hired by a Ukrainian-owned company in Poland to carry out the attack.

The *New York Times* also reported that US intelligence is suggesting a pro-Ukrainian group was behind the blasts.

The *Times* said that US President Joe Biden and his top aides “did not authorise” the attack.

The *New York Times* typically behaves like a mouthpiece for the State Department. The *Times* was forced to issue an apology in 2004 over its misleading coverage about the presence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. It was essentially used by the State Department to parrot the lines that justified the illegal war carried out by the US and its allies.

But here we are again – this time after a report by award-winning investigative reporter Seymour Hersh, which accused the US of ordering the bombing of Nord Stream pipelines under cover of a NATO exercise.

Hersh explained how the Norwegians helped US divers set the remotely triggered explosives under the pipelines in June 2022.

Washington and its allies have denied the accusation made by Hersh. The *New York Times*, true to form, has chosen to parrot the lines given to it and hand-picked German outlets.

Germany’s defence minister Boris Pistorius said that he had read the news reports “with great interest” but warned against drawing quick conclusions on the issue.

“We need to clearly differentiate whether it was a Ukrainian group that acted on the orders of Ukraine or... without the government’s



Seymour Hersh in Cairo, 2007.

knowledge”, he told reporters.

This is so different from the insistence by the US and its allies that Russia was responsible for blowing up the pipelines it earned money from by supplying vast quantities of energy to Europe.

Ukrainian defence minister Oleksii Reznikov rejected suggestions that the attack might have been ordered by Kyiv. He told reporters: “It’s like a compliment for our special forces, but this is not our activity”.

Of course he denies it. He will already be aware that the US was responsible for the explosion.

White House National Security Council spokesman John Kirby declined to comment on the *New York Times* report, noting that investigations by Denmark, Germany, and Sweden are still continuing.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov described the latest reports as a coordinated manipulation intended to conceal the origins of the attack.

He said: “The masterminds of the terror attack clearly want to distract attention.”

Russian President Vladimir Putin and his officials have accused the US of staging the blowing up of the pipelines, which they described as a

“terror attack”.

Jan Oberg, the director of the Transnational Foundation for Peace and Future Research said that once the reporting by Hersh is vindicated and the role of US Navy forces proven, “Europeans will wake up and finally understand that they no longer share interests with the US.”

The Women-led peace organisation CODEPINK issued a statement that “We need a real, public investigation into this crime against the environment!”

Not for the first time, national organiser for Black Alliance for Peace, Ajamu Baraka, got it right when he tweeted: “The arrogance of the white supremacist mind makes it impossible for it to understand how latest propaganda ploy with the misinformation campaign on the US attack on Nord Stream pipelines is making the US press a laughing stock around the world.

“Since the US claims it wants to crack down on misinformation campaigns, perhaps it should investigate the [Times’] misinformation campaign on the Nord Stream attack?” **CT**

Roger McKenzie is the international editor of Britain’s *Morning Star* newspaper. This article was produced by *Globetrotter*.

INSIGHTS

BINOY KAMPMARK

Balloons to Aukus: The war drive against China

When will this hate-filled nonsense stop? Surveillance balloons treated like evocations of Satan and his card-carrying followers; other innumerable unidentified phenomena that, nonetheless, remain attributable in origin, despite their designation; and then the issue of spying cranes. In the meantime, there has been much finger pointing on the culprit of Covid-19 and the global pandemic. Behold the China Threat, the Sino Monster, the Yellow Terror.

In this atmosphere, the hawkish disposition of media outlets in a number of countries in shrieking for war is becoming palpable. The Fairfax press in Australia gave a less than admirable example of this in their absurd Red Alert series, crowned by crowing warmongers warning Australia to get ready for the imminent confrontation. The publications were timed to soften the public for the inevitable, scandalous and possibly even treasonous announcement that the Australian government would be spending A\$368 billion in local currency on needless submarines against a garishly dressed-up threat backed by ill-motivated allies.

For days, the Australian press demonstrated a zombie-like adherence to the war line that had been fed by deskbound generals and deranged civilian strategists des-



RED ALERT: Australia's main daily newspapers pump up the war rhetoric.

perate to justify their supper. It is a line that always assumes the virtue of war; that going into battle, much like US President Theodore Roosevelt thought, will always outdo the tedium of peace in a haze of phosphorescent glory. It is only in the morgues and the crowded cemeteries that we find a worthy pat-

riotism. Go out and kill, you noble sons and daughters. Do your nation proud, however stupidly.

The desperation of such a measure is also a reflection of how public opinion rejects the war drive. In a 2022 poll by the Lowy Institute think tank, 51% of Australians said they preferred their country to remain “neutral” in a conflict between the US and China over Taiwan. This was not a bad return, given the repetitious insistence by various Australian government ministers that joining a war with the United States over Taiwan was simply assumed.

In the US, the *Wall Street Journal* was also doing much the same thing, plumping for great power competitions that can only end badly, rather than great power cooperation which, when it goes well, spares us the body bags, the funerals and the flag fluttering.

The introductory note of one article in that Rupert Murdoch-owned organ was not encouraging. “Since 2018, the [US] military has shifted to focus on China and Russia after decades fighting insurgencies, but it still faces challenges to produce weapons and come up with new ways of waging war.”

The obsession with war scenarios rather than diplomatic ones is hardening. It elevates the game to level pegging with peace overtures. In fact, it goes further, suggesting that such measures are to be frowned upon, if not abandoned in their entirety. Rather than considering discussions with China, for instance, on whether some rules of accommodation and observance can be made, the attitude from Washington and its satellites is one of excoriation, taking issue with any restrictions on the growth of the US defence

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complex. Acid observations are reserved for the Budget Control Act of 2011, which supposedly “hampered initiatives to transform the military, including on artificial intelligence, robotics, autonomous systems and advanced manufacturing.”

As defence analyst William Hartung writes, the Pentagon has never been short of cash in its pursuits, though it has been more than wasteful, obsessed with maintaining a global military presence spanning 750 bases and 170,000 overseas troops, not to mention the madness of shovelling \$2-billion into developing a new generation of nuclear weapons. Far from encouraging deterrence, this is bound to “accelerate a dangerous and costly arms race.”

The same must be said of AUKUS, the triumvirate alliance that is already terrifying several powers in the Indo-Pacific into joining the regional arms race. Here we see, yet again, the Anglosphere “enthralled by protecting their possessions and routes of access, directly or indirectly held.

In the red mist of war, lucid voices can be found. Singaporean diplomat and foreign policy intellectual Kishore Mahbubani is one to offer a bracing analysis in observing that China is hardly going to undermine the very order that has benefitted it. The Chinese, far from wishing to upend the rules-based system with thuggish glee, saw it as a gift of Western legal engineering. “So the paradox about the world today is that even though the global rules based order is a gift of the west, China embraces it.”

He also has this to say about the US-China relationship. “China has been around for 5,000 years. The United States has been around for 250 years. And it’s not surprising

that a juvenile like the United States would have difficulty dealing with a wiser, older civilisation”.

Mahbubani, ever wily but also penetratingly sharp, also offers a valuable point: that the notion of a remarkable weapon (the nuclear-propelled submarine is not so much remarkable as cumbersomely draining and costly) must surely come a distant second to the attainment of economic prosperity. “Submarines are stealthy, but trade is stealthier,” he writes with a touch of serene

sagacity. Both provide security, in a fashion: the former in terms of raw deterrence; the latter in terms of interdependence – but the kind of security created by trade, he is adamant, “lasts longer”. To date, that realisation seems to have bypassed the Aukus troika. **CT**

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TIM CONWAY

The push to bring back child labour

Brad Greve has been a Scout leader for more than 20 years. The Davenport, Iowa retiree leads 50-mile canoe trips on Minnesota’s Boundary Waters that test teens’ mettle while teaching them essential skills.

Greve told a story recently where two boys, despite being warned repeatedly, let their canoe drift perilously close to a section of stream that swept over rapids into a lake below. They just barely recovered and made it to streambank.

That near-accident a few years ago, Greve said, underscores the vulnerability of young teens. And it fuels Greve’s anger at Republicans across the country who want to gut child labor laws and fill dangerous jobs with still-maturing high schoolers.

A GOP bill in Iowa, for example, would allow 14-year-olds to work in

industrial freezers, meatpacking plants, and industrial laundry operations. The legislation would also put 15-year-olds to work on certain kinds of assembly lines, allow them to hoist up to 50 pounds, and allow employers to force kids into significantly longer work days.

In some cases, it would even permit young teens to work mining and construction jobs and use power-driven meat slicers and food choppers.

Make no mistake, this is dangerous work. Just three years ago, a 16-year-old in Tennessee fell more than 11 stories to his death while working construction on a hotel roof. Another 16-year-old lost an arm that same year while cleaning a meat grinder at a Tennessee supermarket.

But these preventable tragedies mean nothing to legislators bent on

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helping employers pad their bottom lines at kids' expense. "It's about businesses wanting cheap labor or more labor than they can currently get because they don't want to pay reasonable wages or give any benefits," Greve said.

Covid-19 prompted millions of Americans to ditch jobs lacking decent working conditions, sick leave, and affordable health care. The meatpacking industry, among many others, hemorrhaged workers after deliberately putting them at risk to protect profits during the pandemic.

Now, rather than provide the quality jobs needed to attract adults, Greve observed, companies want their cronies to "throw them a bone" and widen access to child labor.

Minnesota Republicans want to let 16- and 17-year-olds work construction. GOP legislators in Ohio are pushing legislation to expand teens' work hours. In 2022, labor unions and Democratic officials in Wisconsin beat back a Republican proposal to lengthen work days for teens there.

The Iowa legislation is particularly dangerous because it would exempt employers from civil liability in the event of a youth's injury or death on the job – even in cases of employer negligence – if the teen was participating in a school-approved "work-based learning program."

Employers already flout child labor laws at record rates, according to the US Department of Labor.

After the 16-year-old fell off the hotel roof, for example, Tennessee officials determined that the company not only illegally put the teen in harm's way but also worked him more hours than allowed and cheated dozens of other workers out

of overtime pay. Adding insult to injury, the company vowed to appeal the \$122,000 fine it received for the teen's death.

The poor, migrants, victims of trafficking, and other at-risk youths will be especially impacted. Last year, the news agency Reuters found migrant youths and other children as young as 12 working at Alabama companies supplying the auto industry.

The *New York Times* reported more recently that the illegal employment of minors from poor and migrant families had reached epidemic proportions, reflecting a "new economy of exploitation."

The paper found employers subjecting thousands of kids to some of the deadliest jobs in the country, including work in slaughterhouses and sawmills.

"Why would you want to weaken the law when you can see companies already taking advantage?" asked Greve. "The law should be strengthened." **CT**

Tom Conway is the international president of the United Steelworkers Union (USW). This article was produced by the Independent Media Institute and adapted for syndication by www.otherwords.org.

WILLIAM ASTORE

A Holocaust missile and Armageddon sub?

Ever think about names of US weapons of war? Rarely are those names honest. I do applaud the relative honesty of Predator and Reaper drones, because those names capture the often predatory nature of US foreign policy and the grim reaperish means that are often employed in its execution. But most names are not so suggestive. For example, US fighter planes carry noble names like Eagle, Fighting Falcon, or Raptor. Nuclear bombers are an interesting case since they can carry thermonuclear bombs and missiles to kill hundreds of thousands, possibly millions, of people. So we have the B-52 Stratofortress (a great 1950s-era name), the B-1 Lancer, the

B-2 Spirit, and the new B-21 Raider (the name has historical echoes to the Doolittle Raid on Tokyo in 1942).

Reaping what we sow? Just reaping? Whatever the case, the US way of war is grim. Shouldn't these bombers carry names like Megadeath or Mass Murder?

Think, too, of nuclear missiles. The Air Force's Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs) have had names like Titan, Minuteman, Peacekeeper, and now the new Sentinel. But since these missiles carry warheads that could easily kill millions, wouldn't a more honest name be The Holocaust ICBM? For that's what these missiles promise: a nuclear holocaust.

Consider too the Navy's Ohio-

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class nuclear missile-firing submarines (SSBN) with their Trident missiles. (Trident – gotta hand it to the Navy.) Just one submarine can carry 20 Trident II missiles, each with up to eight warheads, each warhead being roughly equivalent to six Hiroshima bombs. Each of these submarines carries an arsenal roughly equivalent to a thousand Hiroshima bombs. And the US has fourteen of them.

Instead of the Ohio-class of submarines, shouldn't they be called the Armageddon-class? Or the Apocalypse-class? The Genocide-class?

With a bit more honesty, perhaps it wouldn't be so easy to sell these horrific weapons to Congress and the American people. Then again, when the bottom line is higher budgets for the Pentagon and more jobs for Congressional districts, I guess America will buy almost



Wikimedia

ARMAGEDDON CLASS? Trident missile.

anything. Even Holocaust missiles and Armageddon submarines. And for upwards of \$20-trillion over the next 30 years as well.

If they don't bust the budget, perhaps they'll destroy the world. **CT**

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by one of these groups represents a direct attack on every person's constitutionally protected right to freely choose what books to read and what ideas to explore", said Deborah Caldwell-Stone, director of the ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom. "The choice of what to read must be left to the reader or, in the case of children, to parents. That choice does not belong to self-appointed book police."

The Office for Intellectual Freedom said that starting in 2021, a rising number of challenges began targeting large numbers of titles, suggesting they were coordinated efforts from national groups like Moms for Liberty. Previously, the vast majority of book challenges were focused on a single book to which a parent or group of parents objected.

In 2022, 90 percent of the books challenged were part of attempts to censor multiple titles, the ALA reported.

"A book challenge is a demand to remove a book from a library's collection so that no one else can read it. Overwhelmingly, we're seeing these challenges come from organized censorship groups that target local library board meetings to demand removal of a long list of books they share on social media", said Caldwell-Stone. "Their aim is to suppress the voices of those traditionally excluded from our nation's conversations, such as people in the LGBTQIA+ community or people of colour."

In Florida, where Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis has led a nationwide effort by conservatives to keep public school students from learning accurate American history and discussing issues regarding the LGBTQ+ community, one county removed from school library

JULIA CONLEY

US library books ban hits record high

Librarians from across the United States have released a report showing that pro-censorship groups' efforts to ban books with LGBTQ+ themes and stories about people of colour have driven an unprecedented rise in the number of book challenges, with right-wing organisers pushing library workers to remove works ranging from the dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale* to children's books about foods enjoyed in differ-

ent cultures.

According to the American Library Association (ALA), a record-breaking 2,571 unique titles were challenged in 2022, a 38 percent increase from the previous year.

The organisation recorded 1,269 demands to censor books from various groups and individuals, compared to 729 challenges counted in 2021.

"Each attempt to ban a book

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shelves 176 books which have been held in storage since January 2022. The books include the children's books *Hush! A Thai Lullaby*, featuring a Thai mother and child, and *Dim Sum for Everyone!*, about a family eating in a Chinese restaurant.

"I've never seen anything like this", Caldwell-Stone told the Associated Press. "The last two years have been exhausting, frightening, outrage-inducing."

People for the American Way called the association's data, collected from media reports and library professionals across the country, "shocking but not surprising."

"The far right wants to turn back the clock on the freedom to read, teach, and learn", said the group. "We won't stand for it."

The ALA report comes four months after voters in at least two US towns voted to cut or eliminate funding for their public libraries in the wake of campaigns to ban books with LGBTQ+ themes.

People in Jamestown Township, Michigan, voted for a second time against council funding of 84 percent of their library's budget, dooming the facility to a likely closure in 2024. The vote followed a push by a local conservative group to remove the book *Gender Queer: A Memoir*.

Craighead County Jonesboro Library in Arkansas lost 50 percent of its funding after "librarians and library workers were labelled pornographers and paedophiles because of the books on their shelves" that dealt with LGBTQ+ themes, EveryLibrary Institute executive director John Chrastka told *Publishers Weekly* in November.

A poll commissioned by the EveryLibrary Institute last year found 75 percent of respondents were opposed to efforts to ban

books, and across 16 states last fall, a majority of initiatives to pull funding from libraries failed.

"While a vocal minority stokes the flames of controversy around books, the vast majority of people across the nation are using life-changing services that public and school libraries offer", said ALA President Lessa Kanani'opua Pe-

layo-Lozada on Thursday. "Our nation cannot afford to lose the library workers who lift up their communities and safeguard our First Amendment freedom to read." **CT**

Julia Conley is a staff writer at Common Dreams – www.commondreams.org – where this article was first published.

CAITLIN JOHNSTONE

We're the leaders because we say so

In response to questions he received during a recent press conference about Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin cementing a "new era" in strategic partnership between China and Russia, the White House National Security Council's John Kirby made no fewer than seven assertions that the US is the "leader" of the world.

Here are excerpts from his comments:

- "The two countries have grown closer. But they are both countries that chafe and bristle at **US leadership** around the world."

- "And in China's case in particular, they certainly would like to challenge **US leadership** around the world."

- "But these are not two countries that have, you know, decades-long experience working together and full trust and confidence. It's a burgeoning of late based on **America's increasing leadership** around the world and trying to check that."

- "Peter, these are two countries

that have long chafed, as I said to Jeff — long chafed at **US leadership** around the world and the network of alliances and partnerships that we have."

- "And we work on those relationships one at a time, because every country on the continent is different, has different needs and different expectations of **American leadership**."

- "That's the power of **American convening leadership**. And you don't see that power out of either Russia or China."

- "But one of the reasons why you're seeing that tightening relationship is because they recognise that they don't have that strong foundation of international support for what they're trying to do, which is basically challenge **American leadership** around the world."

The illusory truth effect is a cognitive bias which causes people to mistake something they have heard

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many times for an established fact, because the way the human brain receives and interprets information tends to draw little or no distinction between repetition and truth. Propagandists and empire managers often take advantage of this glitch in our wetware, which is what's happening when you see them repeating key phrases over and over again that they want people to believe.

We saw another repetition of this line recently at an online conference hosted by the US Chamber of Commerce, in which the US ambassador to China asserted that Beijing must accept the US as the “leader” of the region China happens to occupy.

US empire managers are of course getting very assertive about the narrative that they are the world’s “leader” because that self-appointed “leadership” is being challenged by China, and the nations which support it with increasing openness like Russia. Most of the major international news stories of our day are either directly or indirectly related to this dynamic, wherein the US is struggling to secure unipolar planetary domination by thwarting China’s rise and undermining its partners.

The message they’re putting out is, “This is our world. We’re in charge. Anyone who claims otherwise is freakish and abnormal, and must be opposed.”

Why do they say the US is the “leader” of the world instead of its “ruler”, anyway? I’m unclear on the difference as practically applied. Is it meant to give us the impression that the US rules the world by democratic vote? That this is something the rest of the world consented to? Because I sure as hell don’t remember voting for it, and we’ve all seen what happens to govern-



Twitter screenshot

Leader: US spokesman John Kirby.

ments which don’t comply with US “leadership”.

I’m not one of those who believe a multipolar world will be a wonderful thing, I just recognise that it beats the hell out of the alternative, that being increasingly reckless nuclear brinkmanship to maintain global control. The US has been in charge long enough to make it clear that the world order it dominates can only be maintained by nonstop violence and aggression, with more and more of that violence and aggression being directed toward major nuclear-armed powers. The facts are in and the case is closed: US unipolar hegemony is

unsustainable.

The problem is that the US empire itself does not know this. This horrifying trajectory we’re on toward an Atomic Age world war is the result of the empire’s doctrine that it must maintain unipolar control at all costs crashing into the rise of a multipolar world order.

It doesn’t need to be this way. There’s no valid reason why the US needs to remain in charge of the world and can’t just let different people in different regions sort out their own affairs like they always did before. There’s no valid reason why governments need to be brandishing armageddon weapons at each other instead of collaborating peacefully in the interest of all humankind. We’re being pushed toward disaster to preserve “American leadership around the world,” and I for one do not consent to this. **CT**

Caitlin Johnstone is an Australian blogger. Her website is www.caitlinjohnstone.com

Hurwitt’s Eye

Mark Hurwitt



MICHAEL GOULD-WARTOFSKY

Welcome to the predator state

Where the Scorpions on the corner
just might kill you

To residents of Memphis's resource-poor, predominantly non-white neighbourhoods, the Scorpions were easy to spot. The plainclothes patrols were known for driving their unmarked Dodge Chargers through the streets, often recklessly, sowing fear as they went, spitting venom from their windows, jumping out with guns drawn at the slightest sign of an infraction.

On the night of January 7, Tyre Nichols was two minutes from home when members of that squad pulled him over. Probable cause: reckless driving (if you believe the official story).

Five Scorpions, all of them trained use-of-force specialists, proceeded to take turns hitting him with everything they had, including boots, fists, and telescopic batons.

The 29-year-old photographer died three days later. Cause of death? "Excessive bleeding due to severe beating."

A body-cam snuff film of sorts was later released, showing some of Nichols's last moments. The video transcripts speak for themselves.

Officer to Tyre: "You're gonna get your ass blown the fuck up. Oh, I'm gonna knock your ass the fuck out!"

Tyre to officers: "OK. You guys are really doing a lot right now..."

- "Lay down!"
- "Stop! I'm just trying to go home."
- "Spray him! Spray him!"
- "Stop! I'm not doing anything."
- "Tase him! Tase him!"

Tyre cries out: "Mom! Mom!"

Officer to Tyre: "Watch out! I'm gonna baton the fuck out of you!"

- "Dude, hit him!"
- "Hit him!"
- "Hit him!"
- "Mom..."

Welcome to America's emerging predator state.

Memphis is anything but an outlier. There are thousands of "elite" teams like that city's Scorpion unit and they come in all calibres, shapes, and sizes. They range from specially trained teams in small-town police departments to sprawling "anti-crime" squads in big cities like Atlanta and New York, not to mention federal tactical units like the Border Patrol's BORTAC and counter-terrorism task forces like the one that killed Manuel Terán in Georgia last month.

Beyond the scary names, such specialized units tend to share some other characteristics. In their war-

like tactics, their strategic outlook, and their often-violent subculture – if not always in their uniforms – they are virtually indistinguishable from their counterparts in the military. In their "wars" on crime, drugs, and terror, they work with a similar playbook imported from US combat missions overseas but seemingly stripped of any reference to the rules of war.

They conduct themselves, in other words, as plainclothes para-militaries in America's urban war zones (or what they like to call "hot spots"). Like Army Special Operations forces, they are regularly charged with the execution of "time-sensitive", "clandestine", and often "unilateral" missions – with or without the support of the local population – using "assurance, deterrence, and coercion" to fight the enemies of the state and exert control over "hostile, denied, or politically sensitive environments."

What's more, these units operate with a legal guarantee of "qualified immunity" for violence against civilians. In other words, despite the recent Memphis exception, they normally have near-total impunity when it comes to violent offences which, had they been committed in another country, might be classified as war crimes, crimes of aggression, or even crimes against humanity.



MOM! MOM!: A still from a police video shows Tyre Nichols' altercation with four of the five police officers involved in his death.

For offences of this nature, the United States is itself an international hot spot. In the course of a given year, according to one recent study, our law enforcement agencies were responsible for 13 percent of all fatalities caused by the police globally, even though Americans make up just 4 percent of the world's population. And as investigative journalism has revealed, specialised units like the Scorpions are responsible for a wildly disproportionate share of those deaths.

Take the New York City Police Department. Since 2000, its own use-of-force reports show that nearly one in three police killings have been by non-uniformed officers, especially “anti-crime” plainclothes units with paramilitary training and a long-standing reputation for terrorising communities of colour.

Nearly a decade before the slaying of Tyre Nichols, there was, for instance, the murder of Eric Garner, a 43-year-old street vendor, “neighbourhood peacekeeper,” and father of six. His life was snuffed out thanks to a police chokehold after he was stopped for selling “loosies”, unlicensed cigarettes, on a Staten Island street corner in the summer of 2014. (In the end, the only person to serve jail time in Garner's death was the young filmmaker of colour who had the courage to record the encounter.)

Like the officers in the South Bronx who gunned down Amadou Diallo outside his home as he reached for his wallet, the ones in Queens who sprayed Sean Bell with 50 bullets on his wedding day, and the ones in Brooklyn who opened fire on a mentally ill man named Saheed Vassell in 2018, those responsible for Garner's murder were members of the infamous “anti-

crime” units whose work would become a blueprint for Scorpion-style policing.

The force's predatory philosophy is often summed up in a single sentence lifted from Ernest Hemingway's 1936 (satirical) short story, *On the Blue Water*. Officers of the peace have been known to quote it, to wear it to work, and to plaster it on the walls of their precincts: “There is no hunting like the hunting of man, and those who have hunted armed men long enough and liked it, never care for anything else thereafter”.

In the words of one New Yorker, a nurse from Crown Heights who witnessed the killing of Vassell, “The undercover think they have the authority to do anything they want. They hunt [people] – like us black people – down... They act tough... like they're from a gang. But they're only like that because they have a badge.”

In December 2019, the city of Lou-

isville, Kentucky, rolled out its version of the Scorpion unit. It was labelled the Place-Based Investigations Squad (PBI) and put under the aegis of its police department's Criminal Interdiction Division.

Following paid consultations with “problem-oriented” academics and police executives from other cities, the Louisville Metropolitan department implemented a then-little-known practice called “Place-Based Investigations of Violent Offender Territories”, or PIVOT. In the end, this would prove but a variation on an already all-too-familiar theme of hot-spot policing first pioneered by “police scientists” in Minneapolis some 30 years before George Floyd’s murder. (In fact, the use of the term “hot spots” can be traced back to the early years of World War II.)

Under this model, police assets were to be specially directed toward a handful of hot spots or “chronically violent urban locations.” That such places were home to populations of disproportionately Black, Indigenous, and immigrant Americans will no longer shock anyone; nor that they overlapped strikingly with areas of concentrated impoverishment and “planned abandonment”; nor that an influx of heavily armed strangers was undoubtedly the last thing such communities needed from the government. All of this was beside the point. The “marginal deterrent effect” – the minimal difference such hot-spot policing purportedly made in the calculations of would-be criminals – was enough to keep most critics quiet.

Three months after the rollout, the Place-Based Investigations Squad would play an integral part in the police raid that took the life of Breonna Taylor, a 26-year-old Black woman and emergency-room technician at the University of Louisville, accused of no crime, but executed anyway by three Louisville police officers standing in the hall-

Breonna Taylor joined a litany of black women, robbed of their lives while trying to live them by those supposedly tasked with their protection

way of her own home. Officers from the PBI Squad had requested and obtained five search warrants with “no-knock” clauses, including one for Ms Taylor, acting on what one would later call a “gut feeling.”

Within moments of the officers’ arrival at her apartment on the night of March 13, 2020, Breonna Taylor lay dying, felled by six of 32 shots fired into her home. It would be 20 minutes before she even received medical attention – 15 minutes too late to save her life. Although four officers have now been federally charged for civil rights violations, and three stand accused of lying on the affidavit they used to secure the warrants, a grand jury ultimately failed to return a single indictment for the officers who opened fire.

That night in 2020, Ms Taylor joined a long litany of black women, robbed of their lives while simply trying to live them by those supposedly tasked with their protection. According to the latest count, some 280 women have been slain in encounters with law enforcement over just the past five years. Researchers have found that women made up nearly half of all police-initiated contacts and black women were three times more likely than white ones to experience the use of force during a police-initiated stop.

“Elite” police units have played an outsized role in such state-sanctioned femicides.

Take the case of India Kager, 27, a Navy vet killed by a tactical team in Virginia Beach in 2015, as she sat in her car with her four-month-old

baby in the back. Or consider Atlanta’s RED DOG (short for “Run Every Drug Dealer Out of Georgia”) Unit. On November 21, 2006, plain-clothes officers from that narcotics squad – having lied under oath to obtain a no-knock warrant – barged into the home of Kathryn Johnston, a 92-year-old grandmother, and promptly gunned her down. Drugs were then planted near her body in a sorry attempt at a cover-up.

We’ve been here before: Officers are charged with second-degree murder. Sweeping reforms are promised. Controversial units are “deactivated”, their officers reassigned to other bureaus.

We saw this with the Amadou Diallo protests and the New York Police Department’s Street Crimes Unit in the early 2000s. We saw it with Atlanta’s RED DOGs after the killing of Kathryn Johnston. We saw it with Louisville’s PBI Squad in the months following the murder of Breonna Taylor – and we’re seeing it now in the aftermath of the assault on Tyre Nichols.

Count on this, however: as time passes and attention subsides, reforms are abandoned, charges are dropped, or the defendants found not guilty by juries of their peers. And special ops teams are rebranded and brought back to life under different names.

Today, Atlanta’s “Titans” have replaced the “RED DOGs” of old, while the very police executive who ran the old unit, Cerelyn “CJ” Davis, was made commissioner of the Memphis police department. The city of Memphis has also sought guidance from Ray Kelly, who was New York police commissioner during a particularly trigger-happy period in that department’s history (including the deaths of Sean Bell, Ousmane Zongo, Timothy Stansbury, Ramarley Graham,

and Kimani Gray).

Meanwhile, New York City Mayor Eric Adams, himself a veteran of a plainclothes police unit, is touting his “Neighbourhood Safety Teams” (along with another elite strike force inherited from his predecessors, the “Strategic Response Group”) as the basis for a whole new approach to policing. In truth, they are simply picking up where the Street Crimes Unit left off. The only real differences: longer guns, modified uniforms, and body cameras that can be turned on or off at will.

The names change, but the strategy (such as it is) remains the same and the body counts only climb higher.

Such police killings are not truly local matters. The final piece of the puzzle is the national security state, itself a predatory entity and the source of much of the surplus that supplies the police with significant military-grade weaponry and the bipartisan consensus that keeps the dollars flowing.

Local police agencies would not have anything like the arsenals they have today – ones that would be the envy of many of the world’s militaries – without the largesse of the Pentagon’s popular 1033 program. For years, it has been arming police departments around the country in a distinctly military fashion, sometimes even with weapons directly off the battlefields of this country’s distant wars. Thanks to that programme, the Memphis police department has managed to obtain a significant stockpile of high-powered rifles and multiple armoured personnel carriers, while the State of Tennessee alone has received \$131-million worth of weaponry from the Department of Defense.

Meanwhile, paving new ground, the Special Operations Bureau of

It should be obvious that police departments are, among other things, playing a dangerous game with democracy

the San Francisco Police Department has procured unmanned, remotely piloted killer robots with names such as TALON and DRAGON RUNNER. It is now advertising its intent to use them as a “deadly force option” in criminal apprehensions and other incidents like “riots, insurrection, or potentially violent demonstrations.”

None of this would be possible without the support of politicians from both parties. The 2023 budget agreed upon by both parties, for instance, promises \$37-billion in new spending on law enforcement – with double-digit percentage increases in discretionary funding for local police departments, above and beyond the nearly \$1-trillion for the Departments of Defense and Homeland Security. As a “moral statement”, that document bears a striking resemblance to its predecessors, backing the blue with billions of public tax dollars, while bearing witness to the priorities of a government on the warpath against enemies domestic and foreign.

Zooming out, we can see this kind of predatory policing for the national crisis it really is.

In recent decades, according to a definitive study published in the British medical journal *The Lancet*, more than 30,000 American civilians have lost their lives in encounters with law enforcement, a figure perhaps best compared to the rates of “collateral damage” in war-torn places like Ukraine, Gaza, Yemen, or the Sahel. And whatever we call them, “elite” units like the Scorpions have

played a leading role in that carnage. From their basic training to their advanced technology and heavy weaponry, they are increasingly cast as the protagonists in what has become America’s homeland theatre of war, producing content of spectacular violence as this country’s war machine turns inward.

At a time when significant cross-over can be seen between law enforcement and the white nationalist militia movement, it should be obvious that police departments are, among other things, playing a dangerous game with democracy. With Donald Trump and his crew still going full Blue Lives Matter and the Biden administration failing to pass meaningful police reform, count on another bloody harvest of police violence in 2023 and 2024. In the event of sustained civil conflict, there is little mystery about which side some elite police units would choose to fight on or who would find themselves in the scopes of their semi-automatic rifles.

Still, the predator state is not invincible, nor is its ascendancy inevitable. After all, the claims of police departments to legitimacy rest upon the support of elected officials who remain vulnerable to popular pressure, while the very existence of such paramilitary units depends on their access to the public purse. In a very real sense, then, they can still be fired, or at least defunded. For now, in the absence of consequences, the hunt for humans goes on uninterrupted and that’s likely to continue as long as so many Americans remain willing to put up with it. **CT**

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GEORGE MONBIOT

How many of those now calling for Putin's arrest were complicit in the illegal invasion of Iraq?

Gordon Brown, Condoleezza Rice and Alastair Campbell are as responsible for an illegal war as the Russian leader's 'henchmen' they condemn

It goes beyond hypocrisy. It's an assault on memory. Gordon Brown, calling for a special tribunal to punish the Russian government, correctly states that an act of aggression – invading another nation – was identified by the Nuremberg tribunal as “the supreme international crime”. It is, he wrote in the *Guardian*, not just Vladimir Putin who should be prosecuted, but also his “henchmen”. These include members of the Russian and perhaps Belarusian national security councils, and a range of political and military leaders. All should be held to account for this “manifestly illegal war”, he wrote on his website.

Condoleezza Rice, who was George W Bush's national security

adviser, was asked of Russia's aggression on Fox News, “when you invade a sovereign nation, that is a war crime?” She replied: “It is certainly against every principle of international law and international order.”

Brown and Rice are right about Russia. Its government, in invading Ukraine, has clearly committed the crime of aggression, a crime in which, as Brown points out, its senior officials are complicit.

The same applies to the US and UK governments, which invaded Iraq 20 years ago today. Among the most senior perpetrators were Rice and Brown.

The seventh of the Nuremberg Principles, which Brown cites in calling for Russian prosecutions,

points out that “complicity” in a war of aggression “is a crime under international law”. Both officials would clearly qualify as complicit. Rice was one of the architects of the war. Brown, as a cabinet member, was party to the decision. As chancellor of the exchequer, he financed the war.

No one can credibly deny that the invasion of Iraq met the Nuremberg definition. But it concluded that “the UK chose to join the invasion of Iraq before the peaceful options for disarmament had been exhausted. Military action at that time was not a last resort”. In other words, it failed to meet the UN charter's criteria for legal warfare. The former law lord, Lord Steyn, came to the same conclusion: “In



Baghdad in flames on the first night of the US bombing onslaught.

the absence of a second UN resolution authorising invasion, it was illegal". The former lord chief justice, Lord Bingham, called the Iraq war "a serious violation of international law". A Dutch inquiry, led by a former supreme court judge, found that the invasion had "no sound mandate in international law".

The attackers went out of their way to eliminate peaceful alternatives. Saddam Hussein desperately sought to negotiate, eventually offering everything the US and UK governments said they wanted, but they slapped his hand away, then lied to us about it. When the UN sought diplomatic solutions, US officials went into what

they called "thwart mode", sabotaging negotiations.

When the head of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, José Bustani, offered to resolve the impasse over weapons inspections in Iraq, the US government illegally ousted him. The first government to support his sacking was the United Kingdom's.

The government in which Brown was chancellor was repeatedly warned that its planned invasion would be illegal. A year before the war, the then foreign secretary, Jack Straw, explained that for a war to be legal, "i) There must be an armed attack upon a State or such an attack must be imminent; ii) The use of force must be necessary and other means to reverse/avert the at-

tack must be unavailable; iii) The acts in self-defence must be proportionate and strictly confined to the object of stopping the attack". None of these conditions applied. The Foreign Office, according to its deputy legal adviser, Elizabeth Wilmshurst, consistently counselled that an invasion would be unlawful without a new UN resolution. She explained that "an unlawful use of force on such a scale amounts to the crime of aggression". A Cabinet Office memo warned: "A legal justification for invasion would be needed. Subject to Law Officers' advice, none currently exists."

As for "law officers' advice", the then attorney general, Lord Goldsmith, warned that there were only three ways in which an inva-

sion could be legally justified. They were “self-defence, humanitarian intervention, or UNSC [UN security council] authorisation. The first and second could not be the base in this case”. The government failed to obtain UN security council authorisation. At the Chilcot inquiry, Lord Goldsmith testified that, after he gave advice Tony Blair didn’t want to hear, the prime minister stopped asking. Just before the war, though the facts had not changed, Goldsmith changed his mind.

There is another way of saying “crime of aggression”: an act of mass murder. The invasion of Iraq killed hundreds of thousands of people. We cannot be more precise than that, as the invading forces refused to measure the carnage.

But it is almost certainly the greatest crime against humanity so far this century. Blair, Brown, Bush and Rice are as guilty of a “manifestly illegal war” as Putin and his close advisers.

But who gets prosecuted is a matter of victors’ justice. For example, until it issued a warrant last month on another charge for the arrest of Putin and one of his officials, there had been 31 cases brought before the international criminal court. Every one of the defendants in these cases is African. Is this because Africa

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Wikimedia



COMPLICIT IN AN ILLEGAL WAR: Condoleeza Rice and Gordon Brown.

is the only continent where crimes against humanity had occurred? No. It’s because Africans accused of such crimes do not enjoy the political protections afforded to the western leaders who perpetrate even greater atrocities.

Instead of facing justice, the killers walk among us, respected, revered, treated as the elder statesmen to whom media and governments turn for counsel. Brown can pose as an august humanitarian. Alastair Campbell, who oversaw the compilation of the “dodgy dossier”, which provided a false case for war, and is therefore as complicit as any of Putin’s “henchmen”, has been thoroughly screenwashed: in other words, rehabilitated, like other grim

political figures, by television. He is now treated as a kind of national agony uncle.

There has been no reckoning and nor will there be. This greatest of crimes has been so thoroughly air-brushed that its perpetrators can anoint themselves the avenging angels of other people’s atrocities.

To quote King Lear: “*Plate sin with gold, and the strong lance of justice hurtless breaks: arm it in rags, a pigmy’s straw does pierce it.*” **CT**

George Monbiot’s latest book is *Regenesis: Feeding the World Without Devouring the Planet*. Read more of his work at www.monbiot.com.

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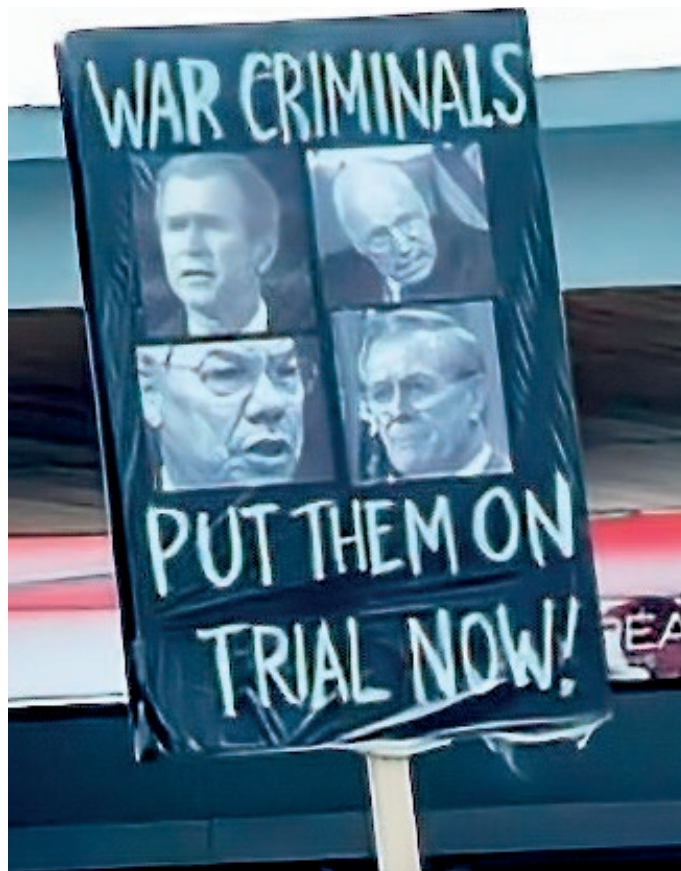
The urbanity of evil: 20 years after Iraq War

What propelled the United States to start the war on Iraq in March 2003 was the dynamics of media and politics that are still very much with us today

Vast quantities of lies from top US government officials led up to the Iraq invasion. Now, marking its 20th anniversary, the same media outlets that eagerly boosted those lies are offering retrospectives, but don't expect them to shed light on the most difficult truths, including their own complicity in pushing for war.

What propelled the United States to start the war on Iraq in March 2003 were dynamics of media and politics that are still very much with us today.

Soon after 9/11, one of the rhetorical whips brandished by President George W. Bush was an unequivocal assertion while speaking to a joint session of Congress on Sept. 20, 2001: "Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists". Thrown down, that gauntlet received adulation and scant criticism in the United States. Mainstream media and members of Congress were almost all



FLASHBACK: Anti-war protesters in 2003 call for George W. Bush and his cronies to face trial as war criminals.

enthralled with a Manichean worldview that has evolved and persisted.

Our current era is filled with echoes of such oratory from the current president. A few months before fist-bumping Saudi Arabia's de facto ruler Mohammed bin Salman – who's been in charge of a tyrannical regime making war on Yemen, caus-

ing several hundred thousand deaths since 2015 with US government help – Joe Biden mounted a pulpit of supreme virtue during his 2022 State of the Union address.

Biden proclaimed "an unwavering resolve that freedom will always triumph over tyranny". And he added that "in the battle between democracy and autocracies, democracies are rising to the moment". Of course, there was no mention of his support for Saudi autocracy and war.

In that State of the Union speech, Biden devoted much emphasis to condemning Russia's war on Ukraine, as he has many times since. Biden's presidential hypocrisies do not in any way justify the horrors that Russian forces are inflicting in Ukraine. Nor does that war justify the deadly hypocrisies that pervade US foreign policy.

But don't hold your breath for media retrospectives about the Iraq invasion to include basic facts about the key roles of Biden and the man who is now secretary of state, Antony Blinken. When they each denounce Russia while solemnly insisting that it is absolutely unacceptable for one country to invade

Tony Sutton

another, the Orwellian efforts are brazen and shameless.

Last month, speaking to the UN Security Council, Blinken invoked “the principles and rules that make all countries safer and more secure” – such as “no seizing land by force” and “no wars of aggression”. But Biden and Blinken were crucial accessories to the massive war of aggression that was the invasion of Iraq. And on the very rare occasions when Biden has been put on the spot for how he helped make the invasion politically possible, his response has been to dissemble and tell outright lies.

“Biden has a long history of inaccurate claims” regarding Iraq, scholar Stephen Zunes pointed out four years ago.

“For example, in the lead-up to the critical Senate vote authorising the invasion, Biden used his role as chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to insist that Iraq somehow reconstituted a vast arsenal of chemical and biological weapons, a nuclear weapons program and sophisticated delivery systems that had long since been eliminated”. The false claim of supposed weapons of mass destruction in Iraq was the main pretext for the invasion.

That falsehood was challenged in real time, many months before the invasion, by numerous experts. But then-Senator Biden, wielding the gavel of the Foreign Relations Committee, excluded them all from two days of high-impact sham hearings in mid-summer 2002.

And who was the chief of staff of the committee at that time? The current secretary of state, Antony Blinken.

We’re apt to put Biden and Blinken in a completely different category than someone like Tariq Aziz,

Compliance with the United Nations was to no avail. The US government leaders wanted to launch an invasion of Iraq no matter what

who was Iraq’s deputy prime minister under despot Saddam Hussein. But, thinking back to the three meetings with Aziz that I attended in Baghdad during the months before the invasion, I have some doubts.

Aziz wore nicely-tailored business suits. Speaking excellent English in measured tones and well-crafted sentences, he had an erudite air with no lack of politesse as he greeted our four-member delegation (which I had organised with colleagues at the Institute for Public Accuracy).

Our group included Congressman Nick Rahall of West Virginia, former South Dakota senator James Abourezk and Conscience International president James Jennings. As it turned out, the meeting occurred six months before the invasion.

At the time of that meeting in mid-September 2002, Aziz was able to concisely sum up a reality that few US media outlets were acknowledging. “It’s doomed if you do, doomed if you don’t”, Aziz said, referring to the Iraqi government’s choice of whether to let UN weapons inspectors back into the country.

After meetings with Aziz and other Iraqi officials, I told the *Washington Post*: “If it was strictly a matter of the inspections and they felt there was a light at the end of the tunnel, this would be a totally fixable problem.”

But it was far from being strictly a matter of the inspections. The Bush administration was determined to make war on Iraq.

A couple of days after the Aziz

meeting, Iraq’s regime – which was accurately stating that it had no weapons of mass destruction – announced that it would allow UN inspectors back into the country. (They had been withdrawn four years earlier for their safety on the eve of an anticipated US bombing attack that took place for four days.) But compliance with the United Nations was to no avail. The US government leaders wanted to launch an invasion of Iraq, no matter what.

During two later meetings with Aziz, in December 2002 and January 2003, I was repeatedly struck by his capacity to seem cultured and refined. While the main spokesperson for a vicious dictator, he exuded sophistication. I thought of the words “the urbanity of evil.”

A well-informed source told me that Saddam Hussein maintained some kind of leverage over Aziz by keeping his son in jeopardy of imprisonment or worse, lest Aziz become a defector. Whether or not that was the case, Deputy Prime Minister Aziz remained loyal to the end. As someone in Jean Renoir’s film *The Rules of the Game* says, “The awful thing about life is this: Everybody has their reasons.”

Tariq Aziz had good reasons to fear for his life – and the lives of loved ones – if he ran afoul of Saddam. In contrast, many politicians and officials in Washington have gone along with murderous policies when dissenting might cost them only re-election, prestige, money or power.

I last saw Aziz in January 2003, while accompanying a former UN Humanitarian Coordinator in Iraq to meet with him. Talking to the two of us in his Baghdad office, Aziz seemed to know an invasion was virtually certain. It began two months later. The Pentagon was pleased to

brand its horrific air attacks on the city “shock and awe.”

On July 1, 2004, appearing before an Iraqi judge in a courtroom located on a US military base near Baghdad airport, Aziz said: “What I want to know is, are these charges personal? Is it Tariq Aziz carrying out these killings? If I am a member of a government that makes the mistake of killing someone, then there can’t justifiably be an accusation against me personally.”

“Where there is a crime committed by the leadership, the moral responsibility rests there, and there shouldn’t be a personal case just be-

If he were ever really called to account for his role, Joe Biden’s words might resemble those of Tariq Aziz

cause somebody belongs to the leadership.” And, Aziz went on to say, “I never killed anybody, by the acts of my own hand.”

The invasion that Joe Biden helped to inflict on Iraq resulted in a

war that directly killed several hundred thousand civilians. If he were ever really called to account for his role, Biden’s words might resemble those of Tariq Aziz. **CT**

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WE ARE ALL FRIED ☞



DAVID CROMWELL & DAVID EDWARDS

Endless war and media complicity

Memories change as mainstream media cover up fraudulent coverage of a shameful war

The 20th anniversary of the illegal US/UK-led invasion of Iraq has demonstrated once again the subservience of state and corporate media to Western power. Jeremy Bowen, the BBC's international editor, veered as close to the truth as BBC News allows in an online piece as well as a segment of its flagship News at Ten on BBC1.

"The invasion of March 2003 was", wrote Bowen, "a catastrophe for Iraq and its people." He noted that:

"George Bush and Tony Blair embarked on a war of choice that killed hundreds of thousands of people. The justifications for the invasion were soon shown to be untrue. The weapons of mass destruction that Tony Blair insisted, eloquently, made Saddam a clear and present danger, turned out not to exist. It was a failure not just of intelligence but of leadership."

Bowen added a further observation on the death toll: "No-one knows exactly how many Iraqis have died as a result of the 2003 invasion. Estimates are all in the hundreds of thousands."

But this was false. A reliable estimate is that at least one million Iraqis died as a result of the invasion.

On BBC News at Ten, Bowen did not even mention Blair or Bush; far less label them as "war criminals"

in the eyes of many viewers and expert commentators. Indeed, BBC 'balance' meant that salient facts were not mentioned; the usual insidious phenomenon of state-corporate "propaganda by omission":

- not calling the 2003 US-UK invasion of Iraq a "war of aggression".

- not pointing out that, by the standards of Nuremberg, it was the supreme international crime.

- not mentioning that the UN sanctions against Iraq in the 1990s resulted in an estimated death toll of 1.5 million, including over half a million children under five. The sanctions were described as "genocidal" by senior UN officials Denis Halliday and Hans von Sponeck. Bowen said merely that the sanctions had "made a lot of people suffer".

Bowen is, of course, not alone in the state-corporate media for never stating these essential facts about the Iraq war, and the awful impact of criminal UN sanctions that preceded it. As Noam Chomsky said in an MSNBC interview with Mehdi Hasan: "It's a very striking fact that in twenty years you cannot find – at least, I have not found – a single statement, one sentence, anywhere near the mainstream that says the most elementary truth: it [the invasion of Iraq] was the supreme international crime of aggression."

Chomsky added: "In fact, war has

been refashioned in liberal commentary as a kind of mercy mission to rescue suffering Iraqis from an evil dictator."

When Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein's statue in Baghdad's Firdos Square was brought down by US Marines using an M88 armoured recovery vehicle on 9 April 2003, Andrew Marr, then BBC political editor, delivered a career-defining speech to the nation from outside 10 Downing Street: "Frankly, the main mood [in Downing Street] is of unbridled relief. I've been watching ministers wander around with smiles like split watermelons." (BBC News At Ten, 9 April, 2003)

So, what was the significance of this moment for Prime Minister Tony Blair? Marr explained: "It gives him a new freedom and a new self-confidence. He confronted many critics. I don't think anybody after this is going to be able to say of Tony Blair that he's somebody who is driven by the drift of public opinion, or focus groups, or opinion polls. He took all of those on. He said that they would be able to take Baghdad without a bloodbath, and that in the end the Iraqis would be celebrating. And on both of those points he has been proved conclusively right. And it would be entirely ungracious, even for his critics, not to acknowledge that tonight he stands as



'UNBRIDLED RELIEF': Saddam Hussein's statue in Firdos Square, Baghdad, is toppled by the US military on April 9, 2003.

a larger man and a stronger prime minister as a result."

This piece of political 'analysis' was no blip. It is, in fact, typical of the Washington-Downing Street narrative that is the very cornerstone of BBC 'impartiality'.

Now, twenty years later, Andrew Marr says his 2003 broadcast was "terribly badly misjudged." It was the most pathetic of mea culpas. There was no acknowledgement of his or the BBC's role in selling a war that has had such appalling repercussions for millions of people in Iraq, elsewhere in the Middle East and the wider world.

Marr said: "In my diary, I find I went to bed perplexed, unsure and exhausted."

It certainly didn't look that way on the day. In reality, we suspect Marr was exhausted from beaming his own "smiles like split watermelons".

Roger Mosey, who was in charge of BBC television news when the 2003 invasion of Iraq took place, recently said on Twitter: "I spent 33 years in the BBC and could not comment on government policy. But that's be-

cause if you want to hold the powerful to account, it is better for the organisation and individuals within it to be seen as impartial."

He gave a supposed example of this by linking to a BBC *Newsnight* special from 2003: "Blair on Iraq with a 100% critical audience and Paxman. That would have been much harder if any of us in the BBC team had been known as Labour or Conservative supporters."

In fact, as we detailed at the time in a media alert, far from holding Blair to account, Paxman's "challenge wilted at the first sign of resistance" from the Prime Minis-

ter. It was a desperate failure by Paxman. He ignored essentially all of the key points that we and many other members of the public emailed to him directly, urging him to raise them with Blair.

The historical record shows that there is, of course, a long-standing, institutionalised media aversion to seriously challenging establishment power of even the most ruthless and cynical kind. The BBC is very much part of that same system of power.

What about the ‘liberal’ *Guardian*? Consider its star columnist Jonathan Freedland who claimed in a cleverly self-serving retrospective on the Iraq war that: “I was writing on these pages back then, arguing that the case George W Bush and Tony Blair were making for war did not add up.”

This was remarkable chutzpah.

Freedland was actually one of the first journalists to sell the case for attacking Iraq. His November 2001 article titled, “Turning Towards Iraq”, was essentially one long uncritical list of US war hawks’ reasons for targeting Iraq after Afghanistan.

We devoted a media alert at the time to this terrible piece: “The article appears neutral – Freedland is merely communicating the Hawks’ views. But by communicating only their views, the net result is that the Hawks are made to seem almost reasonable. In the absence of critical comment or balancing argument (unless we consider a brief reference to Colin Powell’s ‘cautious’ approach balance), the reader is left nodding.”

In his recent *Guardian* article, Freedland quotes the BBC’s security correspondent, Gordon Corera: “In my mind, the original sin lay with the spies – who got it wrong.”

The ‘original sin’, in fact, lay with politicians and journalists who fraudulently claimed that posses-

Freedland made Blair seem reasonable, allowing his hero to say, unchallenged, he brought ‘a ripple of change’ to the Middle East

sion of chemical or biological weapons justified the invasion of a country that had not attacked or even threatened the West.

Freedland affected to show how deeply he cared about the suffering of Iraqis. And yet, as far back as 2011, in discussing Tony Blair’s appearance at the Chilcot Inquiry, Freedland wrote: “It was an electric close to what had seemed set to be a rather dry session, one of interest to few beyond the families in mourning and the dwindling band of Iraq obsessives.”

Journalist and filmmaker John Pilger observed of Freedland’s abysmal article: “Jonathan Freedland, voice of the *Guardian*, blames ‘spooks and politicians’ for the destruction of Iraq – not journalists who sold it. Freedland made the criminal Blair seem reasonable, allowing his hero to say, unchallenged, he brought ‘a ripple of change’ to the Middle East.”

Freedland is one of many journalists and commentators whose uncritical acceptance, sometimes enthusiastic championing, of pro-war rhetoric has not hindered their media careers; quite the contrary.

Infamously, David Aaronovitch, a high-ranking officer of the corporate media’s 101st Chairborne Division, once devoted a *Guardian* column with the key message that: “If nothing is eventually found, I – as a supporter of the war – will never believe another thing that I am told by our

government, or that of the US ever again. And, more to the point, neither will anyone else. Those weapons had better be there somewhere.”

Presumably aware this would become his journalistic epitaph, one year later – with no Iraqi WMD to be found – he published a lame, exculpatory piece, pleading “Was I wrong about Iraq?”

Aaronovitch has since enjoyed long employment with Rupert Murdoch’s *Times* and has backed every US-UK “humanitarian intervention” to “bomb the world better” ever since. Aaronovitch has continued to ‘believe’ US-UK government war propaganda more fervently than ever. Not that we actually believe he ‘believes’ any of it – he’s not a fool.

On the 20th anniversary of the invasion of Iraq, *Double Down News* published a short clip, clearly inspired and informed by the work of *Media Lens*, titled: “Never Forget how the Media Sold, Enabled & Whitewashed the War”.

The pattern of successful careers for politicians, journalists and commentators – who should all have been utterly discredited, if not held accountable for war crimes – has been repeated on both sides of the Atlantic. Here, Tony Blair, Gordon Brown and Alastair Campbell are still feted as respected elder statesmen and knowledgeable ‘experts’ on domestic and world affairs.

Having survived accusations that he had tainted the BBC’s otherwise spotless record of ‘impartiality’, football commentator Gary Lineker repeatedly tweeted praise for Alastair Campbell’s discussions about the Iraq war on Campbell’s podcast, “The Rest Is Politics”. Lineker opined sagely: “The long awaited addressing of the elephant in the room, and it’s every bit as fascinating and illuminating as you would expect.”

We commented: “This ought to

provoke deep outrage – Campbell authentically shares responsibility for an illegal war of aggression that took one million human lives. But hailing him as an Iraq war illuminator is fine, nobody notices – certainly no impartiality concern here.”

To be fair, the Spectator did notice a problem with Lineker’s support for Campbell (and Campbell’s earlier support for Lineker): “Campbell stars on the Rest Is Politics podcast, which is produced by Goalhanger Productions, owned by one G Lineker.”

But, of course, Campbell’s responsibility for mass death in Iraq went unmentioned, being of interest only to “the dwindling band of Iraq obsessives”.

The Blairite virus is running rampant once again in the Tory-lite Labour party under its Blairbot leader Sir Keir Starmer. His Shadow ‘Defence’ Secretary, John Healey, tweeted this on the anniversary of the illegal invasion that led to over one million Iraqi deaths: “Twenty years after the beginning of Operation Telic in Iraq, we thank all who served and remember the 179 personnel who lost their lives. The war has had an enduring impact for many, and we renew our commitment today to support all those who have served in our Armed Forces.”

As Mark Curtis, director and co-founder of *Declassified UK*, said: “This was the sum total of what Labour’s defence spokesperson said on Iraq while its foreign affairs spokesperson – the laughable David Lammy – tweeted nothing at all. Labour is cool with a few hundred thousand dead. They’re the junior imperialist party.”

The replies to Healey’s tweet from members of the public were heartening to read; people with

BP was awarded a significant interest in the country’s largest oil field, Ramaila, near Basra, which had been occupied by British troops

souls and insight. Such as: “Illegal wars of aggression are so cool when we do them.”

And: “No comment on the hundreds of thousands of unnecessary deaths, the destabilisation of the region, leading to the rise of ISIS? This really is a disgusting tweet”

And: “Twenty years after an illegal invasion you voted for, you can’t even bring yourself to apologise to the people of Iraq”

Across the pond, US media’s Iraq war pushers are doing very well twenty years later, as media critic Adam Johnson observed: “It’s not just that media figures who sold the most devastating war crime of the 21st-century never faced any professional consequences – they’re more powerful and influential now than ever.”

David Frum was a head writer for the Bush White House and coined the term ‘Axis of Evil.’ He later became a well-paid and prestigious columnist for the *Atlantic*, an influential US magazine, and a regular contributor to cable TV.

Another example is Jeffrey Goldberg. He was a reporter at the *New Yorker* who promoted conspiracy theories linking Saddam to the 9/11 attacks. Goldberg is now editor-in-chief of the *Atlantic*. Johnson pointed out that: “Like everyone else on this list, he [Goldberg] has used recent Russian meddling in US elections and aggression against Ukraine to launder his image and promote himself as a champion of Western Liberal Democracy and the Liberal Rules Based Order™.”

Johnson summed up: “The almost uniform success of all the Iraq War cheerleaders provides the greatest lesson about what really helps one get ahead in public life: It’s not being right, doing the right thing, or challenging power, but going with prevailing winds and mocking anyone who dares to do the opposite.”

Even today, the ‘free press’ is burying awkward truths about Iraq. *Declassified UK* has just revealed that the British oil company BP has “reaped a bonanza upon its return to Iraq after the 2003 invasion”. In 2009, BP was awarded a significant interest in the country’s largest oil field, Ramaila, near Basra, which had been occupied by British troops. Since 2011, BP has pumped 262 million barrels of Iraqi oil worth £15.4 billion. You will search in vain for significant, if any, coverage of this in the UK state-corporate media, not least to make the glaring contrast between the sordid reality and Blair’s boast in 2003 to make a “brighter and better Iraq”, in which: “any money from Iraqi oil will go in a trust fund, UN-administered, for the benefit of the Iraqi people.”

It turns out, however, that Britain’s first special representative to post-invasion Iraq, appointed by Blair, has done well: Sir John Sawers, who later joined BP’s board in 2015.

In 2001, Kevin Maguire, then chief *Guardian* reporter, noted that BP was “nicknamed Blair Petroleum for its close links with the government”. When Sawers joined BP as a non-executive director in May 2015, he had just stepped down as head of MI6, Britain’s external intelligence agency, which he had led since 2009. He has since ‘earned’ £1.1-million in fees from the company. His BP shareholding was also worth £135,000 last year, up 181% from when he joined the company. “War! What is it good for?” Profit –

both corporate and personal.

Declassified UK reported: “Sawers’ predecessor as head of MI6, Sir John Scarlett, joined Statoil after MI6. Scarlett was the senior intelligence official responsible for Tony Blair’s notorious dossier on Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction produced in the run-up to the invasion. Scarlett ‘proposed using the document to mislead the public about the significance of Iraq’s banned weapons.’”

Scarlett’s predecessor, Sir Richard Dearlove, joined Kosmos Energy after MI6.

It really is not hard to join the dots, and the big picture is ugly indeed.

Contrary to the limited, face-saving, post-Iraq war promises by editors and journalists to “do better”, “to scrutinise more”, and so on, the reality is that the media consensus in support of government war aims is stronger than ever. We have pointed out this phenomenon in our media alerts on Ukraine over the past year.

In an excellent recent article, Tara McCormack, a lecturer in international relations at the University of Leicester, expanded on this theme. The media, she noted, is giving huge prominence to political leaders and commentators who have asserted again and again that Western policy to achieve ‘victory’ for Ukraine is to do whatever it takes, for as long as it takes.

Thus, for example, British Foreign Secretary James Cleverly has declared that British support to Ukraine is “not time-limited” and that Britain would: “Keep the promises that we made to the UN Charter and to the Ukrainian people”. Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has even stated recently that now is “not the time for peace”.

People are being subjected to an ‘anti-democratic war consensus’ created by the government and the media

As McCormack observed: “This adds to the evidence that Britain is playing a key role in prolonging the war. Last year it was reported by Ukrainian media that Boris Johnson went to Kiev in April and told Zelensky that even if he (Zelensky) was ready to negotiate, the West was not. Former Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett has also recently argued that in the spring of last year, Russia and Ukraine were both keen to negotiate but that Johnson was not and that ultimately the Western powers put a halt to the negotiations.”

The reality is that the UK, along with the rest of Europe and the US, is now part of a proxy war against Russia, a nuclear-armed state. We are also shoulder to shoulder with the US and Australia in aggressive behaviour towards China as part of the so-called “Aukus pact”. This is “a historic security pact”, the BBC tells us, to “counter China”. The Orwellian language of ‘security’ and ‘countering’ foreign ‘threats’ is standard for the state-affiliated BBC News.

As McCormack says, the British people are being subjected to an ‘anti-democratic war consensus’ created by the government and the media. There is no proper debate or accountability. Questions are not permitted. Whatever it takes? How long it takes? And why should Britain even be a part of this?

McCormack warned that the Ukraine war could well be the first case since the end of the Cold War where any dissent has been almost

entirely excluded by the political-media class. She rightly concluded: “The war consensus is a deliberate construction of the British state in order to avoid democratic scrutiny and exclude the public from what are existential policy choices. The decision by the political and media class that there should be total exclusion of any kind of discussion about our foreign policy should be a cause for great alarm, whatever one believes British policy towards Ukraine should be.”

A good starting point for public debate and discussion would be to increase one’s awareness of the inherent bias in current media reporting. For example, Tim Holmes noted recently via Twitter that: “The *Guardian* have used the phrase ‘Putin apologist’ 5,790 times.

“They have used the phrase ‘NATO apologist’ a grand total of ... zero times.”

It is also worth noting exactly when media use the word ‘controversial’. It is common practice to apply the word to the actions and intentions of Official Enemies; less so for those of our own government and allies. Thus, a recent *Guardian* headline:

“Putin welcomes China’s controversial proposals for peace in Ukraine”

As US political commentator Aaron Maté astutely noted: “In NATO state media, there’s nothing more ‘controversial’ than a peace proposal”

The *Bloomberg* news agency even reported that: “US Fears a War-Wearied World May Embrace China’s Ukraine Peace Bid”

Imagine that! The world is war-weary and wants to see peace: what a terrible outcome for US power. **CT**

David Cromwell & David Edwards are co-editors of *Media lens*, the UK media watchdog. This article first appeared at www.medialens.org.



HONOURING COURAGE: John Pilger speaks in Sydney on Saturday, March 10, at a ceremony to mark the unveiling of Figures of Courage, Davide Dormino's sculpture of Julian Assange, Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden in Melbourne, Australia.

JOHN PILGER

The betrayers of Julian Assange

For Julian to remain in his cell at Belmarsh is an act of torture, as the United Nations Rapporteur has called it. It is how a dictatorship behaves

I have known Julian Assange since I first interviewed him in London in 2010. I immediately liked his dry, dark sense of humour, often dispensed with an infectious giggle. He is a proud outsider: sharp and thoughtful. We have become friends, and I have sat in many courtrooms listening to the tribunes of the state try to silence him and his moral revolution in journalism.

My own high point was when a judge in the Royal Courts of Justice leaned across his bench and growled at me: “You are just a peripatetic Australian like Assange”. My name was on a list of volunteers to stand bail for Julian, and this judge spotted me as the one who had reported his role in the notorious case of the expelled Chagos Islanders. Unintentionally, he delivered me a compliment.

I saw Julian in Belmarsh not long ago. We talked about books and the oppressive idiocy of the prison: the happy-clappy slogans on the walls, the petty punishments; they still won't let him use the gym. He must exercise alone in a cage-like area where there is sign that warns about keeping off the grass. But there is no grass. We laughed; for a brief moment, some things didn't seem too bad.

The laughter is a shield, of course. When the prison guards began to jangle their keys, as they like to do, indicating our time was up, he fell quiet. As I left the room he held his fist high and clenched as he always does. He is the embodiment of courage.

Those who are the antithesis of Julian: in whom courage is unheard of, along with principle and honour, stand between him and freedom. I am not referring to the Mafia regime in Washington whose pursuit of a good man is meant as a warning to us all, but rather to those who still claim to run a just democracy in Australia.

Anthony Albanese was mouthing his favourite platitude, “enough is enough” long before he was elected prime minister of Australia last year. He gave many of us precious hope, including Julian’s family. As prime minister he added weasel words about “not sympathising” with what Julian had done. Apparently we had to understand his need to cover his appropriated posteria in case Washington called him to order.

We knew it would take exceptional political if not moral courage for Albanese to stand up in the Australian Parliament – the same Parliament that will disport itself before Joe Biden in May – and say:

“As prime minister, it is my government’s responsibility to bring home an Australian citizen who is clearly the victim of a great, vindictive injustice: a man who has been persecuted for the kind of journalism that is a true public service, a man who has not lied, or deceived – like so many of his counterfeit in the media, but has told people the truth about how the world is run.”

“I call on the United States”, a courageous and moral Prime Minister

Julian was granted asylum by Ecuador in 2013 largely because his own government had abandoned him

Albanese might say, “to withdraw its extradition application: to end the malign farce that has stained Britain’s once admired courts of justice and to allow the release of Julian Assange unconditionally to his family. For Julian to remain in his cell at Belmarsh is an act of torture, as the United Nations Rapporteur has called it. It is how a dictatorship behaves.”

Alas, my daydream about Australia doing right by Julian has reached its limits. The teasing of hope by Albanese is now close to a betrayal for which the historical memory will not forget him, and many will not forgive him. What, then, is he waiting for?

Remember that Julian was granted political asylum by the Ecuadorean government in 2013 largely because his own government had abandoned him. That alone ought to bring shame on those responsible: namely the Labor government of Julia Gillard.

So eager was Gillard to collude with the Americans in shutting down WikiLeaks for its truth telling that she wanted the Australian Federal Police to arrest Assange and take away his passport for what she called his “illegal” publishing. The AFP pointed out that they had no such powers: Assange had committed no crime.

It is as if you can measure Australia’s extraordinary surrender of sovereignty by the way it treats Julian Assange. Gillard’s pantomime grovelling to both houses of the US Congress is cringing theatre

on YouTube. Australia, she repeated, was America’s “great mate”. Or was it “little mate”?

Her foreign minister was Bob Carr, another Labor machine politician whom WikiLeaks exposed as an American informant, one of Washington’s useful boys in Australia. In his published diaries, Carr boasted knowing Henry Kissinger; indeed the Great Warmonger invited the foreign minister to go camping in the California woods, we learn.

Australian governments have repeatedly claimed that Julian has received full consular support, which is his right. When his lawyer Gareth Peirce and I met the Australian consul general in London, Ken Pascoe, I asked him, “What do you know of the Assange case?”

“Just what I read in the papers”, he replied with a laugh.

Today, Prime Minister Albanese is preparing this country for a ridiculous American-led war with China. Billions of dollars are to be spent on a war machine of submarines, fighter jets and missiles that can reach China. Salivating war mongering by “experts” on the country’s oldest newspaper, the *Sydney Morning Herald*, and the *Melbourne Age* is a national embarrassment, or ought to be. Australia is a country with no enemies and China is its biggest trading partner.

This deranged servility to aggression is laid out in an extraordinary document called the US-Australia Force Posture Agreement. This states that American troops have “exclusive control over the access to [and] use of” armaments and material that can be used in Australia in an aggressive war.

This almost certainly includes nuclear weapons. Albanese’s foreign minister, Penny Wong, “respects” America’s ambivalent silence on

this, but clearly has no respect for Australians' right to know.

Such obsequiousness was always there – not untypical of a settler nation that still has not made peace with its Indigenous origins – but now it is dangerous.

China as the Yellow Peril fits Australia's history of racism like a glove. However, there is another enemy they don't talk about. It is us, the public. It is our right to know. And our right to say no.

Since 2001, some 82 laws have been enacted in Australia to take away tenuous rights of expression and dissent and protect the cold war paranoia of an increasingly secret state, in which the head of the main intelligence agency, ASIO, lectures dissenters on the patriotic need for the disciplines of "Australian values". There are secret courts and secret miscarriages of justice. Australia is said to be an inspiration for the master across the Pacific.

China as the Yellow Peril fits Australia's history of racism like a glove. However, there is another enemy they don't talk about

Bernard Collaery, David McBride and Julian Assange – deeply moral men who told the truth – are the enemies and victims of this paranoia. They, not Edwardian soldiers who marched for the King, are our true national heroes.

On Julian Assange, the Prime Minister has two faces. One face teases us with hope of his intervention with Biden that will lead to Julian's freedom. The other face ingratiates itself with "POTUS" and allows the Americans to do what they want

with its vassal: to lay down targets that could result in catastrophe for all of us.

Will Albanese back Australia or Washington on Julian Assange? If he is "sincere", as the more do-eyed Labor Party supporters say, what is he waiting for? If he fails to secure Julian's release, Australia will cease to be sovereign. We will be little Americans. Official.

This is not about the survival of a free press. There is no longer a free press. There are refuges in the samizdat. The paramount issue is justice and our most precious human right: to be free. **CT**

This is an abridged version of an address by John Pilger in Sydney on March 10 to mark the unveiling in Melbourne, Australia, of Davide Dormino's sculpture of Julian Assange, Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden, Figures of Courage.



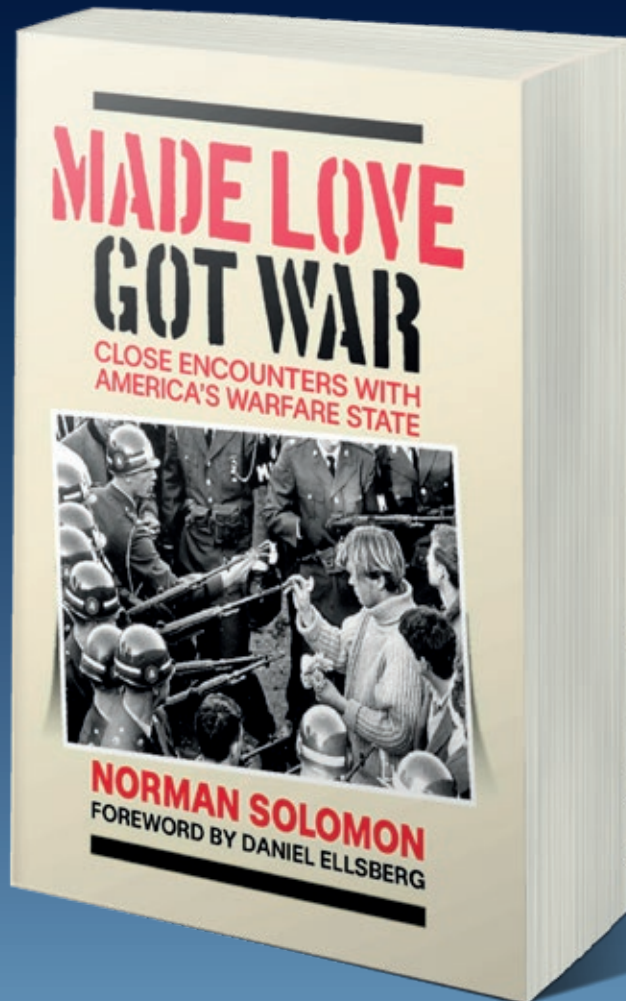
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CHRIS HEDGES

The death spiral of American journalism

The media caters to a particular demographic, telling that demographic what it already believes – even when it is unverified or false

Reporters make mistakes. It is the nature of the trade. There are always a few stories we wish were reported more carefully. Writing on deadline with often only a few hours before publication is an imperfect art. But when mistakes occur, they must be acknowledged and publicised. To cover them up, to pretend they did not happen, destroys our credibility. Once this credibility is gone, the press becomes nothing more than an echo chamber for a selected demographic. This, unfortunately, is the model that now defines the commercial media.

The failure to report accurately on the Trump-Russia saga for the four years of the Trump presidency is bad enough. What is worse, major media organisations, which produced thousands of stories and reports that were false, refuse to engage in a serious postmortem.

The systematic failure was so egregious and widespread that it casts a very troubling shadow over the press. How do CNN, ABC, NBC, CBS, MSNBC, the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times* and *Mother Jones* admit that for four years they

reported salacious, unverified gossip as fact? How do they level with viewers and readers that the most basic rules of journalism were ignored to participate in a witch hunt, a virulent New McCarthyism? How do they explain to the public that their hatred for Trump led them to accuse him, for years, of activities and crimes he did not commit? How do they justify their current lack of transparency and dishonesty? It

ing conflicts in Central America in the early 1980s. In those days, there were a few large media outlets that sought to reach a broad public. I do not want to romanticise the old press. Those who reported stories that challenged the dominant narrative were targets, not only of the US government but also of the hierarchies within news organisations such as the *New York Times*.

Ray Bonner, for example, was reprimanded by the editors at the *New York Times* when he exposed egregious human rights violations committed by the El Salvadoran government, which the Reagan administration funded and armed. He quit shortly after being transferred to a dead-end job at the financial desk.

Sydney Schanberg won a Pulitzer Prize for his reporting in Cambodia on the Khmer Rouge, which was the basis for the film “The Killing Fields.” He was subsequently appointed metropolitan editor at the *New York Times* where he assigned reporters to cover the homeless, the poor and those being driven from their homes and apartments by Manhattan real estate developers. The paper’s Executive Editor, Abe Rosenthal, Schanberg told me, derisively referred



is not a pretty confession, which is why it won’t happen. The US media has the lowest credibility – 26 percent – among 46 nations, according to a 2022 report from the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. And with good reason.

The commercial model of journalism has changed from when I began working as a reporter, cover-

to him as his “resident commie”. He terminated Schanberg’s twice-weekly column and forced him out. I saw my career at the paper end when I publicly criticised the invasion of Iraq. The career-killing campaigns against those who reported controversial stories or expressed controversial opinions was not lost on other reporters and editors who, to protect themselves, practiced self-censorship.

But the old media, because it sought to reach a broad public, reported on events and issues that did not please all of its readers. It left a lot out, to be sure. It gave too much credibility to officialdom, but, as Schanberg told me, the old model of news arguably kept “the swamp from getting any deeper, from rising higher.”

The advent of digital media and the compartmentalising of the public into antagonistic demographics has destroyed the traditional model of commercial journalism. Devastated by a loss of advertising revenue and a steep decline in viewers and readers, the commercial media has a vested interest in catering to those who remain. The approximately three and a half million digital news subscribers the *New York Times* gained during the Trump presidency were, internal surveys found, overwhelmingly anti-Trump. A feedback loop began where the paper fed its digital subscribers what they wanted to hear. Digital subscribers, it turns out, are also very thin-skinned.

“If the paper reported something that could be interpreted as supportive of Trump or not sufficiently critical of Trump”, Jeff Gerth, an investigative journalist who spent

Giving subscribers what they want makes commercial sense. However, it is not journalism

many years at the *New York Times* recently told me, they would sometimes “drop their subscription or go on social media and complain about it.”

Giving subscribers what they want makes commercial sense. However, it is not journalism.

News organisations, whose future is digital, have at the same time filled newsrooms with those who are tech-savvy and able to attract followers on social media, even if



they lack reportorial skills.

Margaret Coker, the bureau chief for the *New York Times* in Baghdad, was fired by the newspaper’s editors in 2018, after management claimed she was responsible for its star terrorism reporter, Rukmini Callimachi, being barred from re-entering Iraq, a charge Coker consistently denied.

It was well known, however, by many at the paper, that Coker filed a number of complaints about Callimachi’s work and considered Cal-

limachi to be untrustworthy. The paper would later have to retract a highly acclaimed 12-part podcast, “Caliphate”, hosted by Callimachi in 2018, because it was based on the testimony of an imposter. “‘Caliphate’ represents the modern *New York Times*,” Sam Dolnick, an assistant managing editor, said in announcing the launch of the podcast. The statement proved true, although in a way Dolnick probably did not anticipate.

Gerth, a Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative reporter who worked at the *New York Times* from 1976 until 2005, spent the last two years writing an exhaustive look at the systemic failure of the press during the Trump-Russia story, authoring a four-part series of 24,000 words that has been published by the *Columbia Journalism Review*. It is an important, if depressing, read.

News organisations repeatedly seized on any story, he documents, no matter how unverified, to discredit Trump and routinely ignored reports that cast doubt on the rumours they presented as fact.

The *New York Times*, for example, in January 2018, ignored a publicly available document showing that the FBI’s lead investigator, after a ten-month inquiry, did not find evidence of collusion between Trump and Moscow. The lie of omission was combined with reliance on sources that peddled fictions designed to cater to Trump-haters, as well as a failure to interview those being accused of collaborating with Russia.

The *Washington Post* and NPR reported, incorrectly, that Trump had weakened the GOP’s stance on Ukraine in the party platform because he opposed language calling

for arming Ukraine with so-called “lethal defensive weapons” – a position identical to that of his predecessor President Barack Obama. These outlets ignored the platform’s support for sanctions against Russia as well its call for “appropriate assistance to the armed forces of Ukraine and greater coordination with NATO defense planning.” News organisations amplified this charge. In a *New York Times* column that called Trump the “Siberian candidate”, Paul Krugman wrote that the platform was “watered down to blandness” by the Republican president. Jeffrey Goldberg, editor of the *Atlantic*, described Trump as a “de facto agent” of Vladimir Putin. Those who tried to call out this shoddy reporting, including Russian-American journalist and Putin critic Masha Gessen were ignored.

After Trump’s first meeting as president with Putin, he was attacked as if the meeting itself proved he was a Russian stooge.

Then *New York Times* columnist Roger Cohen wrote of the “disgusting spectacle of the American president kowtowing in Helsinki to Vladimir Putin”.

Rachel Maddow, MSNBC’s most popular host, said that the meeting between Trump and Putin validated her covering the Trump-Russia allegations “more than anyone else in the national press” and strongly implied — and her show’s Twitter account and YouTube page explicitly stated — that Americans were now “coming to grips with a worst-case scenario that the US president is compromised by a hostile foreign power.”

The anti-Trump reporting, Gerth notes, hid behind the wall of anonymous sources, frequently identified as “people (or person) familiar with” — the *New York Times* used it over a thousand times in stories involving Trump and Russia, between October 2016 and the end of his pres-

Once people are told only what they wish to hear, journalism ceases to be journalism and becomes propaganda

idency, Gerth found.

Any rumour or smear was picked up in the news cycle with the sources often unidentified and the information unverified.

A routine soon took shape in the Trump-Russia saga. “First, a federal agency like the CIA or FBI secretly briefs Congress”, Gerth writes. “Then Democrats or Republicans selectively leak snippets. Finally, the story comes out, using vague attribution.” These cherry-picked pieces of information largely distorted the conclusions of the briefings.

The reports that Trump was a Russian asset began with the so-called Steele dossier, financed at first by Republican opponents of Trump and later by Hillary Clinton’s campaign. The charges in the dossier — which included reports of Trump receiving a “golden shower” from prostituted women in a Moscow hotel room and claims that Trump and the Kremlin had ties going back five years — were discredited by the FBI.

“Bob Woodward, appearing on Fox News, called the dossier a ‘garbage document’ that ‘never should have’ been part of an intelligence briefing”, Gerth writes in his report.

“He later told me that the *Post* wasn’t interested in his harsh criticism of the dossier. After his remarks on Fox, Woodward said he reached out to people who covered this’ at the paper, identifying them only generically as ‘reporters,’ to explain why he was so critical.

“Asked how they reacted, Woodward said: ‘To be honest, there was a lack of curiosity on the part of the people at the *Post* about what I had said, why I said this, and I accepted that and I didn’t force it on anyone.’”

Other reporters who exposed the fabrications — Glenn Greenwald at *The Intercept*, Matt Taibbi at *Rolling Stone* and Aaron Mate at *The Nation* — ran afoul of their news organisations and now work as independent journalists.

The *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* shared Pulitzer Prizes in 2019 for their reporting on “Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election and its connection to the Trump campaign, the President-elect’s transition team and his eventual administration.”

The silence by news organisations that for years perpetuated this fraud is ominous. It cements into place a new media model, one without credibility or accountability. The handful of reporters who have responded to Gerth’s investigative piece, such as David Corn at *Mother Jones*, have doubled down on the old lies, as if the mountain of evidence discrediting their reporting, most of it coming from the FBI and the Mueller Report, does not exist.

Once fact becomes interchangeable with opinion, once truth is irrelevant, once people are told only what they wish to hear, journalism ceases to be journalism and becomes propaganda. **CT**

Chris Hedges is a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist who was a foreign correspondent for fifteen years for *The New York Times*, where he served as the Middle East Bureau Chief and Balkan Bureau Chief for the paper. He previously worked overseas for *The Dallas Morning News*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, and NPR. He is the host of show *The Chris Hedges Report*.

JOHN CLARKE

Plastic manufacturers want ‘right’ to pollute

‘We will continue to see whales washing ashore, turtles drowning and more plastics in our food, water and blood’, says environmental group

Canada’s largest plastic-producing companies have taken the federal government to court in an attempt to undermine measures that would limit plastic pollution. Those involved in the lawsuit include Dow Chemical, Imperial Oil and Nova Chemicals, and they have been joined in this effort by US oil associations, along with the provincial governments of Alberta and Saskatchewan.

This group wants the courts to overturn the designation of plastic as a toxic material under the Canadian Environmental Protection Act (CEPA). It is also trying to “prohibit government action against plastic pollution, including the legal basis of the ban on single-use plastics introduced in 2022”. The environment advocacy group, Oceana Canada, points out that the toxic designation, which has been adopted by 50 other countries, “provides the government the authority to regulate plastic to protect the environment and wildlife”.

Moreover, it “allows the federal government to develop bans on the manufacture, import, sale and export of six common single-use plastic items (bags, straws, cutlery, food service ware, stir sticks and six-pack ring carriers).” While the Canadian government’s measures enjoy mas-

sive public support and are backed “by strong scientific evidence”, the plastic industry is “not providing any real solutions to the plastic crisis. They point to recycling as a solution, while knowing full well that less than nine per cent of plastic waste is recycled. Worse, the industry suggests the carcinogen-releasing method of burning plastics as an emerging solution to plastic waste.”

EcoJustice, an environmental-law organisation, will be intervening in the case on behalf of Oceana Canada, Environmental Defence and Animal Justice. They are taking this action because “there have been no efforts undertaken by big plastic companies to meaningfully curb plastic waste”. They also see the lawsuit as “another way to delay progress. If business as usual continues, we will continue to pollute our oceans” and, if the companies prevail in court, “we will continue to see whales washing ashore, turtles drowning and more plastics in our food, water and blood.”

The failure of the plastic industry to deal with the polluting effects of its products, and its impeding of efforts to address the problem, poses an enormous threat. The environment group, SOS Future, explains that: “Synthetic plastics are made from

finite and polluting fossil fuels. And making them involves the burning of yet more fossil fuels. The plastic industry is one of the industries with the highest carbon footprint.

“Plastics don’t biodegrade like natural materials. Instead, synthetic plastics endure for hundreds of years. So plastic is a problem that sticks around. Plastic litter forms huge ocean gyres of trash, killing wildlife and spreading pathogens and invasive species around the globe.”

Moreover, this vast quantity of litter “often begin(s) to break down – not into inert materials, but into smaller and smaller micro-plastic particles.”

The effects of plastic pollution are having an impact everywhere on the planet. In 2019, *National Geographic* reported that “plastic is proving to be everywhere in the sea”. On three occasions, plastic material has been found at the bottom of the Mariana Trench, 36,000 feet below sea level. The levels of pollution in sections of the trench were worse than in “some of the most polluted rivers in China”. It is believed that “chemical pollutants in the trench may have come in part from the breakdown of plastic in the water column.”

An article that appeared in the *Guardian* last March, noted that “Microplastic pollution has been de-



WEAR THE MASK: A cow rummages for food remains in a dumpsite.

tected in human blood for the first time, with scientists finding the tiny particles in almost 80 percent of the people tested”. The scientific study upon which the report was based showed that “particles can travel around the body and may lodge in organs”. Plastic is taken into the human body through food and water and directly from the air.

Previous studies have already shown that “microplastics were ten times higher in the faeces of babies compared with adults”.

Prof. Dick Vethaak commented that: “We also know in general that babies and young children are more vulnerable to chemical and particle exposure. That worries me a lot.”

Jo Royle, from Common Seas, noted that “Plastic production is set to double by 2040. We have a right to know what all this plastic is doing to our bodies.”

While the precise impacts of plastic pollution on human health have

Plastic is taken into the human body through food and water and directly from the air

yet to be determined, there is already evidence that it is having an adverse effect on seabirds.

A study has now been published by the *Journal of Hazardous Materials* that looks at the impacts of ingesting plastic on 30 seabirds in Australia. It found that “Plastic presence was highly associated with widespread scar tissue formation and extensive changes to, and even loss of, tissue structure within the mucosa and submucosa”. This refers to the lining of the stomachs of the birds.

The study points out that other

indigestible materials found in the birds didn’t produce comparable results, so this “highlights the unique pathological properties of plastics and raises concerns for other species impacted by plastic ingestion”. Based on this, it is concluded that “the extent and severity of fibrosis documented in this study gives support for a novel, plastic-induced fibrotic disease, which we define as Plasticosis.”

In the face of such evidence, the attempt of plastic manufacturers to hold up remedial action in court is utterly despicable, but far from surprising. Plastic pollution is but one major manifestation of capitalism’s assault on nature. Evidence pointing to the urgent need to ensure that production, transportation and consumption are conducted in ways that are sustainable is copious and irrefutable,

yet no serious effort to change course is underway.

As plastic particles spread out to pollute every part of the planet, other elements of the process of environment degradation intensify relentlessly.

The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) has concluded that “The health of ecosystems on which we and all other species depend is deteriorating more rapidly than ever. We are eroding the very foundations of our economies, livelihoods, food security, health and quality of life worldwide.”

Despite such high-placed awareness of the enormity of the situation, global summits come and go without any serious measures being taken to control the corporate activity that is causing an appalling loss of habitat and a devastating rate of species extinction.

When it comes to the climate disaster that is intensifying before our eyes, we know that fossil-fuel companies are continuing down a catastrophic path unchecked. Last year, *Bloomberg* reported that: ‘Companies invested \$58-billion in oil and gas projects in 2021 and 2022 that will only be required if fossil fuel de-

The companies will never choose responsible environmental stewardship over maximising their flow of profits

mand grows to a level at which scientists forecast a climate catastrophe.’ Beyond even this: ‘They may pull the trigger on a further \$23-billion of investments next year that would help warm the planet more than 2.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels.’

To a rational person, it might seem inexplicable that the companies that produce plastic materials would go on polluting the planet in ways that threaten disastrous consequences, or that oil and gas interests would continue to release carbon emissions even as the polar ice caps melt. Actually, however, such conduct is entirely in line with the logic of capitalist accumulation.

The pursuit of profit in this society is engaged in competitively. Capitalists seek to be more exploitative

than their rivals and to draw the materials they need from nature as fully and cheaply as possible. The threat of depletion and the impacts of pollution may be understood, but the competitive drive to accumulate is relentless and unforgiving.

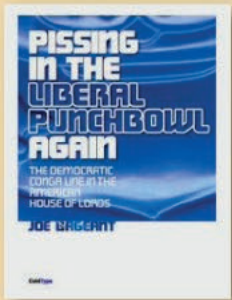
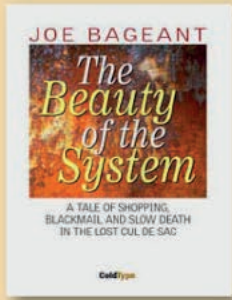
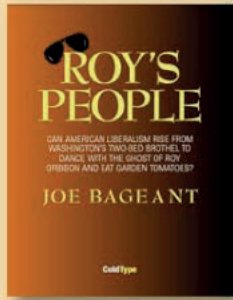
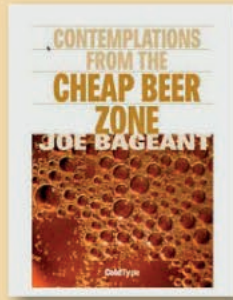
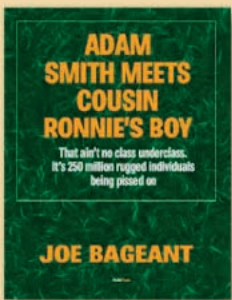
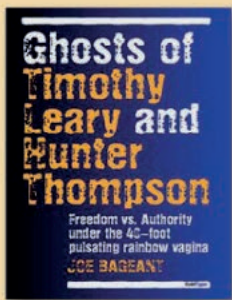
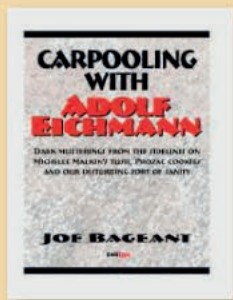
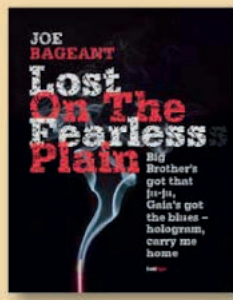
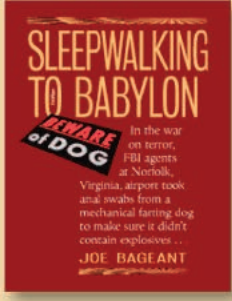
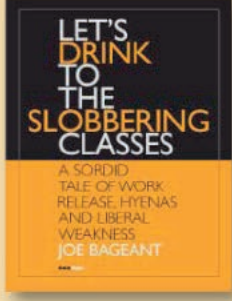
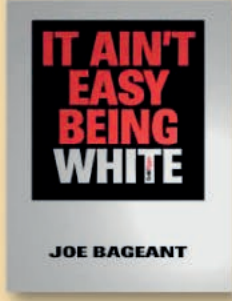
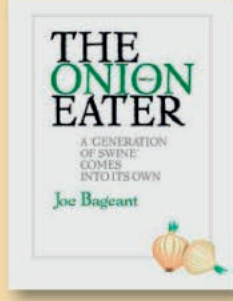
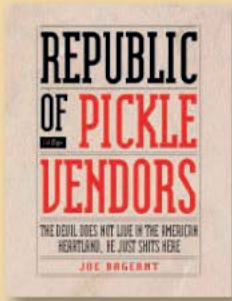
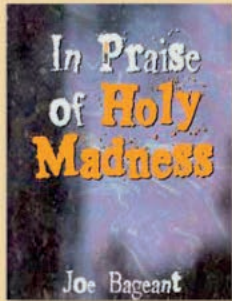
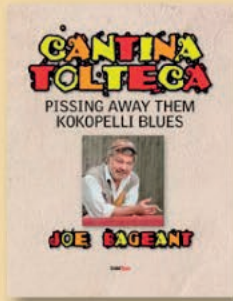
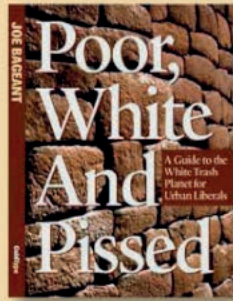
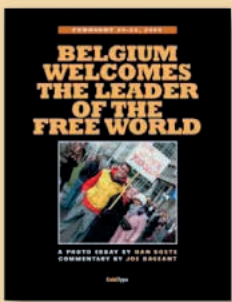
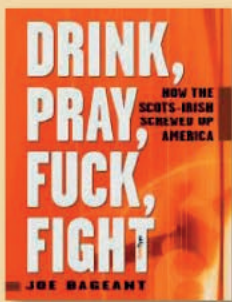
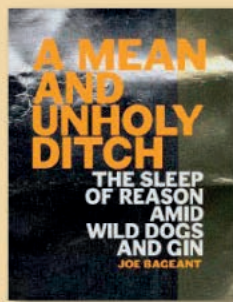
When Oceana Canada states that: “We need the support from all players, including the plastic industry, to stop plastic pollution”, they do so with the very best of intentions but they are making a serious mistake. The companies they are challenging will never choose responsible environmental stewardship over maximising their flow of profits.

From this it follows that only mass action can force serious measures to address environmental degradation out of major companies and governments. Beyond this, however, the struggle for climate justice and sustainability must utterly reject any illusions in a greener capitalism and base itself on the need to eliminate the profit system. **CT**

John Clarke was an organiser with the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (OCAP) for nearly three decades. He blogs at www.johnclarkeblog.com. This article was first published by Counterfire.

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TREVOR GRUNDY

Fooled by the Hitler memoirs

The publication of Hitler's Diaries in 1983 was the biggest publishing scoop of the 20th-century – a sensation only outdone by the fact they were all fake

Ten years from now, the world will witness a tsunami of books reminding us that Adolf Hitler came to power in Germany 100 years ago on January 30, 1933.

And, on November 8 this year, historians and Führer-fantasists will recall with horror – or pride – the 100th anniversary of 1923's Munich Beer Hall Putsch, Hitler's aborted bid to take over Bavaria, an action that culminated in a nine-month stay at Landsberg Prison, where the future despot dictated volume one of his tract *Mein Kampf* to Rudolf Hess, which sold millions of copies and fanned the flames of Jew hate in Germany and other parts of Europe.

Almost eight decades after his suicide in a Berlin bunker, Adolf Hitler still won't go away. We can't get

rid of him.

Today, many of the conditions that prevailed during the Weimar Republic after the First World War return to haunt those with more than TikTok sleep plugs between their ears.

So where do we locate the man? Is he still dangerous? In what pantheon does he lie? To whom should he be compared?

The journalist Richard Gott asked those questions more than 20 years ago in his review of *The Hitler of History: Hitler's Biographers on Trial* by John Lukacs (in *New Statesman*, 19 March 2001).

"It's a new century but we still can't get enough of Adolf Hitler",

Gott wrote, while praising Lukacs for attempting to recover the figure of the German leader from what Gott called "the mindless demonisation to which he has been subjected."

Others have tried but only in a half-hearted nervous sort of way and unless some startling revelations appear, AH will remain in Dante's Seventh Circle of Hell for a

long time yet. So it's as good a time as any to remember the time an attempt was made to de-demonise the German dictator in 1983..

The story began in January 1981, when the German magazine *Stern's* top roving reporter Gerd Heidemann (known as der Spurhund or the bloodhound by his colleagues) headed to Stuttgart to meet Dr Konrad Fischer a small-time shopkeeper and collector of Nazi memorabilia.

Fischer told Heidemann that he had something to sell that could interest the owners of *Stern* magazine and perhaps change the way the world perceived Adolf Hitler.

After a couple of strong drinks, this man told the journalist that diaries written by Hitler from 1932 to 1945 were in the possession of his brother who was a general in the East German Army.

The volumes, he said, had come into his possession after being rescued by villagers from the wreckage of a transport plane that had crashed while carrying senior Nazi leaders and precious secret documents from Berlin towards the leader's moun-

tain-top retreat at Berchtesgaden.

The plane crashed south of Dresden in the Heidenholz Forest just a few days before Hitler's suicide in Berlin on April 30, 1945.

According to Fischer, the diaries had been smuggled into West Germany inside pianos.

Heidemann had several former Nazi friends and had been the long-term lover of Edda Goring, Hermann Goring's daughter. He'd had earlier bought the Nazi leader's yacht Carin II where he entertained men and women who still believed in Hitler and the cause of National Socialism.

After much thought, Heidemann drove with fellow reporter Thomas Walde to the site of the crash, where he saw the graves of the aircraft's crew and met villagers holding up metal parts of the crashed plane.

Convinced of the veracity of his source's story, Heidemann believed he was on to the scoop of the century, and that he'd become a multi-millionaire in the process.

After lengthy deliberations with *Stern's* executives (some of whom believed in Heidemann's story, while others dismissed it as fantasy and farce).

Stern paid 9-million



Deutschmarks to buy the diaries which none of them had even seen, such was their faith in Heidemann's judgment.

They didn't even know their own reporter's source because Heidemann wouldn't tell them – he was protecting his sources, he said.

At that time, the *Stern* reporter did not know that his contact's real name was Konrad Kujau, and he was a small time shopkeeper, part time painter and full time con-man.

On April 22, 1983 one of *Stern* magazine's top executives stood up at a press conference in Hamburg and waved a piece of paper in the air in a scene reminiscent of Neville Chamberlain waving his infamous Peace in Our Time document after his talks in Munich with Hitler and Benito Mussolini in 1938.

Stern's man told startled journalists that the magazine's star reporter had sensationally got hold of many of the diaries written by the man the world most loved to hate – Adolf Hitler. It would, he claimed, be the biggest publishing event of the 20th-century and would encourage the world to see Hitler through a different lens, not just as the Holocaust's master planner.

It seemed the diaries revealed that Hitler didn't know much about the terrible campaign against the Jews, gypsies and homosexuals who had suffered under the Nazi regime.

The Diaries also, it was claimed, posed eye-watering questions: Did Adolf Hitler have a gentle, almost 'feminine' side to his character? Had he really approved of Rudolph Hess's flight to Scotland in 1941 to try to stop the war with Britain? Did he really not know his followers launched a crusade against local Jews during Kristallnacht in 1938?

Read the diaries and find out, was



CAUGHT IN THE SCAM: Germany's *Stern* and the US magazine *Newsweek*.

Stern's answer to those who wondered about these stunning revelations.

But the story of how Heidemann had got his hands on the diaries would remain a *Stern* secret, along with the name of the reporter's sources.

Shaking heads in disbelief historians, journalists and a few politicians departed, waiting for part two of the tale which would be the publication of the diaries in Rupert Murdoch's flagship *Sunday Times* on April 24, followed by another press

conference on the 25th, and then *Stern's* publications of the diaries three days later on the 28th.

The magazine had paid more than DM 9-million for the 35 diaries which were being held in a Swiss Bank. To regain some of the cash, *Stern* sold publishing rights to some of the world's biggest and richest media houses in Europe including *Paris Match*, Italy's *Panorama*, America's *Time* and *Newsweek* magazines and Rupert Murdoch's News Corp, owners of the *Times* and *Sunday Times*.

The deal, it was believed, would make *Stern* and those who believed the diaries were kosher (if that's the right word) mind-blowingly rich and famous.

Who could ask for anything more? Such as the truth about Heidemann's source?

But few of the main players, their eyes fixated on circulation figures and bank balances worried much about that. Who needs truth when there are millions of dollars of cash out there ready to be trousered?

And institutional memory was clouded, with only a few old hands remembered that in 1968 the *Sunday Times* paper had been taken for a £60,000 ride by an Italian woman Amalia Panvini and her daughter Rosa, who claimed, coincidentally, to have come across the private diaries of the Italian Duce, Benito Mussolini.

Not to worry. This time it was different. Hadn't one of the world's top authorities on Hitler, Professor Hugh Trevor-Roper (author of the 1947 best-selling book *The Last Days of Hitler*) staked his reputation the diaries were genuine?

Trevor-Roper, called the leading historian of his time, was a historian at Cambridge University and had worked for M16 in Germany after the war. He took the title Lord Dacre

after being awarded a peerage.

It was then that less-trusting historians and journalists not in the employ of Murdoch or *Stern* started digging.

They quickly discovered that the someone had transposed the gothic letters A and F on the cover of the diaries so the covers of the leather-bound books indicated had been penned by someone with the initials FH, not AH.

Can you image Hitler letting that get past him?

And those who had known Hitler well said he rarely wrote things down, but dictated his speeches and articles. Indeed, it was pointed out, that after the attempt to kill him in July 1944, Hitler had difficulty moving his right hand, yet alone writing with it.

Handwriting experts were called in and most said the writing was a good imitation but that it was not Hitler's. And the ink was made well after 1945.

Alarmed, *Stern's* reporters in Hamburg grilled their bosses about the sources of all these diaries.

"First we publish, then we authenticate?", *Time* magazine's Ed Magnuson quoted one disbelieving reporter asking a *Stern* executive.

Shocked, the magazine's editorial board ordered some of the diaries to be sent to experts at West Germany's Federal Archives in Coblenz.

Friedrich Zimmermann, the country's interior minister, announced later in a terse statement that the Federal Archives were convinced that the documents they'd been asked to examine had not been written by Hitler, but were fakes, produced in the post-war period.

Forensics expert Luis-Ferdinand Werner told a press conference that he had supervised a chemical analysis of the paper, cover, binding, labels and glue used in three of the seven volumes submitted by *Stern* and they were all "obvious fakes."



MIND-CHANGER: Historian Hugh Trevor-Roper said the diaries were authentic. Then as the *Sunday Times's* press began to roll, he changed his mind.

German scientists also disclosed that chemical analysis of the binding showed they contained polyester threads which were not produced until after 1945, that the glue used on the book labels contained post-war chemicals. And there were factual errors about dates and places and the contents of speeches by Hitler and others.

None of the revelations stopped Rupert Murdoch, the man commonly known as "the Dirty Digger" from ordering Frank Giles, the editor of his the *Sunday Times*, to publish.

However, moments before publication, Trevor-Roper telephoned Giles, who was sitting in his office with his senior editors, and told him he had second thoughts about the authenticity of the diaries and that the *Sunday Times* report on page one should be changed.

According to onlookers who heard Giles's side of the conversation, he said, "Well, naturally, Hugh, one has doubts. There are no certainties in this life. But these doubts aren't strong enough to make you do a complete 180-degree turn on

that?

"Oh, I see. You *are* doing a 180-degree turn;"

Giles's world collapsed when Murdoch, who was listening to the call from New York, shouted down the phone, "Fuck Dacre. 'Publish!'"

Publish they did. Fucked they were. The scoop of the century quickly fell apart.

Gard Heidemann and Konrad Kujau were imprisoned for four-and-a-half years apiece for defrauding *Stern*. His reputation shattered, Trevor-Roper lived on with a new name dangling over his lordly head, courtesy of the satirical magazine *Private Eye*, which renamed him Hugh Very-Ropey.

Stern magazine would never recover from the fake diaries farce.

But the Dirty Digger did. He's 92, and still a media tycoon. So, if you know of any interesting diaries down where you live . . .

Footnote: *Not everyone in the diaries farce ended-up short-changed or in a German slammer. There has been a bundle of books, films and TV documentaries about the Stern/Sunday Times fiasco. Faking Hitler was a German TV series, while Robert Harris's best seller Selling Hitler: The Story of the Hitler Diaries, became a six-part ITV comedy-drama, in which Jonathan Pryce played the crafty Gerd Heidemann and the literary legend Alan Bennett was cast as Trevor-Roper. To those who feel inclined to wade deeper, I can recommend two other books – The Hitler Diaries by Jim Williams, and Richard Hugo's 1982 novel The Hitler Diaries.* **CT**

Trevor Grundy is a British journalist who worked in Africa, now lives in England. His website is www.trevorgrundy.news

RAJAN MENON

A war of surprises in Ukraine

Could there be one surprise too many
– a sudden escalation to nuclear war?

Some wars acquire names that stick. The Lancaster and York clans fought the War of the Roses from 1455-1485 to claim the British throne. The Hundred Years' War pitted England against France from 1337-1453. In the Thirty Years' War, 1618-1648, many European countries clashed, while Britain and France waged the Seven Years' War, 1756-63, across significant parts of the globe. World War I (1914-1918) gained the lofty moniker, "The Great War", even though World II (1939-1945) would prove far greater in death, destruction, and its grim global reach.

Of the catchier conflict names, my own favourite – though the Pig War of 1859 between the US and Great Britain in Canada runs a close second – is the War of Jenkins' Ear (1739-1748). It was named for Captain Robert Jenkins of the East India Company who, in 1738, told the British House of Commons that his ear, which he displayed for the onlooking parliamentarians, had been severed several years earlier by a Spanish coast guard sloop's commander. He had boarded the ship off the Cuban coast and committed the outrage using Jenkins's own cutlass. If ever there was cause for war, that was it! An ear for an ear, so to speak.

If I could give Russian President Vladimir Putin's war on Ukraine a name for posterity, I think I'd call

it the War of Surprises, because from the get-go it so thoroughly confounded the military mavens and experts on Russia and Ukraine. For now, though, let me confine myself to exploring just two surprising aspects of that ongoing conflict, both of which can be posed as questions: Why did it occur when it did? Why has it evolved in such unexpected ways?

Though a slim majority of experts opined that Putin might use force against Ukraine many months after his military buildup on Ukraine's border began in early 2021, few foresaw an all-out invasion. When he started massing troops, the reigning assumption was that he was muscle-flexing, probably to extract a promise that NATO would cease expanding toward Russia.

Some context helps here. NATO had just 16 members at its Cold War peak. More than three decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union, it has 30 – 32 when Finland and Sweden, which sought membership after Putin's invasion, are allowed to join. Long before Putin became president in 2000, Russian officials were already condemning the eastward march of the American-led former Cold War alliance. His predecessor Boris Yeltsin made his opposition clear to President Bill Clinton.

In October 1993, as Secretary of State Warren Christopher prepared

to travel to Russia, James Collins, chargé d'affaires at the American embassy in Moscow, sent him a cable warning that "NATO expansion is neuralgic to Russians". If continued "without holding the door open to Russia", he added, it would be "universally interpreted in Moscow as directed against Russia and Russia alone – or 'Neo-Containment', as Foreign Minister [Andrei] Kozyrev recently suggested."

In February 2008, eight years into Putin's presidency and about a month before a NATO summit in Bucharest, Romania, William Burns, then the American ambassador to Moscow and now the director of the CIA, sent a cable to Washington focusing on Ukraine. "NATO enlargement, particularly to Ukraine", he warned, "remains an 'emotional and neuralgic' issue for Russia". That same month, in a memo to President George W. Bush's National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, Burns wrote that Ukraine's entry into NATO would cross "the brightest of all red lines" for Russia's leaders. "I have", he continued, "yet to find anyone who views Ukraine in NATO as anything other than a direct challenge to Russian interests."

Such diplomatic missives had little effect as NATO expansion became the centrepiece of Washington's new security order in Europe. In April 2008, at Bush's urging, NATO final-



DEVASTATED: A woman stands near her shelling-damaged house in the Ukrainian village of Novoselivka, Chernihiv Oblast.

ly took a fateful step at that Bucharest summit, declaring that Ukraine and Georgia would, one day, join its ranks.

Now, it was one thing to include former Soviet allies from Central Europe in NATO, but Ukraine was another matter entirely. In the eyes of Russian nationalists, the two countries shared a centuries-long set of cultural, linguistic, ethnic, and religious ties with Ukrainians, not to mention a 1,426-mile-long border, a point Putin made in a 7,000-word essay he wrote in July 2021, tellingly titled “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians.”

Putin, who never regarded Ukraine as an authentic state, saw the Ukrainians’ overwhelming December 1991 vote in favour of independence as a deep injustice. The Russian newspaper *Kommersant* reported that he told George W. Bush at a NATO-Russia Council meet-

ing held during that 2008 Bucharest summit, “Ukraine is not even a state. What is Ukraine? A part of its territory is Eastern Europe, another part [Ukraine east of the Dnipro River], and a significant one, is a donation from us”. He later added ominously that, if Ukraine entered NATO, it would lose Crimea, its sole Russian-majority province, and the Donbas, its Russophone east. In his 2016 book, *All the Kremlin’s Men*, Russian journalist Mikhail Zygar confirmed that Putin had indeed threatened to destroy Ukraine, were it to join NATO.

Those who blame NATO for the present war point to just such evidence. And it can’t be denied that NATO expansion created tension between Russia and the West, as well as Russia and Ukraine. But the alliance’s Bucharest promise that Ukraine would become a member someday didn’t make Putin’s war

any less surprising.

Here’s why: between then and the invasion moment, NATO never followed through on its pledge to take the next step and provide Kyiv with a “membership action plan”. By February 2022, it had, in fact, kept Ukraine waiting for 14 years without the slightest sign that its candidacy might be advancing (though Ukraine’s security ties and military training with some NATO states – the US, Britain, and Canada, in particular – had increased).

So, the NATO-was-responsible theory, suggesting that Putin invaded in 2022 in the face of an “existential threat”, isn’t convincing (even if one believes, as I do, that NATO’s enlargement was a bad idea and Russian apprehensions reasonable).

A rival explanation for Putin’s war is that it stemmed from his fear of liberal democracy. Under his rule, Russia had become steadily more

authoritarian until the state was embodied in a single person: him. Putin's greatest fear, so this explanation goes, was the spectre of Russians thronging the streets demanding more freedom – and so, his departure. For that reason, he curbed the media, exiled opposition figures, allegedly had others like Anna Politkovskaya and Boris Nemtsov killed, and jailed Alexei Navalny, Russia's most prominent dissident and the person most likely to lead a grassroots rebellion against him.

According to this account, Putin can't imagine Russians turning against him spontaneously, since he played such a crucial role in putting the 1990s – a decade of economic collapse, fire sales of state property to sleazy “oligarchs,” rising poverty, and potential civil war – behind them. Instead, he built a strong state, imposed order, crushed the Chechens' attempted secession, paid off Russia's massive debt early, rebuilt the army, revved up the economy, and left the country standing tall as a great power once again.

So, if Russians do protest en masse (as they did from 2011 to 2013 against rigged elections), it must be thanks to instigation from abroad, as was supposedly true in adjoining countries like Georgia during its 2003 Rose Revolution, Kyrgyzstan during its 2005 Tulip Revolution, and Ukraine during its Orange Revolution that same year. Putin, this narrative continues, hated the “colour revolutions” because they created turmoil in regions he deemed Russia's sphere of influence or in which, as former president Dmitry Medvedev put it, the country has “privileged interests.”

But his real beef against citizen rebellions in Russia's neighbourhood, according to this explanation of what sparked the invasion, is that

But why then did a Russian ruler seized by imperial dreams and a neo-fascist ideology wait more than two decades to attack Ukraine?

they might inspire insurrection in Russia. And when it came to that, he especially feared such events in Ukraine. In 2014, after all, its “revolution of dignity” culminated in the ouster of a Russian-friendly president, Viktor Yanukovich. For Putin, in other words, that revolt hit too close to home. He reacted by annexing Crimea (after a referendum that violated Ukraine's constitution), while working to foster two separatist “republics” across the border in Ukraine's Donbas region. A little more than a month before his invasion at a meeting of the Russia-led Collective Treaty Organization, he warned that “we will not allow the realisation of so-called colour-revolution scenarios” and promptly dispatched 2,500 troops to Kazakhstan following a revolt there.

As for Ukraine, while it may be an imperfect democracy, it was certainly making progress. Its elections were cleaner than Russia's and its media far freer, as political parties competed, governments were voted in and out of power, and civic groups multiplied. All of this, so goes the argument, Putin found intolerable, fearing that such democratic ideas and aspirations would eventually make their way to Russia.

As it happens, though, none of this explains the timing of his invasion.

After all, Ukraine had been moving toward political plurality for years, however slowly and unevenly, and however far it still had to go. So, what was happening in 2021 that could have taken his fear to new heights? The answer: nothing,

really. Those who claim that NATO was irrelevant to the invasion often insist that the deed sprang from Putin's ingrained authoritarianism, dating back to his days in Russia's secret police, the KGB, his love of unchecked power, and his dread of uppity citizens inclined to rebellion.

The problem: none of this explains why the war broke out when it did. Russia wasn't then being roiled by protests; Putin's position was rock-solid; and his party, United Russia, had no true rivals. Indeed, the only others with significant followings, relatively speaking, the Communist Party and the Liberal Democracy Party (neither liberal nor democratic), were aligned with the state.

According to yet another explanation, he attacked Ukraine simply because he's an imperialist through and through, yearns to go down in history as Putin the Great, and has been transfixed by far-right thinkers, above all the exile Ivan Ilyin, whose remains he arranged to have returned to Russia for reburial.

But why then did a Russian ruler seized by imperial dreams and a neo-fascist ideology wait more than two decades to attack Ukraine? And remember, though now commonly portrayed as a wild-eyed expansionist, Putin, though hardly a peacemaker, had never previously committed Russian forces to anything like that invasion. His 1999-2009 war in Chechnya, though brutal, was waged within Russia and there was no prospect of outside intervention to help the Chechens. His brief military foray into Georgia in 2008, his landgrab in Ukraine in 2014, his intervention in Syria in 2015 – none were comparable in size or audacity.

Do I have a better explanation? No, but that's my point. To this day, perhaps the most important question of all about this war, the biggest surprise – why did it happen when it did? – remains mysterious, as do Putin's motives (or perhaps impulses).

Once Russian troops did cross Ukraine's border, just about everyone expected Kyiv to fall within days. After that, it was assumed, Putin would appoint a quisling government and annex big chunks of the country. The CIA's assessment was that Ukrainian forces would be quickly trounced, while Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley reportedly told members of Congress resistance would fizzle within three days. Those predictions briefly seemed on the mark. After all, the Russian army made its way to the northern suburbs of the Ukrainian capital, Kyiv – think of a military bent on capturing Washington, DC, reaching Bethesda, Maryland – before being stopped in its tracks. Had it taken that city, we would be in a different world today.

But the far weaker Ukrainian army not only prevented what was then considered the world's second-greatest military superpower from taking Kyiv, but in September 2021 ejected Russian forces from the northeastern province of Kharkiv. That October, it also pushed them out of the portion of the southern province of Kherson they had captured on the right bank of the Dnipro River. In all, Ukrainian forces have now retaken about half the territory Russia occupied after the invasion.

As winter approached that year, the crescent-shaped frontlines extending from northern Luhansk Province (one of two that make up the Donbas region) all the way south became the scene of World War I-style trench warfare, both sides throwing their troops into a virtual meat grinder. Still, since then, despite having overwhelming superiority in soldiers and firepower – the estimated artillery exchange ratio between the two forces has been put as high as 7:1 – Russia's advance has

If, as 2021 began, I had suggested that Russia might soon invade Ukraine and begin a war in Europe, you would have thought me mad

been glacial.

The Russian army's abysmal performance has perplexed experts. According to American, British, and Norwegian estimates, it has suffered something on the order of 180,000-200,000 casualties. Some observers believe those numbers are too high, but even if they were off by 50 percent, the Russian army's casualties in one year of fighting would exceed by perhaps twofold the losses of the Soviet Union's Red Army during its 10-year war in Afghanistan.

Russia has lost thousands of tanks, armoured personnel carriers, and helicopters, while vast amounts of equipment, abandoned intact, have fallen into Ukrainian hands. All of this, after Putin initiated a megabucks military modernisation drive in 2008, leading the Economist to declare in 2020 that "the Russian military dazzles after a decade of reform" and NATO had better watch out.

For the evolution of the war, unlike so much else, I do have an explanation. Military experts typically dwell on what can be counted: the level of military spending, the number of soldiers, tanks, warplanes, and artillery pieces a military has, and so on. They assume, reasonably enough, that the side with more countable stuff is likely to be the winner – and quickly if it has a lot more as Russia indeed did.

There is, however, no way to assign numerical values to morale or leadership. As a result, they tend to be discounted, if not simply omitted from comparisons of military power. In Ukraine, as in the American wars

in Vietnam in the last century and Afghanistan in this one, the squishy stuff has, at least so far, proven decisive. French emperor Napoleon's dictum that, in war, "the moral is to the physical as three to one" may seem hyperbolic and he certainly ignored it when he led his Grande Armée disastrously into Russia and allowed the brutal Russian winter to shred its spirit, but in Ukraine – surprise of surprises – his maxim has held all too true, at least so far.

When it comes to surprises, count on one thing: the longer this war continues, the greater the likelihood of yet more of them. One in particular should worry us all: the possibility, if a Russian defeat looms, of a sudden escalation to nuclear war. There's no way to judge or measure the probability of such a dreaded dénouement now. All we know is that the consequences could be horrific.

Though neither Russia nor the United States seeks a nuclear war, it's at least possible that they could slide into one. After all, never, not even in the Cold War era, has their relationship been quite so poisonous. Let us hope, in this war of surprises, that it remains nothing more than another of the scenarios strategists like to imagine. Then again, if as 2021 began, I had suggested that Russia might soon invade Ukraine and begin a war in Europe, you would have thought me mad. **CT**

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VIJAY PRASHAD

The long arm of the US extends to Africa

Country will spend twice as much on its Air Base 201 than on humanitarian aid to one of continent's poorest nations

On March 16, 2023, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken announced – during his visit to Niger – that the United States government will provide \$150-million in aid to the Sahel region of Africa. This money, Blinken said, “will help provide life-saving support to refugees, asylum seekers, and others impacted by conflict and food insecurity in the region.”

The next day, UNICEF issued a press release with information from a report the United Nations issued that month stating that 10 million children in the central Sahel countries of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger need humanitarian assistance.

UNICEF has appealed for \$473.8-million to support its efforts to provide these children with basic requirements.

According to the Human Development Index for 2021, Niger, despite holding large reserves of uranium, is one of the poorest countries in the world (189 out of 191 countries); profits from the uranium have long drained away to French and other Western multinational corporations.

However, the US aid money will not be going to the United Nations but will be disbursed through its own agencies, such as the US Agency for International Development's Bureau for Humanitarian

Assistance.

Northeast of Niger's capital Niamey, near the city of Agadez, is Air Base 201, one of the world's largest drone bases and home to several armed MQ-9 Reapers.

During a press conference with Blinken, Niger Foreign Minister Hassoumi Massoudou affirmed his country's “military cooperation” with the United States, which includes the US “equipping... our armed forces, for our army and our air force and intelligence.”

Neither Blinken nor Massoudou spoke about Air Base 201, from where the United States monitors the Sahel region, trains Niger's military, and provides air support for US ground operations in the region (all of this made clear during the visit by Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force JoAnne S. Bass to the base at the end of December 2021). The US will spend \$280-million on this base – twice the humanitarian aid promised by Blinken – including \$30-million per year to maintain operations at Air Base 201.

Blinken is the first US Secretary of State to visit Niger, a country that his own department accused of “significant human rights issues” including “unlawful or arbitrary killings, including extrajudicial kill-

ings by or on behalf of government” and torture. When a reporter asked Blinken during the press conference what the US will do “to bring democracy” to Burkina Faso and Mali, he replied that the United States is monitoring the “democratic backsliding, the military coups, which so far have not led to a renewal of a democratic constitutional process in these countries.”

The military governments in Burkina Faso and Mali have ejected the presence of the French military from their territories and have indicated that they would not welcome any more Western military intervention.

A senior official in Niger told me that Blinken's hesitancy to directly speak about Burkina Faso and Mali might have been because of the distress about the faltering democracy in Niger.

Niger President Mohamed Bazoum has faced serious criticisms within the country about corruption and violence.

In April 2022, president Bazoum wrote on Twitter that 30 of his senior officials had been arrested for “embezzlement or misappropriation”, and they would be in prison “for a long time”. This was a perfectly clear statement, but it obscured the deeper corruption within Bazoum's own administration – including the detention of his Com-



US Secretary of State Antony Blinken meets Nigerien Foreign Minister Hassoumi Massoudou at a press conference in Niger during which the US promised \$150-million in aid to people affected by conflict in the Sahel region of Africa.

munications Minister Mahamadou Zada on corruption charges – which was revealed through an audit of the country’s 2021 spending that highlighted millions of dollars of missing state funds.

Furthermore, a third of the money spent by Niger to buy \$1 billion in weapons from arms companies between 2011 and 2019 was pilfered by government officials, according to a report by the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project.

In December 2022, during the US-Africa Leaders Summit, President Bazoum joined Benin’s President Patrice Talon to be part of the US project known as the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC).

The US government pledged \$504-million toward facilitating transportation between Benin and Niger, to help increase trade between these two neighbours.

The MCC, set up in 2004 in the context of the US war on Iraq, has been expanded into an instrument used by the US government to chal-

lenge the Chinese-led Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Senior officials in Niger, who requested anonymity, and several studies by independent authorities indicate that this MCC money is being used to upgrade African farmlands and that the corporation has been working with US-funded institutions such as the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates and Rockefeller foundations), and turn these agricultural resources over to multinational agribusinesses.

The MCC grants, the senior officials said, are used to “launder” Niger’s land to foreign corporate interests and to “subordinate” Niger’s political leadership to US government interests.

At the press conference, Blinken was asked about Russia’s Wagner Group. “Where Wagner has been present”, Blinken said, “bad things have inevitably followed”. Statements have been made recently about the Wagner Group operating in Burkina Faso and Mali by the US State Department’s Vedant Patel after the second coup in the former country in September 2022, and by

the RAND Corporation’s Colin P. Clarke in January 2023.

Governments in both Burkina Faso and Mali have denied that Wagner is operating from their territory (although the group does operate in Libya), and informed observers such as the Nigerien journalist Seidik Abba (author of *Mali-Sahel, notre Afghanistan à nous*, 2022) said that countries in the Sahel region are being wary about any foreign intervention.

Despite repeating many of Washington’s talking points about Wagner, Niger Foreign Minister Massoudou conceded that focus on it might be exaggerated: “As for the presence of Wagner in Burkina... the information that we have does not allow us to say that Wagner is still in Burkina Faso.”

Before Blinken left for Niger and Ethiopia, US Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Molly Phee said that Niger is “one of our most important partners on the continent in terms of security cooperation”. That is the most honest assessment of US interests in Niger – largely about the military bases in Agadez and Niamey. **CT**

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