

ColdType

WRITING WORTH READING ■ PHOTOS WORTH SEEING

Mid-April 2020



LOCKDOWN!

Insightful reading to keep the boredom at bay

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Issue 204 / Mid-April 2020

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■ JOE ALLEN

A Redneck's escape from Knoxville

I get the uneasy feeling that when the present Global Lockdown is finally lifted, we'll all come out of our cells to find that the furniture has been rearranged – and we won't be allowed to put it back

LAST month I was gearing up for a world tour. The job was as a rigger for a pop punk band. Yes, I'm a dirty fucking roadie.

The tour would start in Asia, bounce back to Europe, do the US circuit, then hop over to Oceania. There would be long flights and free drinks. Tour buses and sweet hotels. Blistering hard work at breakneck pace with zero sleep. Wild parties in pathogen-rich environments. It wouldn't be my first, but it was sure to be my best.

Then came the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent Global Lockdown. My job depends on thousands of people gathering together. In an instant, our entire industry was obliterated.

The warnings started in January. A good friend from back home – we'll call him K-Bob – was freaking out about some "Chinese virus". This demonic spectre, I gathered, was a ravenous chemical complex with a taste for the human lung, a

microscopic enigma skirting the fine line between organism and self-replicating molecule, an anime succubus that wore a silk dress and flew on bat wings. Being an anti-commie maniac, K-Bob used more descriptive terms, but I'll leave that to your imagination.

As I gathered myself for the band's rehearsals, concentrating on my professional future, K-Bob's relentless text messages hammered my brain:

01/21, 4:47 PM – might want to invest in germ for crowds

01/21, 5:32 PM – germ mask

01/21, 8:46 PM – maybe coronavirus will be black swan

01/21, 8:52 PM – interesting thing is how 25% get pneumonia. simply having bunch people with that could crash already fragile medical system.

At this point, the WHO had just stopped repeating China's claim that the virus couldn't spread person-to-person. Apparently, the germ could surf a sneeze straight into your nostrils. Rumour had it



the peculiar COVID-19 originated in a bad batch of bat soup cooked up next door to a Level 4 bioweapons lab in Wuhan. The world community didn't care too much and I didn't either. But K-Bob would not be ignored:

01/24, 1:22 AM – weird that millions quarantined in china but still flights to usa

01/24, 8:24 PM – viral chernoby5

01/25, 7:15 PM – forget porn. coronavirus phone videos far more addictive. i believe nothing officials say.

01/26, 12:16 AM – nobody



South Gay Street, Knoxville, Tennessee

remembers botched utah nerve gas test or accidental gorky biowar anthrax release

01/27, 7:45 PM – w.h.o. says oops, risk actually high, not moderate

01/30, 6:28 PM – get hand sanitizer and, if possible, mask for trip

01/30, 6:39 PM – always be the first to panic

01/31, 11:01 PM – saw prediction on twitter that 6 months after coronavirus kills last man, computer in fed basement trading with computer in wall street basement will

drive dow to all-time highs

02/01, 12:07 AM – twitter, facebook now censoring coronavirus posts

These increasingly frantic texts followed me to the band's rehearsals. I tried my best to ignore them and let my dreams soar. Looking back, I'm reminded why it's best to keep one antenna tuned to the far left, the other to the far right.

02/16, 7:00 PM – am astonished msm, public did not, and still do not, notice shit hitting fan

By March, the tour had been cancelled and the entire world was

hysterical. Seeing all the shelves cleared of toilet paper, I realised that America is literally a nation of asswipes. After a long stint of denial – maybe just long enough – the WHO and the CDC had finally sounded the alarm. Two months too late, Big Media suddenly echoed the dissident feeds that K-Bob follows. Privy investors sold their stock. The Dow Jones tanked. It was time for a cosmic freak out.

I decided to break camp and head north to Yankee Town. Sure, they talk funny up there, but there's a

beautiful woman I know who tends a garden off the beaten path. Might be a good time to plant seeds and sing songs. Besides, maybe she needs a strong back and a .357 to keep her company.

On March 15, I got my last proper pint at Blackhorse Pub & Brewery on Knoxville's Gay Street, an hour before they put the chairs up for good. It wasn't as satisfying as you'd think it'd be, so I ordered another. At the other end of the bar, a batty old lady with a roller walker yammered, "It's over. It's over. It's over." Her tone was more informative than alarmed. She'd probably been repeating that line since well before the pandemic began.

The streets of downtown Knoxville were empty except for one or two disaster tourists licking Cruze Farms ice cream cones. A handful of hobos watched them without interest. One was selling crocheted dog sweaters and I gave her a couple of bucks. If you don't support local business, who will? The Cruze Farms girls always wear checkered dresses as a trad uniform, but now they also wore checkered bandanas over their mouths, too. Big box stores could never replicate this flavour, but as it turns out, they don't have to. By the end of the month, the entire state would be locked down. Most businesses were ordered to close, except for Amazon and Whole Foods, or essentials like Tractor Supply and Wal-Mart.

If you've ever been imprisoned, you know that lockdown is a total drag. You go into your cell and do push-ups and listen to your cellmate tell that same story for the hundredth time. You look out

The best I could figure, a rolling meth lab must have gone Code Red like that Level 4 facility in Wuhan, but with less long-term damage

the steel door's little window and watch the guards move around freely. Maybe an ass-kiss inmate is out there cleaning up the blood, or dutifully rearranging the furniture.

I get the uneasy feeling that when the present Global Lockdown is finally lifted, we'll all come out of our cells to find that the furniture has been rearranged – and we won't be allowed to put it back.

My escape from Knoxville commenced after an argument with my new neighbours. I'd returned home from a job in Las Vegas to find a Mexican man sitting outside the apartment next door. Four pairs of muddy cowboy boots sat under him. One pair was embroidered with dyed leather stars-and-stripes. The man held his smartphone next to his mouth, speakerphone at top volume. The woman on the other end chattered in Spanish.

The next afternoon, as if to signal a new era, I returned home and heard a pop like a loud gunshot from just beyond the Sunsphere. Minutes later, a black plume rose up behind the golden globe. You could smell burning rubber in the air. I walked over to discover that a small transit van had exploded on the entrance ramp to Henley

Street. The windows were blown out and the tires had melted into the pavement. In fact, everything was completely burned except the metal frame.

I joined a group of redneck gawkers watching the firemen hose down the blackened remains. Another 'neck showed up and said, "I ain't never seen nuthin' like 'at."

"Nor have I", I responded. The way they all looked at me, you'd think I'd just said "My teeth are from Mars" in fluent Greek. The 'neck snapped a picture on his smartphone and drove off. The best I could figure, a rolling meth lab must have gone Code Red like that Level 4 facility in Wuhan, but with less long-term damage.

Back at my apartment, the top-volume speakerphone conversations continued outside my door. This resulted in me and mi amigo nuevo having top-volume arguments in broken Spanish. I tried to explain how our cultural orientations toward Big Tech are incompatible, but he didn't speak English.

Turns out that my landlords, who'd put me through a rigorous background check, were now renting a single unit to four undocumented workers. Their real estate company had apparently hired the immigrants at half price to help build more overpriced Legoland condos across the river. By my estimates, if my landlords were charging each of the four Mexicans half what they charged me, their total rent would be twice what I paid – plus cheap labour with zero accountability.

On my last night in ghost town Knoxville, I sat drinking on my back porch. The University of Tennessee's clock tower tolled each

passing hour. Suddenly the spatter of urine sang up from the walkway below. One of the Mexicans was peeing off the porch next door, holding a chattering smartphone in his hand. I laughed, cracked a beer, and meditated on gentrification and its discontents.

My northbound path to Yankee Town took me over Skyline Drive, which winds like a snake over a rolling Virginian mountain range. A biologist on the radio reported that since the lockdown, the absence of pollution has altered the pollination patterns of the trees waking up below. I parked and climbed onto a rock face. The views over the Shenandoah Valley were gorgeous.

This is the soil that our Founding Fathers tilled, where English dreams of liberty were born on the backs of indentured servants and African slaves. These days, we're all online innovators and proto-cyborgs, libertines and bible-thumpers, the 1 percent and eager immigrants and the despairing unemployed. The sun cut through the clouds to set green fields and breaking red buds aglow.

As the Global Lockdown squashes small shops, behemoths like Amazon and Wal-Mart have captured the entire sanitised market

On Palm Sunday, my first of morning of true freedom, I woke up to a Shenandoah National Park ranger banging on my van door. She told me the wilderness was overcrowded with sightseers and their nasty microbiomes, so she'd decided to close up the park. If only for a moment, the deer and beaver would be free of human disruption. I drove on.

The next morning, *Democracy Now!* announced that Bill Withers had passed away at 81. The newscaster said his classic "Lean On Me" was now trending as a message of hope during this age of illness and isolation. "Goddamnit, Amy Goodman", I growled at my dashboard, "you can't lean on

anyone and still practice social distancing. You're being a bad influence!"

In Upstate New York, the highways transitioned to pasted-over potholes. I couldn't help but notice all the exit ramp signs for local businesses. Up here, these generic white letters actually compete with professionally designed corporate logos. But for how long? As fear of the virus spreads, and the Global Lockdown squashes small shops from Maine to California, behemoths like Amazon and Wal-Mart have managed to capture the entire sanitised market. We'll see who rises from the ashes.

At my final destination, I found a lovely earthbound angel turning the soil. While I'd been drawing lines on maps, she'd been planting seeds in her garden. Each has the potential to sprout, she told me, but plenty will wither away. So it goes with the rest of us. This world produces far too many dreams for Nature to nurse them all. **CT**

Joe Allen writes about race, robots, and religion. Most days, he's based out of tour buses and far-flung hotels.

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■ JOHN PILGER

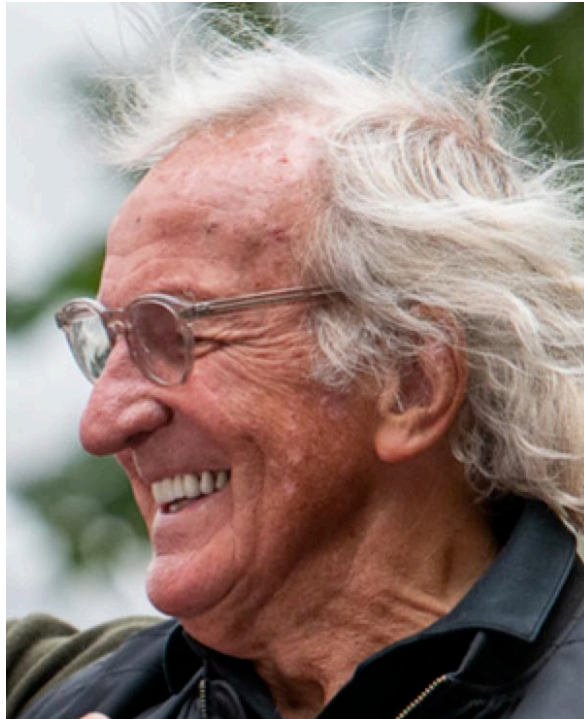
People deserve freedom from fear

Many care homes are cash cows for ruthless individuals and their precarious companies. The people of Britain deserve better

T.J. Coles interviews journalist and filmmaker John Pilger about the coronavirus crisis in the context of propaganda, imperialism, and human rights.

COLES: *People are being told to self-isolate because of coronavirus, but Julian Assange has been isolated by successive British governments for years. Can you tell us what's going on with his case and how he was doing, last time you saw him?*

PILGER: On March 25, a London court refused Julian Assange bail even though he was convicted of nothing and charged with nothing in Britain. The Trump administration wants to extradite him on a concocted indictment of "espionage" – so ludicrous in law it should have been thrown out on the first day of the extradition hearing in February. It wasn't thrown out because the magistrate, Vanessa Baraitser (she is described as a judge but is actually a magistrate)



JOHN PILGER: "How ironic and appropriate that the NHS is currently saving Boris Johnson's life."

has made it clear she is acting on behalf of the British and US governments. Her bias has shocked those of us who have sat in courtrooms all over the world.

At the bail hearing, she added cruelty to her repertoire. Julian was not allowed to attend, not even by video link; instead he sat

alone in a cell. His barrister, Edward Fitzgerald QC, described how he was at risk of contracting coronavirus. He has a chronic lung condition and is in a prison with people who are likely to be carriers of the disease. The UK Prison Governors Association has warned "there will be deaths" unless the vulnerable are released.

The Prison Officers Association agrees; the UN High Commissioner on Human Rights, the WHO, the Prison Advisory Service – all have said the virus is set to spread like wildfire through Britain's congested, unsanitary prisons. Even Boris Johnson's Justice Secretary, Robert

Buckland, says, "The virus could take over the prisons ... and put more lives at risk". At the time of writing, nine prisoners have died from COVID-19 in British prisons, including one at Belmarsh: these are the numbers the authorities admit to; there are very likely more. Some vulnerable prisoners

Photo: Ron F. Rafferty

are to be released, but not Julian: not in the land of Magna Carta. How shaming.

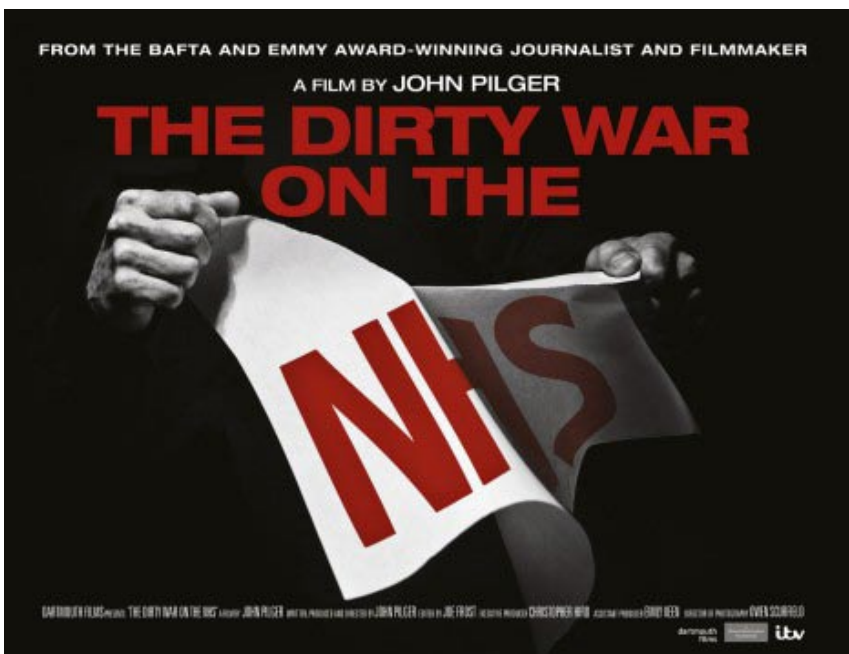
When I last saw Julian in prison, he had lost between 10 and 15 kilos; his arm was a stick. He is as sharp as ever; his black humour is intact. His resilience astonishes me. But how long can this resilience last? He is a political prisoner of the most ruthless forces, whose goal is to break him.

COLES: *In your film *The Dirty War on the NHS* you expose the British National Health Service's creeping privatisation and hollowing out, both by Tories and New Labour. What's the link between the coronavirus and the fragmentation of the NHS?*

PILGER: That the virus has been allowed to sweep through modern, developed societies is a crime against humanity. This applies especially to Britain. In 2016, the Department of Health in London conducted a full-scale pandemic drill, known as Exercise Cygnus. The National Health Service was overwhelmed. There weren't enough ventilators, emergency beds, ICU beds, protective kits and much else. In other words, it predicated accurately the crisis we face today.

The Chief Medical Officer at the time appealed to the Conservative government to heed the warning and begin to restore and prepare the NHS. This was ignored; the documents describing the conclusions of the drill were suppressed.

Why? By 2016, the Department of Health had been reduced to a revolving door of Thatcherite ideologues: privatisers, management consultants, asset strippers, many of them besotted with the "American model" of healthcare, where



IT'S WAR: John Pilger's latest film, *The Dirty War on the NHS*, exposes efforts being made to undermine and allow the Americanisation of health care in Britain.

the current head of NHS England, Simon Stevens, had spent 10 years promoting the private health industry as a senior executive of United Health, a company that exemplifies an infamous system which effectively disbars some 87 million Americans from medical treatment.

In Britain, the Americanising of health care has been accelerating year upon year since a Tory bill, the Health and Social Care Act, welcomed privateers such as Richard Branson and his Virgin Care. In 2019, more of the NHS was sold to private companies than ever before. By last November, the number of public beds had been cut to 127,000, the lowest bed capacity since the NHS was founded in 1948 and the lowest in Europe.

Mental health beds were down to a mere 18,000 – and most of mental health services were now in private hands, mostly American. This subversion of the world's first

public health service, established to give all people, regardless of income and class, "freedom from fear", is surely a crime in what is now a state of fear.

Alas, my film foretold much of this. With the NHS and its clinicians prepared and ready with a national testing programme not unlike Germany's, I believe Britain could have avoided the worst of the virus and the draconian measures that followed.

COLES: *Your 2016 film, *The Coming War on China*, documents US encirclement and demonisation of China. Can you talk about the propaganda of corona as a 'Chinese virus'?*

PILGER: Let's take one example. When the coronavirus emerged in China and Australian tourists of mainly Chinese descent flew home, they were quarantined in a remote mining camp and an offshore detention centre. When a cruise ship, the

Ruby Princess, docked in Sydney with mostly white Australians and infested with the virus, the passengers were allowed to disembark without so much as a temperature check, let alone quarantine.

As a result, 662 people linked to the ship have fallen ill and at least 11 have died. The difference here is race and racist propaganda. A virulent anti-China campaign has consumed the Australian media in a country whose biggest trading partner is China and the universities depend largely on Chinese students. At the same time, no country is as integrated with the US as Australia: its military and “national security” agencies and bases, its politics and media.

The current US propaganda war on China began in Australia when Barack Obama addressed the Australian Parliament in 2011 and announced America’s “pivot to Asia”. This launched the biggest peacetime build-up of US naval forces in the Pacific since World War Two, all of it aimed at China.

Today, more than 400 US bases surround China, from northern Australia, to the Marshall Islands, throughout south-east Asia, Japan and Korea. Such intimidation of China, a nuclear power, is seldom mentioned when China is attacked for building its defences on islands in the South China Sea.

As part of the “pivot”, a barrage of China-is-a-threat propaganda is dispensed by travelling Pentagon admirals and generals, who describe the Pacific Ocean as if it is theirs. In a WikiLeaks disclosure, Hillary Clinton, Secretary of State under Obama, demanded of a senior Chinese official that his government agree to re-name the Pacific “the American Sea”. She

A virulent anti-China campaign has consumed the Australian media in a country whose biggest trading partner is China

later claimed she was joking.

COLES: *What are your thoughts on the US and British elites treating coronavirus as a ‘war’ to be won, even though they cut back on public institutions that might have pre-empted the spread?*

PILGER: A pandemic described as a war to be won is in keeping with the language of “permanent war”. The disabling or “lock down” of populations is routinely described as a “wartime measure”. This is meant to evoke The Blitz in 1940 when the Luftwaffe attacked England. Of course, to compare the current crisis with the carnage and struggle of the Second World War is profane.

The central issue is the ideological destruction of a health service that has been a beacon of a lost world of equity and fairness. How ironic and appropriate that the NHS is currently saving Boris Johnson’s life. If there is a “war”, the weapons ought to be mass testing and tracing the pathways and pattern of the virus, treating people quickly and comprehensively, protecting front line health workers, social distancing and transparency – but most of this is missing.

As for locking down the population and the “forced isolation” of those over 70, to quote one of the

British government’s favourite journalists, Robert Peston, there is a salutary lesson to be learned. In 2012, a landmark study on the “disease of isolation” was published in Britain and the US. Researchers from University College, London, revealed that isolation was killing the elderly – not loneliness, but isolation forced on people by circumstances beyond their control. More than “pre-existing” health conditions, isolation was the silent killer.

In my own reporting in Britain in the age of “austerity”, I have seen underfunded voluntary services trying to cope with this killer disease – for example, in the northern city of Durham, devastated by Conservative policies, one volunteer attempted to care for 21,000 people and to save many of them.

This is occasionally a local media story, usually when a privatised care home is caught mistreating its elderly occupants, a common abuse. Once a humane extension of the NHS, Britain’s social care of the vulnerable was privatised by both Tory and Labour governments. Many of the care homes are cash cows for ruthless individuals and their precarious companies. The people of Britain deserve better, at the very least, their freedom from fear. **CT**

John Pilger is a celebrated journalist and filmmaker. His website is www.johnpilger.com.

*T.J. Coles is a postdoctoral researcher at Plymouth University’s Cognition Institute in the UK and the author of several books, including *Voices for Peace* (with Noam Chomsky and John Pilger) and *Privatized Planet*.*



WILD WORLD! South Korea was hit hard by coronavirus, but never locked down. In Busan, there is a thin, yet steady, flow of people.

■ LINH DINH

Stumbling into a farce

Sitting in a South Korean cafe, our writer reflects on life, death, coronavirus and the downfall of the American economic house of cards

ALL our lives, our sadism is masterfully jerked by movies and newscasts, so we're giddy at the sight of other people being blown up or swept away by giant waves, anything, really, as long as it's not us being napalmed or nuked. This coronavirus crisis is so disappointing, however, for there's not much to see. Coffins or body bags just aren't kinetic enough, and completely empty streets are, like, whatever. Are we supposed to jizz up over literally nothing?! Where

are the zombies?

Anticipating war, but elsewhere, of course, we casually say, "I'll get the popcorn", but the death count for this coronavirus jazz is simply too low. It's just a bad flu season, many insist. Months into this pandemic, it still feels unreal. This is so boring. Maybe they can hire some of the millions suddenly unemployed to jiggle the coffins? Pop a few corpses out?

I'm writing to you from South Korea, still. In Daegu, I entered Shinsegae, a pharaonic tem-

ple to ostentatious, brand-name consumption. What struck me was how hard everything looked, walls, stores, shoppers, with nothing blurry, mushy, messy or just incongruous allowed to seep from any unscripted crack or hole. There was no unzipped fly, metaphorically speaking. It was the opposite of a wet market.

But that's the whole thrust of this highfalutin modernism or postmodernism. No farts allowed! Not even the naturally aging ones. That's why they must be quaran-

tined. Even before this coronavirus crisis, entire categories of people were locked away, for their bodies were just not solid enough to be presentable. Twisted, mangled or practically decomposing, they ruin our appetite for Lolita or hunk hunting.

Suddenly, though, we ourselves are walled in, and since so many of us live alone, we're effectively in solitary confinement. Shut in, we comfort ourselves with porn, the mass pacifier nonpareil.

Recently, I wrote about America's celebration of the open road, as in the seduction, challenge or imperative of running away from home, for there's a huge wonderland of a country out there, not to mention the world. But there's a flipside, and I don't just mean that most Americans don't get to run around much, what with an exhausting job or two, hardly any vacation time and barely any cash beyond the few bills in their pockets.

For decades, America has kept more people in solitary confinement than any other country, which is only inevitable, perhaps, for it institutionalised the concept in 1829, with the opening of the Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia. Denying a prisoner all social contacts was meant to be good for him, for it forced him to contemplate. Penitent, he could regain his moral compass and become an upright and productive citizen. In reality, this cruel regime turned people psychotic.

Visiting this prison in 1842, Charles Dickens concluded, "In its intention, I am well convinced that it is kind, humane, and meant for reformation; but I am persuaded that those who devised this sys-

Movement and access to essentials, must be controlled, but you can't just drive a poor doofus batshit, or he might burn down the Hamptons

tem of Prison Discipline, and those benevolent gentlemen who carry it into execution, do not know what it is that they are doing. I believe that very few men are capable of estimating the immense amount of torture and agony which this dreadful punishment, prolonged for years, inflicts upon the sufferers; and in guessing at it myself, and in reasoning from what I have seen written upon their faces, and what to my certain knowledge they feel within, I am only the more convinced that there is a depth of terrible endurance in it which none but the sufferers themselves can fathom, and which no man has a right to inflict upon his fellow-creature. I hold this slow and daily tampering with the mysteries of the brain, to be immeasurably worse than any torture of the body: and because its ghastly signs and tokens are not so palpable to the eye and sense of touch as scars upon the flesh; because its wounds are not upon the surface, and it extorts few cries that human ears can hear; therefore I the more denounce it, as a secret punishment which slumbering humanity is not roused up to stay."

If this was already known by the mid-19th-century, then why has solitary confinement not been phased out, but actually expanded,

so that the United States keeps roughly 100,000 people in that condition at any time? Simple, because it works! Their final solution, you see, is to straitjacket not just bodies, but minds.

To rule most effectively in these decaying United States of Drugged Serfs, a citizen's movement and access to essentials, from food to information, must be strictly controlled, but you can't just drive a poor doofus batshit, or he might burn down the Hamptons.

To deflect his growing anger and frustration, you must hype up some bogeymen, which at the moment include China, the Chinese, Trump, the Democratic Party, Russians or even Mother Nature herself. Better yet, just let many of them think it's the Second Coming, so the lockdown and discontinued paychecks are just bits of discomfort before the greatest rejoicing!

Though Jesus won't show up for weeks, months, years, centuries, your serfs will at least have gotten conditioned to their increasingly strangled lives.

In 2010, the Rockefeller Foundation published *Scenarios for the Future of Technology and International Development*, and one of four hypothetical futures is triggered by a pandemic. Dubbed *Lock Step*, it's "a world of tighter top-down government control and more authoritarian leadership, with limited innovation and growing citizen pushback."

What's imagined sounds remarkably like right now, "In 2012, the pandemic that the world had been anticipating for years finally hit. Unlike 2009's H1N1, this new influenza strain – originating from wild geese – was extremely virulent and deadly. Even the most

pandemic-prepared nations were quickly overwhelmed when the virus streaked around the world, infecting nearly 20 percent of the global population and killing 8-million in just seven months, the majority of them healthy young adults. The pandemic also had a deadly effect on economies: international mobility of both people and goods screeched to a halt, debilitating industries like tourism and breaking global supply chains. Even locally, normally bustling shops and office buildings sat empty for months, devoid of both employees and customers.”

Without “official containment protocols”, “the virus spread like wildfire” through nearly all countries, but one is singled out for praise, “The Chinese government’s quick imposition and enforcement of mandatory quarantine for all citizens, as well as its instant and near-hermetic sealing off of all borders, saved millions of lives, stopping the spread of the virus far earlier than in other countries and enabling a swifter post-pandemic recovery.”

Instead of healthy young adults, it’s mostly the very old and sick who are dying, and China is not being lauded, but demonised. Still, its anti-pandemic tactics are being imitated by countries worldwide, including the US, so what’s going on here? Was this “Scenarios for the Future” a prediction or script?

Sitting at a Busan café in an underground shopping centre, I see a thin yet steady flow of people. Across the way is a greasy spoon I’ll probably eat at later. Within sight is a shoe shop called “NEW ENGLAND”. Don’t ask me why,

Cowed by fear, oozing despair and dependent on those who have betrayed, we’ll become even more catatonic in our cells

and a tarot card reader who’s busy with a dowdy marm. Life is reasonably normal here.

After China, South Korea was hit hardest by the coronavirus, yet it never locked itself down. By comprehensively testing people, regularly disinfecting places, contact tracing and having nearly everyone wear a face mask while in public, it has managed to suffer just 211 deaths in 11 weeks. On one day, April, 799 people died from it in New York State.

Why hasn’t the Korean model been emulated worldwide, instead of China’s much more restrictive measures? If you want to explore your totalitarian playbook, however, this is the perfect window.

Many Americans believe their government is using this crisis to preempt restlessness, riots or even revolution, for the American economic house of cards is overdue for collapse anyway, thanks to decades of mismanagement. With a rising China making Uncle Sam increasingly irrelevant and annoying, the US has to unleash this bioweapon to zap its nemesis and decouple from it. So what if a few shiploads of its own citizens keel over. They’re just useless eaters anyway.

In Dean Koontz’ 1981 novel, *The Eyes of Darkness*, there’s this

passage, “Wuhan-400 is a perfect weapon. It afflicts only human beings. No other living creature can carry it. And like syphilis, Wuhan-400 can’t survive outside a living human body for longer than a minute, which means it can’t permanently contaminate objects or entire places the way anthrax and other virulent microorganisms can [...] Do you see the advantage of all this?”

During the Eurovision Finale in May of 2019, a corona-wearing Madonna is surrounded by gas-masked, zombie-like dancers as she sings, *Not everyone can come into the future / Not everyone that’s here is gonna last*. At the end, they all fall backward, out of sight, so that only the 61-year-old sex symbol remains, with rapper Quavo.

Maybe they’re just cute coincidences, among many others, but don’t you sometimes get the feeling we’re just being toyed with?

With our plastic, skyscraping project imploding, perhaps we can devolve into a breed that’s simpler, muddier and gnarlier, less distracted so much saner, and more honest to those around us, since we can’t escape them. Perhaps we’ll become men again.

Or maybe not. Cowed by fear, oozing despair and dependent on those who have clearly betrayed us at each turn, we’ll become even more catatonic in our cells. After lockdown, we’ll stumble like blind fools, into this farce, again. **CT**

Linh Dinh's latest book is Postcards from the End of America, an account of our political, economic and social unravelling. He is also the author of three books of fiction and five of poetry.

■ ADAM BEHR

Bill Withers: Songs for the world to lean on

His relationship with record company finally deteriorated due to what he saw as the failure of the “blaxperts” – his label for the record company personnel – to accommodate his own style

EVEN before Bill Withers passed away from heart complications at the end of March, his 1972 hit *Lean on Me* had already become something of a marker for public solidarity in the face of the coronavirus. From schoolchildren in Scotland, to quarantined apartment residents in Dallas and online virtual choirs around the world, the song has been a prominent feature of musical responses to the crisis.

This is unsurprising. It was already a staple of charity concerts, and had been performed at the presidential inaugurations of both Barack Obama and Bill Clinton.

Its appeal, like much of Withers’ music, lies in its accessibility, universality and the simplicity with which it aligns the spiritual and the secular. Simple, however, isn’t the same as easy. What made Withers distinctive was the extensive applicability of his songs, and the deceptive ease with which he packed straightforward structures with emotional content.

This was of a piece with his background and uncharacteristic path into – and out of – music making. Having grown up in the hard-



Bill Withers arrives at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame induction ceremony

Photo: onetwothreefourfive / Flickr.com

scrabble mining town of Slab Fork, West Virginia, he arrived in Los Angeles to begin a music career – self-taught and having overcome a stutter – after a nine-year stint in the US Navy.

Uncertain and rough around the edges, he kept his job at the aircraft factory throughout the recording of his first album. He had to be told by an impressed Graham Nash: “You don’t know how good you are”, and can be seen carrying his factory lunch box on the cover of his debut album.

This is reflected in his work, which carries an air of understatement

that reinforces its effect. Having imbibed the country music as well as the gospel of his hometown, Withers straddled the traditional hinterland of soul music and the emerging “singer-songwriter” format, and has been described as “the last African-American Everyman”.

His rich baritone notwithstanding, and despite undoubted vocal prowess (the long-held note on *Lovely Day*, for instance) he largely eschewed the pushing at the edges of the range that marked much soul music of the 60s, and the vocal gymnastics that followed in the 1980s.

His songs, also, veered away from the punch and pomp of the genre. As he described it in a 2009 BBC documentary, the record companies had a different idea: “They didn’t want me to do anything quiet. They had this rhythm and blues syndrome in their mind, with the horns, and the three chicks and the gold lamé suit, and I wasn’t really into that. I had a job ... I don’t need you guys”.

The power of Withers’ music rests in the way it aligns the purely personal with wider concerns, often through straight description,



REGULAR GUY: "The fame game was kicking my ass", said Bill Withers.

filtered through well-crafted turns of phrase. *Grandma's Hands*, for instance, depicts growing up in a deprived neighbourhood, and generations of experience, through an account of his own grandmother, who helped to bring him up.

The Vietnam War is addressed through the ostensibly prosaic device of a letter dictated by a veteran who says, having lost his right arm, *I Can't Write Left Handed*.

As a result of this, he has had a disproportionately large impact from a comparatively short recording career – nine studio albums in total, and a live album recorded at the Carnegie Hall, that stands as a paragon of the form, all in an ac-

tive recording career of eight years between his first release in 1971 and his final album in 1985, with an eight-year hiatus due to tensions with his record company.

These tensions were eventually to lead to him walking away from the industry altogether. Ambivalent from the start, he erased one album over a pay dispute and his relationship with Columbia finally deteriorated due to what he saw as the failure of the "blaxperts" – his label for the record company personnel, to accommodate his own style. The "fame game", as he called it, "was kicking my ass". Comfortable in his own skin, and with his legacy, by 1985, With-

ers felt no need to either fight, or compromise.

I'm very pleased with my life how it is. This business came to me in my 30s. I was socialised as a regular guy. I never felt like I owned it or it owned me.

This is an unusual outcome for so successful a career, to be sure. But it's entirely consistent with his music. Some artists achieve longevity through constant evolution and overt experimentation. Others do so by carving a decades-long trail through the charts. Withers managed to create a host of canonical songs through his capacity to translate his own experience into both danceable and widely resonant grooves – from the friendship of *Lean on Me* through the darker hues of *Who Is He* and *What Is He To You* to the socially inflected commentary of *Harlem*.

It was less that he worked in a form that no-one else was using. Just that he did it better than most.

Of his induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2015, he said: "I'm not a virtuoso, but I was able to write songs that people could identify with. I don't think I've done bad for a guy from Slab Fork, West Virginia."

Not bad, indeed. As the subsequent years, and the hundreds of multiple and varied covers and samples of his songs have shown, people continue to lean on his music and will be doing so for a long time to come. **CT**

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■ TREVOR HOYLE

Jeremy Corbyn: the leader who never led

With his own demise, he brought the Labour Party crashing down with him, snuffing out the last glimmer of hope for the UK

WAS mad for Corbyn. Now I'm mad *at* him.

From this distance, it's hard to conjure up the heady atmosphere of excitement and promise of those 20 months between Corbyn becoming party leader and the general election of 2017.

I went to hear him speak three times during that period. He's not a great orator. He didn't have to be. The people in the crowd were so grateful that at last there was a politician they could put their fragile faith in, a man who wasn't just spouting words when he spoke about "compassion" and "caring" and "for the many not the few". Despite his self-effacing, low-key style, he was greeted with genuine enthusiasm and rapturous applause; I hesitate to use the word "adulation" but it was close.

The most memorable of these events was at the Lowry theatre in Salford Quays, now the gentrified nexus of what used to be the working port of the Manchester Ship Canal. There's a large shopping mall, with bars and restaurants, the Lowry art gallery, and a

stone's-throw across the waterway is MediaCity where the BBC northern news hub is based.

I particularly remember this occasion because it was a sweltering hot Saturday afternoon and the theatre was packed: I was on the topmost tier, standing room only. It was also memorable, and highly unusual at a political rally, to find the older generation outnumbered by young people in their teens and twenties, even families with toddlers in buggies. Didn't they have something better to do, on such a gorgeous afternoon, than cram into a stuffy crowded theatre? Apparently not. This was important to them. Anyway, with a bit of luck there'd be another sunshiny Lancashire weekend coming along next year or the year after.

I've highlighted the Lowry event to give an idea of the grassroots fervour of working folk who'd probably never been to a political gathering in their lives, and as personal eye-witness testimony to Corbyn's drawing power in those early days. Bear in mind also that Labour supporters were still

haunted by the grisly hangover of Ed Miliband's leadership and the lacklustre 2015 election campaign.

In his first general election as leader, called for 8 June 2017, Corbyn's Labour started off 25 points behind the Tories in some opinion polls. Within weeks he cut that lead down until they were almost neck-and-neck. Even so, it was the general consensus that Theresa May would win by a landslide – a view shared by many Labour MPs, who thought Corbyn was a disaster waiting to happen.

A final fond memory of the summer of 2017 is Glastonbury: Corbyn is on the bill, between Run the Jewels and Craig David. The cheering crowd breaks into an impromptu chorus of *Oh Jeremy Corbyn ...* as he appears onstage, smiling and waving. Although he'd lost the election two weeks earlier, there is an air of celebration and the mood is buoyant.

There was good reason for such optimism. Membership under Corbyn had surged to over half-a-



ELECTION DREAM: Jeremy Corbyn campaigns in Glasgow during the 2019 election, hoping for a voting surge that would give the UK a socialist government.

million, making Labour the largest political party in western Europe.

So how did we get from that hope-filled prospect of a fairer socialist future to the embarrassing pit of despair that was the 2019 election debacle? And what part did Jeremy Corbyn play – or not – in getting us there? It can be summed up in two words: Appeasement. Capitulation. (Oh – and let’s include throwing your most loyal, steadfast and long-standing comrades under the bus for good measure.)

Corbyn’s enemies did their job brilliantly: it was a masterclass, though they made a few dud starts. With the always willing participation of corporate media and state broadcaster, they auditioned Jeremy for a series of pantomime villain roles, complete with huge floppy hat, cloak and fizzing bomb. These they ran through to see

which fitted best: Russian dupe under Putin’s masterful spell; terrorists’ friend (IRA, Hamas, Libya, take your pick); undercover spy for the eastern bloc during the Cold War; all-purpose threat to national security, and dastardly dirty scoundrel and rotten traitor.

They even recruited a top-ranking (though anonymous) army officer to warn of a military coup should a socialist government led by Corbyn get the keys to No. 10; obviously this could only happen by fraud or through a catastrophic failure of the democratic system.

All of these were tried, none were successful. Then, desperate to find a smear that would stick, somebody raided the Karl Rove playbook, and came up with a beauty: “Attack your opponents at their strongest point, not their weak-

est.” Seems counter-intuitive, but it worked a dream. (Rove, in case you’ve forgotten, was the greasy eminence behind George Bush Jr’s illegal invasion of Iraq: the superhawk’s superhawk.) They chose racism. Sorry, I’ll read that again: They chose ANTISEMITISM.

Whether it was an orchestrated campaign by the Blairites or a “black ops” conspiracy fomented by a foreign power (Israel) or a conjunction of the two doesn’t matter. It was a clever and fiendishly executed pincer movement with Corbyn caught in the middle.

With a sizeable rump of hostile Labour MPs in the Commons at his back, most of them loyal to Tony Blair, on one side, and the vociferous, publicity-hungry Labour Friends of Israel (LFI) contingent on the other, the trap was set.

Senior party figures – shadow ministers such as Hilary Benn and Corbyn’s deputy, Tom Watson, brazenly defied party discipline, openly briefing the press about their disagreements with the leader and rejection of his policies, without fear of censure or recrimination. Corbyn didn’t change his style; always polite and restrained, he continued to portray the decent, softly-spoken gentleman, almost wretchedly anxious to avoid any unpleasantness or confrontation. This made him appear not mature, calm and reasonable, but weak; not a man of principle, but a pushover.

I never saw the charges of racism and antisemitism against Corbyn as being anything to worry about. Come off it – a man who had championed racial equality and universal human rights his entire political career? It was daft. The whole farrago of manufactured

smears and innuendo was so blatantly bogus it would never gain credence with the public. Corbyn was being targeted because he was a supporter of Palestinian rights. The Israeli government was behind it, using the LFI in parliament as their front. If you doubted this, you only had to watch the Al Jazeera two-part documentary *The Lobby*, filmed with secret cameras in a London restaurant. It showed Shai Masot, an official at the Israeli embassy, revealing to Labour MP Joan Ryan (chair of Labour Friends of Israel) that he had £1-million available to help undermine the leader. Ryan was unaware she was being recorded and never reported this dubious offer to the party.

When the programme aired in 2017, Masot was sent back to Israel as a scapegoat and forced to resign. Tellingly, it says something of the secretive and bureaucratically opaque nature of how the Labour Party operated that no investigation of Joan Ryan or the LFI was deemed necessary. Both parties walked away unscathed.

The antisemitism bandwagon gathered speed. Ken Livingstone, one of Corbyn's oldest colleagues, had already been suspended by the party for supposed antisemitic comments. The persecution of Livingstone smacked of a witch-hunt. Bassetlaw MP John Mann, with a convenient camera crew in tow, was shown pursuing Livingstone along a corridor, in a bullying rant that almost tipped into a physical confrontation – dramatic footage that was repeated endlessly on all the main news channels. Disturbingly, given their long association and close friendship, Corbyn did practically nothing except issue a



ATTACK MODE: As the 2019 general election campaign heated up, the *Sun* and other UK right-wing newspapers went to ever-greater extremes in re-hashing anti-Corbyn diatribes.

brief statement in defence of Ken; a sign of things to come.

Then, like a latter-day Joe McCarthy brandishing his list of reds under the beds in the State Dept, Dame Margaret Hodge claimed to have the names of “200 antisemites inside the Labour party”. When challenged to provide evidence, the charge fell to pieces because most were not Labour party members and the rest were random comments from social media forums where nutjobs gather in a circle-jerk. Didn't matter: the smear had worked, the damage was done.

It became open season on Corbyn and his increasingly isolated band of supporters. Labour MPs – many of them LFI – were queuing up to put the boot in: Luciana Berger, Ruth Smeeth, Wes Streeting, Ian Austin, Joan Ryan, with Jess Phillips and John Mann constant thorns in his side. These sniping attacks occurred with the measured beat of a metronome; such was their timing that you might suspect they were part of a metic-

ulously planned operation. Perish the thought.

In 2017, MP for Derby North, Chris Williamson, spoke at a meeting in defence of Corbyn's handling of alleged antisemitism, labelling the smears “bullshit” and “a really dirty, lowdown trick.” He went on, “Many people in the Jewish community are appalled by what they see as the weaponisation of antisemitism for political ends”. Every word he said was true. Even so, it was a gift to the Zionists. Williamson was accused by the Board of Deputies of British Jews (BoD) of not showing “solidarity” to those suffering racism in his party.

Solidarity to whom exactly – the 0.08 per cent? Racism within Labour was, and always has been, historically insignificant, far lower than the Conservative Party, and indeed the population at large. (The BoD, by the way, is quite openly a supporter of the Tories.)

The upshot, after months of internal party wrangling, was that Chris Williamson was suspended. Corbyn's enemies sniffed the air,

the witch-hunt was in full cry.

The antisemitism label was hung around the neck of anybody who was deemed close to Corbyn, the aim being to pick off his allies until he was left exposed and unprotected. People who'd been loyal party members for years, including Jackie Walker, Tony Greenstein, Peter Willsman, Marc Wadsworth, and dozens more – were suspension or expelled, based on “evidence” that was flimsy, fabricated or plain non-existent.

The corporate media, hostile to Corbyn from the start, lapped up this internecine war with relish, the supposedly impartial BBC in the thick of it. Almost every report and interview the state broadcaster ran concerning Labour was slanted to lever in the latest trivial titbit about antisemitism, no matter what the story.

Jonathan Cook, a British journalist based in Israel, summed it up: “The media and Israel lobby may have been largely successful in recruiting British Jews and many others to their self-serving campaign to stop Corbyn becoming prime minister...”

The Karl Rove playbook (remember him?) was bang on the money: Attack your enemy at his strongest, not his weakest point.

Through 2018 and 2019, when these attacks were taking place and a general election was on the horizon, the despairing wail echoed on blogs sympathetic to Labour and all over left-leaning message boards, “When is Jeremy going to stand up and defend his friends and supporters against these vile smears of antisemitism?”

Most mystifying of all was why didn't the party come out, all guns blazing, and rebut the slurs and

The most mystifying question of all was why didn't the party come out, all guns blazing, and rebut the slurs and fake news?

fake news? And what in heaven's name was Seumas Milne, Corbyn's communications director, doing? What guidance and sage advice was he giving his boss? None, it seemed. Just an echoing void.

Corbyn and his shadow chancellor John McDonnell were on the back foot from day one. Instead of confronting their accusers and demanding documented instances of antisemitism, they meekly accepted blanket accusations of wrong-doing. Time and again they trotted out the same boilerplate phrases: “the Labour party doesn't tolerate racism in any form ... we will not allow the scourge of antisemitism within our ranks ...” Statements so hollowed-out by repetition they became a meaningless dirge of denial everyone grew weary of.

I'm still lost for a reason as to why Corbyn would place his trust in traitors and abandon those who supported and believed in him. I detest Boris Johnson and all he stands for, but he didn't hesitate when he became leader and kicked out those who stood against him: doing what Corbyn should and could have done.

Okay, you can put that sodden handkerchief away and release a shuddering sigh of relief. Which is what Jeremy Corbyn must be

doing right now. He's escaped the coronavirus shitstorm Johnson has inherited, instead observing from the sidelines as the PM takes the impact. Maybe there's even the tiniest twinge of schadenfreude ...? But perhaps not, given JC's purity of soul and desire to treat everyone as you would wish to be treated.

And the reason I was a big fan of Jeremy Corbyn's and now I'm mad at him? Because for the first and only time in a generation there was the faintest hope that we might elect a government that would address the obscene inequality of wealth and privilege in Britain and change its culture from that of a corrupt and rapacious warmongering regime, supported and cheered on by an obsequious media, to one which genuinely cares about the welfare of all its people, is concerned for future generations and the stewardship of the planet.

Corbyn had that chance, however faint it was, and managed to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory. And he brought the Labour party crashing down with him, snuffing out the last glimmer of hope for this country. That's what I find very hard to forgive.

AFTERWORD: The choice of Sir Keir Starmer as Labour's new leader will delight the Blair bunch and the BoD. Back to the future! **CT**

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■ DANIEL LAZARE

Imperialism in denial

The captain of the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier the USS Theodore Roosevelt warned of a coronavirus threat to his ship. His reward: he was fired on the spot

YOU can't handle the truth," Jack Nicholson screams at a crucial moment in a silly 1992 film called, *A Few Good Men*. Nicholson was addressing Tom Cruise for reasons no one can bother to remember. But he may as well have been addressing Donald Trump, who is equally helpless when it comes to the truth about Covid-19.

Brett Crozier, captain of the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier the USS Theodore Roosevelt, is the latest example why. On April 6, he sent a four-page memo to higher-ups warning that the coronavirus was racing through the ranks and that the only solution was to remove all but a skeleton crew and subject them to a two-week quarantine. "Keeping over 4,000 young men and women aboard the TR is an unnecessary risk and breaks faith with those Sailors entrusted to our care", he wrote.

This was the simple truth, and yet Crozier's reward was to be fired on the spot. This makes him the American version of Li Wenliang, the 33-year-old ophthalmologist who, in December, first noticed that a new virus was making the

rounds in the Chinese city of Wuhan. Li, who would later die of the disease, got in trouble for telling officials what they didn't want to hear, and now Crozier has gotten the axe for doing the same.

Crozier's message was not only that the Navy faces a huge problem in terms of disease control. Implicitly, it was that the entire US war machine is effectively inoperable. The military could still "fight sick" in an emergency. But since no emergency exists, its only realistic option is to shut down until the pandemic is under control. Otherwise, the military infection rate will continue to climb, spelling disaster for every civilian population the military comes in contact with.

But, faced with the loss of its high-tech toys, the brass responded in typical childish fashion by shutting its eyes, stopping up its ears, and screaming, "I can't hear you!" Crozier is out on his derriere as a result while the Trump administration is now beating the war drums just to show it can.

The insanity was on full display at an April 1 press conference an-

nouncing the White House's latest military offensive against Venezuela. Trump was his usual Mussolini-esque self while Secretary of Defense Mark Esper, a former Raytheon lobbyist, was the perfect image of a self-serving careerist whose only concern is winning his next promotion. "At a time when the nation and the Department of Defense are focused on protecting the American people from the spread of the coronavirus", he began, "we also remain vigilant to the many other threats our country faces. Today, at the president's direction, the Department of Defense, in close cooperation with our interagency partners, began enhanced counter-narcotics operations in the eastern Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea. This initiative is part of the administration's whole-of-government approach to combating the flow of illicit drugs into the United States and protecting the American people from their scourge...."

"Included in this force package", he continued, "are Navy destroyers and littoral combat ships, Coast Guard cutters, P-8 patrol aircraft, and elements of an army



HIT BY AN INCOMING VIRUS: The USS Theodore Roosevelt

security force assistance brigade. These additional forces will nearly double our capacity to conduct counter-narcotics operations in the region.”

All of which was not only nonsense, but dangerous nonsense at that. Sure, some illicit drugs enter the United State via the eastern Pacific and Caribbean. But they mainly travel by land and by post, with China far and away the leading source for artificial opiates that have wreaked such havoc in recent years. Yet not only is Fentanyl all but impossible to stop since it's 100 times stronger than heroin gram for gram, but it can be easily synthesised from precursor chemicals, according to the Rand Corporation, that are themselves perfectly legal.

A destroyer is as useless against such a threat as a medieval crossbow. Moreover, Venezuela isn't a major player even when it comes to cocaine since production mainly takes place in Peru, Columbia, and Bolivia, all solidly in the pro-US camp, while transport is chiefly

overland via Central America and Mexico. As for good old-fashioned heroin, the world's leading producer happens to be Afghanistan, a US protectorate since 2001.

If the US wants to blockade someone, it should probably start with itself since it's the chief source of the problem.

So what's the real explanation for the latest round of sabre rattling? Is it because Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro may have begun dabbling in the drug trade like so many others? Or is it because he sits on top of some of the largest oil reserves on earth?

The latter is far more likely, obviously. But with oil already in the mid-\$20 range and sure to plunge even lower, even that doesn't quite make sense.

Rather, the only way to understand it is as a form of imperial madness in which chest-thumping becomes an end in itself. The Trump administration wants to intimidate Venezuela for the same reason that

it wants to intimidate Iran or blow up Iraq by launching a military offensive against Shi'ite militias with closes ties to the Baghdad government. It wants to merely in order to show it can. It wants to prove that, virus or no virus, it's still the toughest guy on block, so everyone else better step said.

But the act rings hollow in an age of Covid-19. A destroyer is more a threat to itself if half its crew is down with corona, and that goes double for an army security force assistance brigade, whatever the hell that is. The Trump administration's efforts to control the virus have already been a colossal failure domestically while now it's seemingly doing everything in its power to make the problem worse everywhere else as well. Sending troops into battle, ordering ships to deploy against nonexistent threats, stepping up economic sanctions that cripple efforts to defend against the disease – all of this is merely insures that the disease will intensify and thousands more will die.

An empire that is incapable of responding rationally to an existential threat is not one that's long for this world. A lot of banks and corporations will go belly up before this crisis is through. But so will political structures, beginning with the rickety structure known as the United States.

The gods first make mad whom they wish to destroy. **CT**

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■ C.J. HOPKINS

Brave New Normal

So the War on Populism is finally over. Go ahead, take a wild guess who won

I’LL give you a hint. It wasn’t the Russians, or the white supremacists, or the gilets jaunes, or Jeremy Corbyn’s Nazi Death Cult, or the misogynist Bernie Bros, or the MAGA-hat terrorists, or any of the other real or fictional “populist” forces that global capitalism has been waging war on for the last four years.

What? You weren’t aware that global capitalism was fighting a War on Populism? That’s OK, most other folks weren’t. It wasn’t officially announced or anything. It was launched in the summer of 2016, just as the War on Terror was ending, as a sequel to the War on Terror, or a variation on the War on Terror, or continuation of the War on Terror, or ... whatever, it doesn’t really matter anymore, because now we’re fighting the War on Death, or the War on Minor Cold-like Symptoms, depending on your age and general state of health.

That’s right, folks, once again, global capitalism (aka “the world”) is under attack by an evil enemy. GloboCap just can’t catch a break. From the moment it defeated communism and became a global ideological hegemon, it has been one

evil enemy after another.

No sooner had it celebrated winning the Cold War and started ruthlessly restructuring and privatising everything than it was savagely attacked by “Islamic terrorists”, and so was forced to invade Iraq and Afghanistan, and kill and torture a lot of people, and destabilise the entire Middle East, and illegally surveil everybody, and ... well, you remember the War on Terror.

Then, just as the War on Terror seemed to be finally winding down, and the only terrorists left were the “self-radicalised” terrorists (many of whom weren’t even actual terrorists), and it looked like GloboCap was finally going to be able to finish privatising and debt-enslaving everything and everyone in peace, wouldn’t you know it, we were attacked again, this time by the global conspiracy of Russian-backed, neo-fascist “populists” that caused the Brexit and elected Trump, and tried to elect Corbyn and Bernie Sanders, and loosed the gilets jaunes on France, and who’ve been threatening the “fabric of Western de-

mocracy” with dissension-sowing Facebook memes.

Unfortunately, unlike the War on Terror, the War on Populism didn’t go that well. After four years of fighting, GloboCap (aka the neoliberal Resistance) had ... OK, they had snuffed both Corbyn and Sanders, but they had totally blown the Russiagate psyop, and so were looking at four more years of Trump, and Lord knows how many of Johnson in the UK (which had actually left the European Union), and the gilets jaunes weren’t going away, and, basically, “populism” was still on the rise (if not in reality, in hearts and minds).

And so, just as the War on Populism had replaced (or redefined) the War on Terror, the War on Death has been officially launched to replace (or redefine) the War on Populism ... which means (you guessed it), once again, it’s time to roll out another “brave new normal.”

The character of this brave new normal is, at this point, unmistakably clear ... so clear that most people cannot see it, because their minds are not prepared to accept it, so they do not recognise it, though they are looking right at it.



Art: Aleksey Martynov / 123rf.com

Like Dolores in the *Westworld* series, “it doesn’t look like anything” to them. To the rest of us, it looks rather totalitarian.

In the span of approximately 100 days, the entire global capitalist empire has been transformed into a de facto police state. Constitutional rights have been suspended. Most of us are under house arrest. Police are rounding up anyone not cooperating with the new emergency measures. They are pulling

riders off of public transportation, arresting people whose papers aren’t in order, harassing, beating, intimidating, and arbitrarily detaining anyone they decide is “a danger to public health.”

Authorities are openly threatening to forcibly pull people out of their homes and quarantine them. Cops are hunting down runaway grandmothers. They’re raiding services in churches and synagogues. Citizens are being forced to wear ankle monitors. Families out for a walk are being menaced

by robots and Orwellian drones. Counterterrorism troops have been deployed to deal with non-compliant “rule breakers”. Anyone the US authorities deem to have “intentionally spread the coronavirus” can be arrested and charged as a coronavirus terrorist. Artificial intelligence firms are working with governments to implement systems to log and track our contacts and movements. As a recent *Foreign Policy* article put it:

“The counterterrorism analogy is useful because it shows the di-

rection of travel of pandemic policy. Imagine a new coronavirus patient is detected. Once he or she tests positive, the government could use cell-phone data to trace everyone he or she has been in close proximity to, perhaps focusing on those people who were in contact for more than a few minutes. Your cell-phone signal could then be used to enforce quarantine decisions. Leave your apartment and the authorities will know. Leave your phone behind and they will call you. Run the battery down and a police car will be at your door in a manner of minutes ...”

I could go on, but I think you get the picture, or ... well, you either do or you don't.

And that is the really terrifying part of the War on Death and our “brave new normal” ... not so much the totalitarianism. (Anyone who's been paying attention is not terribly shocked by GloboCap's decision to implement a global police state. The simulation of democracy is all fine and good, until the unwashed masses start to get unruly, and require a reminder of who's in charge, which is what we are being treated to currently.)

No, the terrifying part is how millions of people immediately switched off their critical faculties, got into line, and started goose-stepping, and parroting hysterical propaganda, and reporting their neighbours to the police for going outside for a walk or jog (and then sadistically shrieked abuse down at them like the Goodbye Jews Girl in Schindler's List as they were wrestled to the ground and arrested).

They are out there, right now,

The simulation of democracy is fine, until the unwashed masses start to get unruly, and require a reminder of who's in charge

on the Internet, millions of these well-meaning fascists, patrolling for signs of the slightest deviation from the official coronavirus narrative, bombarding everyone with meaningless graphs, decontextualised death statistics, X-rays of fibrotic lungs, photos of refrigerated morgue trucks, mass graves, and other sensationalistic horrors intended to short-circuit critical thinking and shut down any and all forms of dissent.

Although undeniably cowardly and sickening, this kind of behaviour is also not shocking. Sadly, when you terrorise people enough, the majority will regress to their animal instincts. It isn't a question of ethics, or politics. It is purely a question of self-preservation. When you cancel the normal structure of society and place everyone in a “state of emergency” ... well, it's like what happens in a troop of chimpanzees when the alpha chimp dies or is killed by a challenger. The other chimps run around hooting and grimacing until it's clear who the new dominant primate is, then they bend over to demonstrate their submission.

Totalitarians understand this. Sadists and cult leaders understand this. When the people you are dominating get unruly, and start questioning your right to

dominate them, you need to fabricate a “state of emergency” and make everyone feel very afraid, so that they turn (or return) to you for protection from whatever evil enemy is out there, threatening the cult, or the Fatherland, or whatever. Then, once they've returned to the fold, and stopped questioning your right to dominate them, you can introduce a new set of rules that everybody needs to follow to prevent this kind of thing happening again.

This is obviously what is happening at the moment. But what you probably want to know is ... why is it happening? And why is it happening at this precise moment?

Lucky for you, I have a theory. No, it doesn't involve Bill Gates, Jared Kushner, the WHO, and a global conspiracy of Chinese Jews defiling our precious bodily fluids with their satanic-alien 5G technology. It's a little less exciting and more abstract than that (although some of those characters are probably part of it ... all right, probably not the Chinese Jews, or the Satanic-Alien Illuminati).

See, I try to focus more on systems (like global capitalism) than on individuals. And on models of power rather than the specific people in power at any given time. Looking at things that way, this global lockdown and our brave new normal makes perfect sense. Stay with me now ... this gets kind of heady.

What we are experiencing is a further evolution of the post-ideological model of power that came into being when global capitalism became a global-hegemonic sys-

tem after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In such a global-hegemonic system, ideology is rendered obsolete. The system has no external enemies, and thus no ideological adversaries. The enemies of a global-hegemonic system by definition can only be internal. Every war becomes an insurgency, a rebellion breaking out within the system, as there is no longer any outside.

As there is no longer any outside (and thus no external ideological adversary), the global-hegemonic system dispenses with ideology entirely. Its ideology becomes “normality”. Any challenge to “normality” is henceforth regarded as an “abnormality”, a “deviation from the norm,” and automatically delegitimised. The system does not need to argue with deviations and abnormalities (as it was forced to argue with opposing ideologies in order to legitimise itself). It simply needs to eliminate them. Opposing ideologies become pathologies ... existential threats to the health of the system.

In other words, the global-hegemonic system (ie, global capitalism) becomes a body, the only body, unopposed from without, but attacked from within by a variety of opponents ... terrorists, extremists, populists, whoever. These internal opponents attack the global-hegemonic body much like a disease, like a cancer, an infection, or a virus. And the global-hegemonic body reacts like any other body would.

Is this model starting to sound familiar?

I hope so, because that is what is happening right now. The system

GloboCap will just have to lock us down again, and keep locking us down, over and over, indefinitely, until we get our minds right!

(ie, global capitalism, not a bunch of guys in a room hatching a scheme to sell vaccines) is reacting to the last four years of populist revolt in a predictable manner. GloboCap is attacking the virus that has been attacking its hegemonic body. No, not the coronavirus. A much more destructive and multiplicitous virus ... resistance to the hegemony of global capitalism and its post-ideological ideology.

If it isn't already clear to you yet that this coronavirus in no way warrants the totalitarian emergency measures that have been imposed on most of humanity, it will become clear in the months ahead. Despite the best efforts of the “health authorities” to count virtually anything as “a Covid-19 death”, the numbers are going to tell the tale. The “experts” are already memory-holing, or recalibrating, or contextualising, their initial apocalyptic projections. The media are toning down the hysteria. The show isn't totally over yet, but you can feel it gradually coming to an end.

In any event, whenever it happens, days, weeks, or months from now, GloboCap will dial down the totalitarianism, and let us out, so we can go back to work in whatever remains of the global economy ... and won't we all be so very

grateful! There will be massive celebrations in the streets, Italian tenors singing on balconies, chorus lines of dancing nurses! The gilets jaunes will call it quits, the Putin-Nazis will stop with the memes, and Americans will elect Joe Biden president!

Or, all right, maybe not that last part, but, the point is, it will be a brave new normal! People will forget all that populism nonsense, and just be grateful for whatever McJobs they can get to be able to pay the interest on their debts, because, hey ... global capitalism isn't so bad compared to living under house arrest!

And, if not, no problem for GloboCap. They'll just have to lock us down again, and keep locking us down, over and over, indefinitely, until we get our minds right. I mean, it's not like we're going to do anything about it ... right? Didn't we just demonstrate that? Sure, we'll bitch and moan again, but then they'll whip out those pictures of mass graves and death trucks, and the graphs, and all those scary projections, and the Blockwart-hotlines will start ringing again, and ... **CT**

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November 2001: Arlington, Vermont.



March 19, 2008: Anti-War demonstration, Washington, DC

■ KEVIN BUBRISKI

Taking it to the streets

Photographer captures a decade of protest in Main Street America



OUR STREETS, OUR VOICES

American Protests, 2011-2011

Kevin Bubriski

powerHouse Books

US \$50 / Can \$66

IT'S strange the difference a week makes. When the e-mail-man dumped a copy of Kevin Bubriski's *Our Streets, Our Voices* into my inbox, my first thought was that it was a better-than-usual collection of photographs of street demonstrations – an eye-catching portrait of localised American history, but of no special significance.

A week later, the world entered Lockdown and we were all under house arrest. Suddenly, *Our Streets* moved into the category of *nostalgia*, a fierce reminder of a

world that used to be, one in which we were allowed to stand up (even if we always seemed to end up on the losing side) for our rights to protest the harsh and unjust. Who would have thought that it would take so few days for society to shed all those rights we have taken for granted for generations?

The street has always been the ultimate public venue for political and cultural expression”, says the anonymous writer of a media release from powerHouse, the book's



March 24, 2003: Anti-War march, New York City.

The crowds made it clear that America was at a difficult and defining moment after a contentious election



Jan 20, 2001: Inauguration of George W. Bush, Washington, DC.



Jan 20, 2009: Inauguration of Barack Obama, Washington, DC

publisher; “and Bubriski’s images cover a decade of American protest that began on January 20, 2001 with the inauguration of George W. Bush and ended with Occupy Wall Street in October of 2011.

“The crowds in the street at the 2001 inauguration made it clear that America was at a difficult and defining moment after a contentious election. Following the inauguration of 2001 and the tragedy of 9/11, the American streets – as they have been since the country’s founding – became the setting for numerous memorials and vigils, parades and protests.

“Bubriski’s photographs chronicle events in New York, Washington, DC, and Vermont at large and small gatherings, most of which were unnoticed by the mainstream media. These portraits show a diversity of people: veterans, families of men and women on active duty, families of the victims of the 9/11 tragedy, parents of US servicemen and women killed in the Iraq War, security personnel, police, Muslim Americans, anti-war activists, disenfranchised minorities, and anarchist youth.”



April 18, 2008: Iraq Veterans Against the War, Washington, DC.



December 9, 2009: Vermont National Guard Deployment, Burlington, Vermont.

I wonder what images we'll see in future years', after the United States and the world awakes from hibernation?



October 10, 2011: Occupy Wall Street, New York City.



September 24, 2005: Anti-War march, Washington, DC.

Looking at the pictures closely, I wonder what images we'll see in future years, after the coronavirus threat is beaten and the United States and the rest of the world awakes from hibernation.

Will life return to pre-coronavirus normal, with dissent tolerated, if not actually encouraged, by the authorities? Or will we become imprisoned in a nightmarish lockdown, our liberties curtailed by desperate, but convenient, edicts passed when we were happy to be corralled, surveilled and incarcerated, "for our own safety."

Whatever the future may bring, however, you can bet your boots that Robert John Burck, aka the Naked Cowboy (*see next page*), will be flaunting his flesh in New York's Times Square. He's in a 2004 shot in Bubriski's book, I spotted him in an almost deserted New York City on TV a few nights ago, and I'm sure he'll be there standing defiantly behind his guitar at the end of the world. – *Tony Sutton*



March 19, 2008: Anti-war march, Washington, DC.



August 29, 2004: Republican National Convention, New York City 2004.

■ GEORGE MONBIOT

Let's nuke the virus!

Governments attend to imaginary threats, while neglecting real ones

WE are defending ourselves against the wrong threats. For decades, UK governments have been fighting not just the last war but a redundant notion of war, spending hundreds of billions against imaginary hazards. At the same time, as we have become horribly aware over the past few weeks, they have neglected real and urgent dangers.

A month ago, just as the coronavirus began racing across the UK, the government boasted that had raised military spending by £2-billion to £41.5-billion. Our military force, it claimed, is “the tip of the spear for a resurgent Global Britain.”

Most of this money will be spent on equipment and infrastructure. The UK is acquiring 138 new F-35 aircraft. According to the manufacturers, Lockheed, this “supersonic, multi-role” fighter “represents a quantum leap in air dominance capability”. It “has the range and flexibility to win, again and again.” But win against what? Can it bomb the coronavirus? Can its “advanced stealth, integrated avionics, sensor fusion and superi-

or logistics support” defeat climate breakdown? It is of as much use in solving the world’s complex and pressing problems as a jackhammer is to a watchmender.

The most likely role for such weaponry is to wage elective wars in distant nations. Even in these circumstances, the F-35 could be outdated before it is deployed. The decisive weapons in such conflicts are likely now to be drones, not jets. It might have “multiple capabilities”, but all this means is that the UK will bring a Swiss army knife to a gunfight.

Last month, Ben Wallace, the British defence secretary, gave a speech in which he characterised international law as “a straitjacket of permissions and authorities that make it hard for us to respond”. And he claimed, like any 19th-century colonial official, that the UK’s intervention abroad is “a force for good”. We have, apparently, “a moral imperative” to address conflict and instability overseas.

In reality, for the past 17 years the UK’s intervention abroad has been one of the major causes of

conflict and instability. This nation’s involvement in the Iraq war has helped to cause collapse, continued fighting and the rise of terrorist groups. Our current contribution is to supply the hardware and training Saudi Arabia currently deploys in Yemen. Yemen is now suffering a humanitarian crisis: starvation caused by the Saudi blockade, and epidemics of cholera, diphtheria and other infectious diseases. Saudi Arabia has used British weaponry to bomb schools, markets and hospitals. Yemen’s health system is collapsing, just as Covid-19 is about to strike.

Last year, as a result of these atrocities, the UK’s arms exports to Saudi Arabia were ruled unlawful in the court of appeal. The court instructed the UK government to stop issuing new licences and to review its past decisions. There has been no review. When it was caught issuing new licences for weapon sales to the kingdom, the UK government claimed it had done so “inadvertently”. British bombs and rockets, fired by British jets, many of them deliberately targeting civilians, continue to rain misery on the world’s most



READY, FOR WHAT? RAF Lockheed Martin F-35B Lightning lands on the aircraft carrier HMS Queen Elizabeth on October 17, 2019.

vulnerable people. But this trade in death has been worth £5-billion to UK companies since the war in Yemen began, so it continues to be supported by the government, in defiance of both UK and international law. This is not defence. This is mass murder and the perpetuation of conflict.

The great majority of the UK’s “defence” capabilities have no defensive purpose. There is no strategic reason to spend 2 percent of our GDP on military force. Other countries spend far less, and are just as secure. Nato’s tepid conflicts with Russia, stoked by each other’s paranoia, would be better resolved by diplomatic means. But people such as Wallace talk of only “adversaries” rather than of potential – and necessary – allies in confronting common threats.

That £41.5-billion spent on the military is more than twice as much money as the UK spends on preventing climate and ecological

breakdown – which are not just potential threats but current emergencies. It is hundreds of times more, as we are now discovering, than the government has spent on preparing for pandemics. We now know that both the UK and US governments ignored warnings about the potential scale and impacts of pandemics, and failed to invest in genuine national defence: extra capacity in the health system, beds, training, ventilators and protective equipment. Even when the disease began to spread, they downplayed its likely effects. They attend, lavishly and zealously, to imaginary threats, while neglecting real ones.

We need a complete reassessment of what security means. China’s dispatch of specialists to the UK to help treat the coronavirus makes a nonsense of Wallace’s attempts to portray that country as our “adversary”. Yes, like Russia’s and Iran’s, its government competes with western governments for spheres of influence and

resources. But in confronting genuine threats to humanity and the rest of life on Earth, there should be more that brings us together that sets us apart.

If ever there was a time for brokering peace, this is it. If ever there was a time for nations such as the UK and the US to meet their disarmament commitments under the nuclear non-proliferation treaty and work with Russia and China to put their wasted billions to better use, this is it. If ever there was a time to reassess the genuine threats to our security and separate them from the self-interested aims of the weapons industry, this is it.

Yet our governments’ primary effort is to enhance their power at the expense of other countries. In failing to address our real and common threats, we are our own adversaries. **CT**

George Monbiot is a columnist for the Guardian, where this article first appeared. His website is www.monbiot.com

■ ANDREW FISCHER

Brushes with celebrity

The famous don't always do or say what you'd expect. Nor do taxi drivers . . .

IT'S my strong conviction that the celebrities of days gone by were far more deserving of their status than those of today. Sure, they had their failings and foibles, but Marilyn Monroe, Clark Gable et al had bearing, stature and mystique. They kept their political views and indiscretions to themselves, or at least tried to do so. Above all, they had class – something completely lacking from most of today's vulgar celebrities. (I'm not singling them out, but Kim Kardashian, Justin Bieber and Miley Cyrus come instantly to mind.) The old celebs always seemed well-dressed, ethereal, almost demigods, yet somehow they still remained just "people". If you ran into one at say, a sporting event, he/she would likely interact with you as anyone else would – as long as you didn't shout his/her [last time for that] name out loud and point.

As fate would have it (and it did) I've met well over a dozen celebs over the years, most of them when I drove a taxicab in Los Angeles in 1980. Some were just fleeting meetings, like the time I rounded a corner on Rodeo Drive and practi-

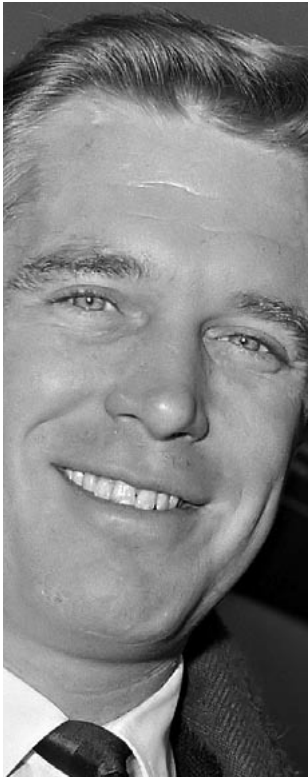
cally bumped into an overdressed, middle-aged Beverly Hills beauty whose gaze briefly met mine. By the time I realised it was Zsa Zsa Gabor she had walked far past me; too late to say anything or turn and go after her; plus, I looked my sloppiest that day. (I still feel I could have been her seventh husband, however.) Other encounters had much more depth and interesting verbal exchanges. So, I hereby invite you, dear reader, to enter Mr. Peabody's Way-back Machine and experience a quartet of one man's "Brushes With Celebrity." [sound of trumpets]

One sunny day in 1980 I picked up a tall, nice-looking young woman. Unfortunately, I was driving a taxi and she was just a fare. A Marina del Rey address was provided and I gleefully turned on the meter, since this would be a lucrative ride. After a minute or two I started a conversation with the woman, who said she was a New York journalist sent to interview a director about his new movie. "Really?" I asked. "Which director?"

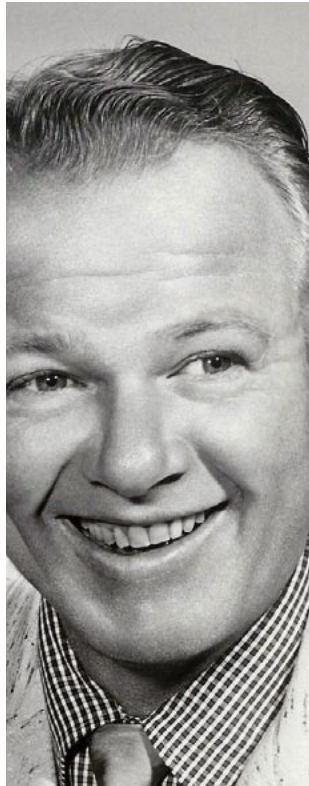
"Sam Fuller", she replied.

Now, I knew enough about the movie industry to recall that Fuller had directed movies in the '60s that were so bad he was essentially drummed out of Hollywood. I had seen two of them at a Santa Monica "classics" theatre a few months earlier. In *The Naked Kiss*, an actress playing a hooker accidentally closed her suitcase on the bottom of an actor's coat. As the scene continued, the actor kept shaking the garment to get her attention, but she didn't take the hint. Everyone in the theatre laughed except one young woman near me. "Why is everyone laughing?" she asked aloud. "Because it's stupid", remarked the kid behind her. When the actors were finished with their silly double entendre-laden dialogue, the scene cut to them walking away without ever addressing the stuck coat. Sorry, but this is not competent filmmaking.

Fuller's new movie, according to the journo, was a World War II flick entitled *The Big Red One*, starring Lee Marvin. It sounded interesting, since I liked war movies and Marvin. (Who could forget him as "Slob" in *Shack Out On 101*?) Anyway, a bit of strained



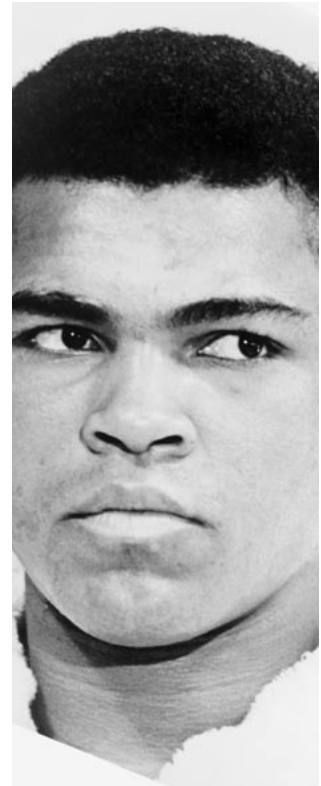
George Peppard



Alan Hale Jr



Lee Marvin



Muhammad Ali

conversation and thirteen dollars-and-change later we arrived at the designated address, my fare hopped out and walked into what looked like the back door of a modest row house. I was sure the place must have cost plenty, though, since Marina del Rey wasn't exactly a neighbourhood for the average person. After a fingers-tapping wait, I detected the opening of a door. Unfortunately, it wasn't my fare, but on the bright side it was... wait for it... actor George Peppard.

Peppard was a major star, appearing in dozens of films by 1980, and I assumed (incorrectly, as it turned out) that he was also in *Big Red One*. As he approached I leapt out of my taxi to greet him. I noticed that his face was as white as a ghost's; he must've had some heavy makeup for the screen. "Hi, Mr. Peppard. Can I shake your hand

and get that out of the way?" (Later, I learned that the best thing to say to celebs is "I like your work", and then leave them alone.) He seemed friendly and amused; we shook and he asked about the amount of money owed for the journalist's ride. "Thirteen dollars and forty-five cents," I cheerfully replied. He handed me a twenty, and I was about to learn a little lesson.

I counted out fifty-five cents, a dollar bill, and a fiver – \$6.55. He returned the coins, then pondered the two bills, one in each hand. He looked left, then right, then left again. I realised what he was thinking: should he tip me with the one or the five? In a flash I knew the five would be too much and the one would be too little. I began thinking of a non-embarrassing way to regain the five-spot and convert it into ones, but it was too

late. He handed me the one dollar bill, and after a few parting pleasantries he disappeared back into his bungalow. Lesson learned.... In retrospect, I don't think Peppard was a cheapskate. Instead, I feel he thought that I intentionally gave him the one and five, hoping he'd give me the latter note since I knew he was a celebrity, and presumably a wealthy one. *Mea culpa*.

Not long after that encounter, I won a bid to pick up a passenger at Hollywood General Hospital. The cab company used a "bid system", which meant that a dispatcher would broadcast an intersection of two streets. Every driver on the road could bid on that fare by shouting his cab number into a built-in two-way radio. The first guy the dispatcher heard got the

job. Unless a driver had a long ride, therefore, he'd drive with one hand and hold his thumb on the mike's talk-button with the other. I worked the same way, so I could have one fare in the taxi and another lined up. Easy peasy... but there was a catch: if you were late picking up the new fare and he phoned the company, there was a penalty. I think it was a day off the road.

This time I arrived timely. Standing out near the curb was a middle-aged couple; neither's appearance said "hospital patient" to me. As I got closer, I realised that the man was Alan Hale (Jr), best known as "Skipper" on the TV show *Gilligan's Island*. As I pulled up I wondered what I would say to him. (I almost always started conversations with my fares, not because I was gabby or even extroverted, but because it felt a bit odd to sit silently in a car with a stranger at my back.) I also wondered how I would be able to compare my height with Hale's, which is something I'd often thought about – just how tall were those actors on television? (By the way, Peppard, was five-feet-ten or eleven inches, I'd say.) Well, too late to get out of the cab and open the door now. Hale had already opened the passenger-side back door and ushered his wife in. Then he climbed aboard taxicab 624 instead of the non-steamship SS Minnow.

I was given an address and started off. My guests quickly engaged in a quiet conversation between themselves. I kept my big mouth shut, since they had just come from a hospital, after all, and the mood in the taxi certainly wasn't jovial. Also, I couldn't think of a thing except our impending

I kept my big mouth shut, since they had just come from a hospital, after all, and the mood in the taxi certainly wasn't jovial

arrival, and of course I hadn't even let on that I recognised Hale. What to do?... I figured I'd park, run around and open the door for my passengers when we reached our destination, then collect the fare and subtly compare my height (six-feet-three) with his.

When we arrived at the address it turned out to be the Hales' home, a modest house in West Hollywood. There were three white Cadillacs parked in the driveway and/or the street out front – one each from the '50s, '60s and '70s. As I was about to open my door Mr Hale told Mrs Hale he wanted to get some things at a hardware store, so I got out and helped her on the street side of the cab. She thanked me and walked toward their house. This was an excellent turn of events – now I'd have the Skipper all to myself! Right after we started moving again I said "How are you, Mr Hale?"

He seemed pleased that I had, in fact, recognised him. His face brightened up and he said something to the effect of "fairly well". We had a light conversation – I asked him some things about *Gilligan's Island*, what he was "up to" at the moment, and so forth. I wanted to ask about his height, but thought it might seem a bit weird. He told me that a Gilligan's

TV movie was in the works, and he was happy about that.

The hardware store wasn't far, and I parked close to it. (No mean feat – anywhere in Los Angeles.) I jumped out, ran around and opened Hale's door. He edged out of the cab and exclaimed, and this is verbatim: "That's the first time a cab driver opened a door for me in twenty years!" I stood next to him as he handed me the cash; he was a big, strong man (not skinny like me). He seemed to be my height, but I won't dispute the internet consensus of six-feet-two. I shook his hand and wished him well. Hale was definitely a nice man, and he left me in good spirits... but the story doesn't end there.

About a month later, a friend and his wife visited LA, and I proposed that we have dinner at a seafood restaurant, Alan Hale's Lobster Barrel. I told them how I'd met him and suggested that with luck we might even get our dinners "comped", and they agreed.

The eatery was a tourist trap – just inside the door there was even a barrel of "Clam Shells from Gilligan's Island". However, the food was good enough; I recall my friend's order of a whole crab, which was huge and seemingly impregnable. No sign of Hale, though, until dessert time. Then, out of nowhere he appeared, in a suit and tie, briefly engaging with his guests, table by table. I could hardly wait for him to reach us. I knew he couldn't possibly forget the young man who opened a taxi door for him – the first time in twenty years!... After an eternity he stopped to speak with us. "Remember me?" I asked. He looked puzzled. "The cab driver", I continued, "the one who opened the door

for you.”

Suddenly it hit him. “Oh, yeah”, he smiled happily, reaching out and patting my cheek with a big hand. “Have a great meal”. I waited expectantly for him to add, if nothing else, “... and all of you have dessert on the house”. Well, unfortunately that last part didn’t happen. Still, Alan Hale was a genuinely happy, nice man, and my favourite of the celebrities I’ve encountered.

Not long after meeting Alan Hale, I won the bid on a pickup at Sunset Boulevard near Doheny Drive, just outside Beverly Hills. As I got closer to the location, I saw a tall, gray-and-white-haired man in a dark gray suit standing stiffly on the sidewalk, arms at his sides. Trying, futilely, to appear inconspicuous, he motioned discreetly with a hand to “hurry up”. In a few seconds I recognised him. “Wow – that’s Lee Marvin!” I said aloud.

If Alan Hale was a star, if George Peppard was a major star, then Lee Marvin was a superstar. He had appeared in countless TV shows and movies for at least thirty years. In 1965, he’d won an academy award for best actor. Now, in 1980, he may have been past his peak but I knew from my journalist/Peppard encounter that he would be starring in the soon-to-be-released *Big Red One*. Peak or no peak, there weren’t many actors around who had achieved Marvin’s status. I’d hit the jackpot!

Once he entered my taxi, I looked in the rearview mirror and asked “How are you doing, Mr Marvin?” His booming voice responded with “pretty good” or something similar. I asked where he was headed (and noticed that

Marvin criticised his court case and the legal process, stating, somewhat sadly, “That’s when I learned to lie”

he had a large head), and our destination was the Beverly Wilshire Hotel. That was a bit of a downer, since the ride would be very short; I didn’t have a lot of time to waste on small talk. I asked about his upcoming film, and I can’t remember what he said. He almost seemed to be lost in thought.

I certainly didn’t want to bother him, but I had to ask about one thing – his ongoing “palimony” case. An actress named Michelle Triola had sued Marvin in 1977 after breaking up with him after six years of living together. They hadn’t married, but she’d added his last name to hers and claimed that Marvin had promised her financial support for life. The case had been a three-month media sensation, with feminists opining that after so many years the breakup was practically identical to a divorce, and Triola should get her payday. She had sought a couple of million bucks but the judge had awarded a token judgment of only \$104,000. In 1980, the case was on appeal, so... I asked the question.

That lit him up. He leaned against the back seat, eager to tell me all about it. He criticised his court case and the legal process, stating, somewhat sadly, “That’s when I learned to lie”. I told him I’d been to law school for a few

months. He said with intent, “Then you *know*”. I nodded, feeling as if we were part of the same club. He said the trial judge was a “champion of women’s rights” nearing retirement and wanted to “go out in a blaze of glory”, which explained the 104K award. Marvin added that “everyone involved knew it would be overturned on appeal”. (It turned out to be true – the award to Triola was reversed and the judge retired later in 1980. As far as lying in the courtroom goes, nothing need be said...)

After seven to ten minutes we arrived at the Beverly Wilshire. I said “I hate to gush, but it’s been a real treat”. Lame, but that’s what came out of my mouth. He thanked me and handed me a five-dollar bill for the \$3.50 fare (a nice tip, \$16 total in today’s money). The thought occurred to me that Marvin’s generosity neatly balanced Peppard’s frugality. I thanked him, then he jumped out of my taxi, strode tall into the hotel and he was gone.

I met celebrity number four in 1976 or ’77 at a Midwest airport, Kansas City, I think. Anyway, I was standing just outside a terminal, killing time before my second hop. I’d just been driven from another terminal by a boorish, incoherent, cab driver; I was so irritated by his nasty, inane prattle that when we pulled up I told him I wouldn’t respect myself if I tipped him. No problem, he just blathered on, unaffected.

While I waited near the doors at the top of a short flight of steps, a limousine pulled up to drop someone off. Normally I’m curious about who’s inside a limo when I spot one, but this time I had no interest, probably as I was still ticked

from the taxi driver, and was also enjoying the fresh afternoon air and surroundings – trees, grass, hills and such. I glanced at the vehicle and returned to the sky, the clouds and my thoughts. Then a man standing nearby said, in a hushed tone, “That’s the champ.”

“The champ?” I thought. “Okay, let’s see who ‘the champ’ is”. He looked like an ordinary limousine driver to me. Oh, wait. A tall, black man stood next to him as they made airport small talk. “Wait a minute”, I said to myself. “That’s Muhammad Ali!”

Yes, it was indeed the impressive two-time (at that time) heavy-weight boxing champion and the best-known person on Earth. He was obviously being dropped off to catch a plane. He soon left his driver and bounded up the steps toward me. I had to say something to him – but what?

Years earlier, I’d devised a tabletop boxing game, hoping to get

He stopped, leaned back a bit, looked at me with wide-open eyes and an expression that said “who is this goofball?”

it published. I had christened it *Muhammad Ali’s Boxing Game* and sent a copy to the only address I could find with any connection to him. (Don’t forget – this was the 70s – no internet and plenty of naiveté.) Of course there had been no response. Still, the idea of mentioning it to him flitted through my mind – and was quickly rejected.

When Ali was within two or three steps of me I had to open my mouth. Out came: “Excuse me, can I just shake your hand and

then disappear?” Which sounded pretty dumb, but at least implied a promise that I wouldn’t pester him for the next twenty minutes.

Now, you have to picture the many times you’ve seen the man and especially his playful side. He stopped, leaned back a bit, looked at me with wide-open eyes and an expression that said “who is this goofball?” Then he slowly put out his hand, we shook firmly and he went inside the terminal. I wanted to go after him and pester him for the next twenty minutes, but even an implied deal is a deal – and I’d just had a brush with the most famous celebrity in the world. **CT**

Andrew Fischer is an accountant and author of two books. Purgastories, a collection of short stories, is available at amazon.com. He enjoys his fiancée and designing board games; the latter can be downloaded at no charge from boardgamegeek.com.



Trumpocalypse

Consent Factory Essays Vol. 1 (2016-2017)

C.J. Hopkins

In this first collection of his Consent Factory essays, C.J. Hopkins irreverently covers the improbable rise of Donald Trump, the political dynamics that led to his presidency, and the media-generated mass hysteria that swept America during his first term in office. “Brave, original, enlightening, and hilarious” (Matt Taibbi, *Rolling Stone*), the essays in this volume capture the insanity of 2016 and 2017. Trump’s candidacy, the election, the Resistance, “Putin-Nazis,” neo-McCarthyism, fake news, bots, Charlottesville ... the whole mad circus unleashed by America’s “insane clown president.”

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■ CONN HALLINAN

Indecision puts India in deep coronavirus crisis

With much of India's mainstream press co-opted or cowed, alternative sources are reporting what is happening to the vast majority of people who live outside the huge metropolises

WHILE the coronavirus has focused much of the world on Europe and the United States, India promises to be the greatest victim of the disease. But other than a slick public relations campaign, the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi has done little to confront the crisis. Indeed, a number of policy moves by Delhi have likely fed the spread of the dangerous virus.

When Modi announced a 21-day nationwide shutdown on March 24, he did so without any warning. Almost before the Prime Minister had finished talking, panicked city residents – mostly middle class – poured into the streets to stock up on food and medicines, almost certainly accelerating the spread of COVID-19.

The shutdown instantly made tens of millions of people jobless, setting many of them in motion toward their home villages. Since public transportation has been shut down, that involved journeys of over 300 miles. And because many villages are blocking outsiders, where migrants will get food and water is anyone's guess.



Photo: Vaikunda Raja / Wikipedia

A newspaper vendor in Tamil Nadu, India, wearing safety gloves, mask and safety glass

Except for a few independent news sources, much of the chaos set off by the March 24 orders has gone unreported. Using a combination of financial pressure and outright censorship, Modi and his

rightwing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have silenced much of the media. Newspapers and broadcast outlets are finding that criticism of Modi or the BJP results in the loss of government advertising, a

major source of revenue. Modi has also filed expensive and difficult to fight tax cases against opposition media outlets.

In the case of the coronavirus, the government got the Supreme Court to order all media to “publish the official version” of the health crisis, which, in practice, has meant feel-good stories. The success that the BJP has had in coralling India’s 17,000 newspapers, 100,000 magazines, and 178 television news channels has been sharply condemned by media organisations. Reporters Without Borders rates India a lowly 140 out of 180 countries on its freedom index.

Modi has led a high-profile campaign to create a regional response to the COVID-19 crisis. On March 15, Modi convened a teleconference of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) to create a coronavirus emergency fund and exchange medical information. On March 26, Modi expanded the effort to draw in the G-20, an international forum of wealthy governments and banks that includes the European Union.

But there is suspicion that Modi’s regional and international efforts have more to do with repairing his government’s reputation than confronting the health crisis. Modi’s unilateral seizure of Jammu and Kashmir in violation of the Indian constitution – and subsequent crackdown on any and all opposition to the takeover – was widely condemned internationally. The recent move by the Modi government to redefine “citizenship” in a way that excludes Muslims has also been wide criticised. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, called the law a violation of several

Modi cancelled 500 and 1,000 rupee notes, throwing the country into currency chaos and impoverishing large numbers of poor Indians

international agreements to which India is a party.

There has been scant follow through with the SAARC or the G-20, and the government has done little at home. India’s public health system is fragile at the best of times, with only 0.5 hospital beds for every 1,000 people. In contrast, Italy has almost seven times that figure.

One important independent outlet reporting on the Covid-19 crisis has been Rural India Online, part of the People’s Archive of Rural India (PARI), a network of reporters and photojournalists who report on India’s rural dwellers who make up 70 percent of the population.

P. Sainath, PARI’s founder and editor – a winner of the prestigious Ramon Magsaysay Award and Amnesty International’s Global Award for Human Rights – is sharply critical of the Modi government’s actions, and PARI’s reporters have covered what the mainstream media has been intimidated from reporting: the massive number of poor who have taken to the roads to return home, cancer patients sleeping outside hospitals in the hope of getting treatment, and day labourers who cannot afford to miss any work.

One told PARI reporter Shraddha Agarwal, “Soap won’t save us if we die of hunger first.”

PARI reporters have also done a number of stories on India’s sanitation workers, few of whom have been provided with gloves or masks. “The government is saying clean hands constantly”, Mumbai sanitation worker Archana Chabuskwan told PARI reporter Ivoti Shinoli. “How do we do that?” Hand sanitisers are too expensive – Chabuskwan makes \$2.63 cents a day – water supplies are iffy, and social distancing is impossible. “We have to share a public toilet with hundreds of people.”

If sanitation workers do get sick – or, for that matter, any of Mumbai’s 20 million residents – they are in trouble. Government hospitals currently have 400 ventilators and 1,000 intensive care beds available for the entire city.

India’s health crisis is long-standing, and while the actions of the Modi government will almost certainly worsen the current crisis, for the past 30 years Indian governments – right and center – have cut back on health care and privatised much of the system. “We have one of the lowest health expenditures – barely 1.2 percent (as a share of the GDP) in the world,” writes Sainath. Almost a quarter of a million Indians die each year of tuberculosis and 100,000 children from diarrhoea.

In contrast, the US spends about 17 percent of its GDP on health.

According to Sainath, “Health expenditures across India today are possibly the fastest growing component of rural family debt”, A study by the Public Health Foundation of India found that in 2011-12 55-million people had been improv-

erished by health costs, 38-million by the cost of medicine alone.

That is what a substantial part of India's 1.3-billion people face as COVID-19 ramps up, and they are unlikely to get much help from the BJP or Modi. When China finally went public with the dangers posed by the coronavirus, India was convulsed with sectarian riots touched off by some of Modi's cabinet members. More than 50 people were killed in New Delhi and hundreds injured as rightwing mobs organised by the Rashtyria Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) raged through the streets.

The RSS – an organisation that philosopher and political commentator Aijaz Ahmad describes as the “oldest, largest and most successful far-right group in the world today” – is the real power behind Modi. The BJP is largely a front for the RSS, a Hindu fundamentalist organization that is “profoundly hierarchical and secretive”, according to Ahmed.

The top-down, no warning decree on the coronavirus is typical of the way the RSS functions. In 2016 – again, with no warning – Modi unilaterally cancelled all 500

and 1,000 rupee notes, throwing the country into currency chaos and further impoverishing large numbers of poor Indians.

The RSS's major goal is the creation of a Hindu-centred state, and it is not shy about using violence to do that, either of the mob variety, or by assassination. Gunmen have killed several prominent opponents of the RSS over the past several years, killings that have never been solved.

The focus on religion has skewed the government's priorities. The chief minister of India's most populous state, Uttar Pradesh, spent \$91-million to build a huge statue of the god Ram, while short changing emergency medical facilities.

With much of India's mainstream press either co-opted or cowed, it is alternative sources such as the People's Archive of Rural India that has picked up the slack and reported what is happening to the vast majority of Indians who live outside the huge metropolises, as well as what slum dwellers and city sanitation workers are facing.

So far, Modi and the RSS have

avoided having to answer for the increase in violence and the social priorities that have widened the gap between rich and poor. But COVID-19 may change that. The PARI has put forth a series of demands to address the current crisis, including the immediate distribution of surplus grains, a shift from cash crops to food crops, and the nationalisation of private medical facilities nationwide.

The COVID-19 crisis is the third disease to go pandemic since the great 1918-20 flu, which may have killed up to 100-million people. But climate change is producing conditions that favour the growth of diseases like the coronavirus and vector-driven pathogens like dengue and malaria. The next pandemic is just around the corner, and unless there is a concentrated effort to make health care a human right, it is only a matter of time before the next mega-killer strikes.

CT

Conn Hallinan can be read at dispatchesfromtheedgeblog.wordpress.com and at middleempireseries.wordpress.com.

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Why the ruling elite loves this crisis

While monumental shocks currently pound citizens around the world, an orgiastic festival of exploitation is underway

LEVITHAN shocks currently pound citizens around the world. Shocks to our lives. Shocks to the economy. Shocks to our reality. Shocks to our families, our careers, what we used to view as our “normal”. The pain of these shocks hits us in many ways, not the least of which is being forced to have sex while six feet apart.

Welcome to the Shock Doctrine.

Many of you may know Naomi Klein’s best-selling book *The Shock Doctrine*. It was also turned into a hit documentary I believe called *Fight Club*, but don’t quote me on that. *The Shock Doctrine* basically says that the rich and powerful – our rulers bereft of empathy or moral cores – exploit any crisis such as disasters, natural and otherwise, to force through controversial, draconian, profit-based, or flat-out, offensive policies and laws, while the majority of the populace are too distracted, stressed, and drowning in anxiety to fight back adequately.

To put that another way: When the shit hits the fan, rather than help people, the ruling thieves

have a ball!

We’ve witnessed this tactic before:

- The privatisation of New Orleans schools after Hurricane Katrina

- The selling off of Puerto Rico’s power grid after Hurricane Maria

- The Federal Reserve bailout amounting to \$29-trillion (not a typo) after the 2008 economic crisis

- The passing of the Patriot Act after 9/11, completely trashing Constitutional rights (then collecting them out of the dumpster, putting them in a blender, puree’ing them into a fine paste, mixing it with horse dung and biohazard waste, and heaving said mixture into a Port-A-John at the ripe end of Bonaroo)

Because our ruling elite fit in the farthest reaches of the sociopath spectrum, they do not see a horrific crisis as a time to help people. They see it as a time to get what they want.

And Americans have hardly faced a crisis as formidable as right now. Someone dies in New York City every two minutes from

coronavirus, the Federal Reserve now estimates job losses could total 47-million, the unemployment rate may hit 32 percent and the National Air Guitar Championships have been postponed.

This. Is. A. Crisis.

Which means it’s prime time for the oligarchs to exploit the bottom 90 percent of us. The largest way they’ve used this catastrophe so far is to pass their \$2-trillion giveaway to corporate America with little-to-no oversight. David Dayen at *American Prospect* calls it a robbery in progress, and they plan to viscerally excrete more soon.

Hardly a moment of discussion about this (central) bank robbery on our corporate airwaves stabs through the wall-to-wall virus coverage. Even members of Congress hardly dig into it – after quickly signing off on the bailout bill, they had to run home to take care of their mistresses’ blind perfumed labradoodles (or whatever it is the elite do when they aren’t destroying average people’s lives via toxic giveaways to corporate monstrosities).

Here are some of the other con-



SCREEN-TIME: President Trump, his adviser/daughter Ivanka, and Larry Kudlow, Director of the National Economic Council, take part in a White House video conference with banking executives.

troubling policies and laws joyfully being slammed through in an orgiastic festival of exploitation at the top:

The Environmental Protection Agency has indefinitely suspended environmental rules. Indeed, the already weak-sauce EPA just all but disbanded itself. This shouldn't surprise anyone seeing as EPA head Andrew Wheeler counts "former coal lobbyist" as his crowning career achievement.

With this change corporate America and fossil fuel companies may begin polluting with impunity, putting an end to the exhausting practice of pretending as if every time they dumped a million gallons of noxious chemicals into a river it was an accident. After all, their

As long as the courts yell the word "emergency", they can hold anybody including US citizens for eternity without charges or trial

throats were hoarse from yelling "Whoopsy!" so often.

But look on the bright side – America will soon recapture our glory years when many rivers glowed bright with fire, highly flammable from such an effective polluting. I'm sure many Americans will feel their hearts swell with patriotic fervour when the

rivers run red with the lively, acrid flames of feral capitalism. A festive sight indeed!

The Department of Justice wants to suspend certain Constitutional rights. *Rolling Stone* reports, "The DOJ has requested Congress allow any chief judge of a district court to pause court proceedings 'whenever the district court is fully or partially closed by virtue of any natural disaster, civil disobedience, or other emergency situation'..."

This means that as long as the courts yell the word "emergency", they can hold anybody including US citizens for eternity without charges or trial. What constitutes an "emergency", one might ask. Well, let's see: hurricanes, torna-

does, floods, droughts, mud slides, Slip n' Slides, viruses, black mold, termite infestations, bad cuts (especially in hard-to-reach areas), scrapes, bruises, polyps, bunions, rashes, fractures, sprains, twists, turns, tumours, tremors, trichinosis, in-grown crotch hairs, and of course hangnails. Emergencies are clearly everywhere! We better burn the Constitution!

The Trump administration has moved to steal the ancestral lands of a Native American tribe. The Trump regime (why are only governments in other countries called “regimes”?) said the Mashpee tribe in Rhode Island will be disestablished, 75 percent to help out Trump’s casino friends and 25 percent because Donald wants to end the primo champagne treatment America’s indigenous have received for hundreds of years. (Sarcasm.)

And there will likely be an attempt at privatising some public schools. With schools out of session for months, the forces of greed will try to turn some into charter schools, just like after Hurricane Katrina. Transforming public schools – open to all of our children – into private for-profit institutions (generally far more accessible to the rich and the parasitic) is immoral and vile.

And I’m saying that from a place of deep concern for our society, not because I like kids. I don’t like kids. Not a fan. They’re sticky and tenacious and high-pitched and they ask questions you can’t answer like, “Why’s the sky blue?” and “Why does the moon follow us when we drive?” and “Why are they named the Mario Brothers if it’s Mario & Luigi? What’s their

A new poll shows nearly 60 percent of the people in the US believe the political system is designed solely to serve the rich and powerful

last name?” and “Is the anteater the only animal named after what it eats?” At some point during this gut-wrenching inquisition I generally break down into incoherent mumblings of deep self doubt.

These are just four examples of obvious Shock Doctrine spoils. Along with the trillions of stolen money pilfered by way of the “bail-out,” this will amount to quite a nice bag of booty – but that’s not enough. The neoliberals and neons will continue their disaster thievery for some time to come.

But shocks to the system can be used for positive change as well. For example, workers have been uniting in a way not seen in decades, and the possibility of a general strike hovers just over the horizon. Suddenly average workers – people stocking shelves, delivering packages, driving food cross country, caring for the elderly – have been told they are “essential” to the beating heart of American life.

Meanwhile we all now recognise that hedge fund managers, CEOs, corporate lawyers, marketing execs, sports entertainment sales specialists, and professional boardroom fluffers are not essential. They are overpaid courtesans, empowering a flailing consumerist death march, empty calories

for an obese and slovenly pseudo-existence.

The current strikes and worker solidarity are due to the fact that the shock of the outbreak has woken up a lot of people. Citizens who have slept through these matters for years suddenly see the big picture. In fact, a new poll shows nearly 60 percent of the people in the US believe the political system is designed solely to serve the rich and powerful. Sixty percent of Americans now understand the problem. We must use this shock to the system to benefit the people rather than the rich and powerful leeches getting plump off the blood of minimum wage workers.

As Margaret Kimberly wrote recently, “A return to normalcy is the opposite of what we need. This is a moment to think about what should be the new normal and what should be jettisoned forever.”

Now is the time for great change because when things are back to “normal” it’s too late. **CT**



Lee Camp is the host of the hit comedy news show “Redacted Tonight.” His new book “Bullet Points and Punch Lines” is available at www.LeeCampBook.com and his standup comedy special can be streamed for free at www.LeeCampAmerican.com.



Photo: Gage Skidmore / Wikipedia



Photo: Wilson Dias/Agência Brasil / Wikipedia

TRANSITION? Donald Trump uses coronavirus pandemic to launch 'silent war' aimed at overthrow of Venezuela's President Nicolas Maduro.

■ ALAN MACLEOD

Coronavirus aid for regime change in Venezuela

THE US State Department released what it called its “democratic transition framework for Venezuela” on March 31; a 13-point plan for the removal of Nicolas Maduro and a radical overhaul of the country’s political system. The principal and most fundamental change Washington proposes is to “restore all powers to the National Assembly”, the one branch of government the right-wing pro-US opposition coalition currently holds. This would

place the entire country under the control of political groups that have not won a general election in Venezuela since 1993.

In point number three, the US also demands that “all foreign security forces depart immediately”. Here, they are presumably not speaking about the US-linked far-right Colombian death squads that have been known to penetrate the countries’ long and porous border, but about Cuban security advisors and medical personnel.

The United States is currently waging a silent war against the Caribbean island, pressuring countries to refuse its medical aid during the coronavirus pandemic. US-backed regimes in Brazil and Bolivia both expelled Cuban doctors from their countries upon coming to power, with Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro claiming that they were “costumed doctors” who were there to “create guerilla cells and indoctrinate people”. Brazil’s Health Ministry is now asking them to return even as its president continues to deny COVID-19 is a serious problem. According to the State Department’s transition plan, all political offices in Venezuela will be liquidated and their positions filled with people chosen by the National Assembly – ie the Venezuelan opposition. This includes the National Electoral Council, the Supreme Court, the Council of State and the presidency.

The National Assembly has been in limbo ever since 2017 when the Supreme Court ruled it was in contempt of court. During the previous elections, a few new members of the National Assembly were tried for vote buying, but the institution refused to recognise the Supreme Court, instead demanding all power be given to it, hence the three-year-long constitutional crisis.

Only after the National Assembly has handpicked the new Council of State, which, in turn, chooses the president, will the US begin to lift sanctions, the State

Department claims. However, it promises the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF) and Inter-American Development Bank (all institutions that have attempted to overthrow the socialist government) will be there to flood the country with foreign loans. The IMF recently refused an emergency COVID-19 loan to Venezuela unless Maduro stepped down.

The American proposal is unlikely to attract interest from Venezuela. “It’s a little hard to see how this is going to be convincing to the major players in the government”, said David Smilde, an anti-Maduro academic at the Washington Office for Latin America. Steve Ellner, a government-sympathetic professor at the Universidad de Oriente in Puerto La Cruz, suggested that the IMF’s actions would only “add to resentment against Washington” worldwide, also noting that many in the opposition coalition actually favour dialogue and working with the government during the pandemic.

The American proposal has not attracted interest from the Venezuelan government, President Maduro dismissing it outright. While Maduro holds very low approval ratings, he was democratically elected in 2013 and 2018 in some of the most internationally monitored elections in the world. Around 150 foreign observers, including three teams of seasoned election officials who produced reports, watched the 2018 vote. Among them was former Span-

ish Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, who said, “I do not have any doubt about the voting process. It is an advanced automatic voting system”. Former Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa agreed, praising its “impeccable” organisation. In 2012 former president Jimmy Carter described Venezuela’s system as “the best in the world.”

Nevertheless, the US government refused to recognise the results, imposing sanctions on the country. An American Special Rapporteur for the UN, Alfred de Zayas, visited Venezuela and denounced them, accusing Trump of “crimes against humanity” and estimating that they were responsible for more than 100,000 deaths. The international community has called for all US sanctions to be halted.

After a series of secret negotiations, the US government immediately backed self-declared president Juan Guaidó’s audacious coup attempts last year. Guaidó, head of the National Assembly, insisted that Maduro was illegitimate and he should be made president. While he was lauded in Washington, even receiving a standing ovation from both Republicans and Democrats at Trump’s state of the union address, his attempts were largely rejected by the Venezuelan public. The most recent poll showed him with a 10 percent approval rate and a 68.5 percent disapproval rating among his country folk. He was unceremoniously removed from his position as National Assembly chair by his

own coalition in January.

The State Department’s most recent announcement is another in a long line of efforts by Washington to unseat the ruling socialist party – a chain of attempts going back to at least 2002.

This was made explicit by special Venezuela representative Elliott Abrams: “The plan is not so much an effort to change Nicolas Maduro’s mind as it is to appeal to everyone else in Venezuela to change his mind for him,” he told a briefing.

However, it is far from clear whether it will have this effect. Steve Ellner, a government-sympathetic professor at the Universidad de Oriente in Puerto La Cruz, suggested that recent actions would only “add to resentment against Washington” worldwide, also noting that many in the opposition coalition actually favour dialogue and working with the government during the pandemic. Like Mike Pence and Mike Pompeo’s previous calls for the military to rebel and overthrow Maduro, the State Department’s transition plan will likely be ignored inside Venezuela. With a global pandemic threatening to hit the country, Venezuelans likely have more important things to think about. **CT**

*Alan MacLeod is a Staff Writer for MintPress News. He is the author of *Bad News From Venezuela: Twenty Years of Fake News and Misreporting, and Propaganda in the Information Age: Still Manufacturing Consent*. This article was first published at www.mintpressnews.com*

■ TREVOR GRUNDY

After 70 years, book still has disturbing power

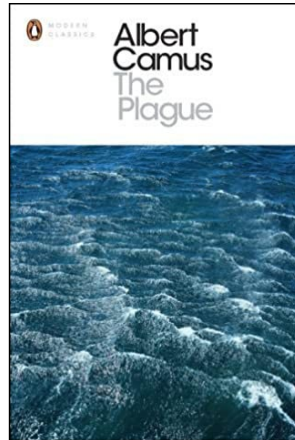
BOOKS should be re-viewed when they're relevant, not just when they're written. Could any book be more important to read and understand at the moment than Albert Camus's *The Plague*?

Written in 1947, the novel was published in English the following year. George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* appeared several months later.

Against the backdrop of rising populism, mainly in Europe, the latter book is quoted by ad nauseam. Now we have Coronavirus sweeping the world and I believe *The Plague* is the book most in tune with the moment we are in.

Many literary critics say it is the greatest book ever written about a pandemic. Sales of the book have tripled in Italy, and Penguin has rushed out a reprint of its English translation by Stuart Gilbert. Ben Macintyre writing in the *Times* on March 14, is spot on when he says that this is a book that helps us understand the way we cope with a mysterious illness – incurable and implacable.

It was Camus's most successful novel, written when he was 33. Within a year it was translated into nine languages, with more to come as years went by. It has never been out of print and was seen by so many as a literary



THE PLAGUE

Albert Camus

Translated by Stuart Gilbert
Penguin Books

classic even before the author's untimely death in a car accident in January 1964.

The Plague was written just two years after the end of World War II, suggesting that the Algerian-born Camus must have had the virus of Nazism in mind when he wrote what many of his admirers believe was his greatest novel.

But was that the only virus he had in mind? That's debatable. *The Plague* is loosely based on the cholera epidemic that erupted in Oran in 1849 following the French colonisation of Algeria.

As MacIntyre says, many of the characters and themes in *the Plague* (*La Peste*) are familiar from today's crisis. Initially, only

a few people understand what's happening when thousands of rats appear on the streets and in the homes of the citizens of Oran.

They first attempt to ignore the problem, hoping (or praying) it will go away.

Then a hero emerges: Bernard Rieux, a doctor, warns that unless immediate action is taken the entire population of the walled city will perish.

Arguments erupt about how best to control the epidemic, but by the time the authorities make up their confused minds, the emergency measures prove inefficient. The town is sealed off but even then there are people who refuse to obey safety instructions. (*Lockdown tedium has already begun in Britain.*

As I write, I hear a football being bounced along the street where I live in a seaside town in Kent, close to a long beach normally patronised by thousands of Londoners at the start of the long Easter break. The number dead in UK hospital is now more than 5,000.

At the beginning of *The Plague*, many residents believed that the epidemic would soon die out and that they and their families would be spared. The Jesuit priest Pere Paneloux tells his frightened congregation the plague is a divine punishment for their sins, the most severe of which is their attendance at his church only one day every week. He doesn't say it, but the inference is that collection plates need filling seven days a week, not just on Sundays.

Hundreds die. The journalist Raymond Rambert who is in town to write about poor sanitary conditions for Arabs, just wants to get out of the place and be re-united with his wife in Paris; Joseph Grand wants to write about it and publish a book; Jean Turreau keeps notes.

Some, including a crook named Cottard profit for a while, cashing in on shortages; housewives are forced to buy basic commodities from connen cashing in on out-of-control buying/feeding frenzies.

Sound familiar?

One of the best critiques I've read of this extraordinarily brilliant novel was written by the late Tony Judt in the *New York Review of Books*. He saw in *The Plague* one of the clearest examinations of the diverse ways in which we respond to pandemics (medical or political) ever written. In his long and wonderful analysis, Judt said Camus's public standing guaranteed the novel's success.

But timing is everything, as any writer knows. The French in 1947 were beginning to forget the recent past, inventing heroes along the way. Baddies like Marshal Philippe Petain had been tried and imprisoned. The Goodies, led by General Charles de Gaulle, were polishing their images and spreading what the American poet Louis Macneice called "the myth of themselves."

Says Judt, "Such commentaries are doubly revealing. In the first place they show just how much Camus's apparently

straightforward story was open to misunderstanding. The allegory may have been tied to Vichy France, but *The Plague* transcends political labels.

It was not "fascism" that Camus was aiming at – an easy target, after all, especially in 1947 but dogma, compliance and cowardice in all their intersecting public forms.

The message, as I see it, is two-fold. First, the only real vice is ignorance. To which we might add "and those who encourage it."

Secondly, Albert Camus's own words at the end say it all: "The

plague bacillus never dies or disappears for good; that it can be dormant for years and years in furniture and linen-chests; that it bides its time in bedrooms, cellars, trunks, and bookshelves; and that perhaps would one day come when, for the bane and the enlightening of men, it roused up its rats again and sent them forth to die in a happy city." **CT**

*Trevor Grundy is an English journalist and author of *Memoir of a Fascist Childhood* published by William Heinemann, London in 1998*

■ ALLISON SKIDMORE

Tiger King and America's captive tiger problem

NETFLIX'S new docuseries *Tiger King* takes viewers into the strange world of big cat collectors. Featuring eccentric characters with names like Joe Exotic and Bhagavan "Doc" Antle, the series touches on polygamy, addiction and personality cults, while exploring a mysterious disappearance and a murder-for-hire. To Allison Skidmore, a PhD candidate at the University of California, Santa Cruz, who studies wildlife trafficking, the documentary didn't bring enough attention to the scourge of captive big cats.

A former park ranger, Skidmore first started studying the is-

sue in the US after the infamous death of Cecil the Lion in Zimbabwe in 2015. She was shocked to learn how little oversight there was stateside. We asked her about the legality, incentives and ease of buying and selling tigers.

1. How many captive tigers are in the US?

Unfortunately, there's no straightforward answer. The vast majority of captive tigers are crossbred hybrids, so they aren't identified as members of one of the six tiger subspecies – the Bengal tiger, Amur tiger, South China tiger, Sumatran tiger, Indochinese tiger and Malayan tiger. Instead, they're classified as "generic."

Less than 5 percent – or fewer than 350 – of tigers in captivity are managed through the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, a nonprofit organisation that serves as an accrediting body in the US. They ensure accredited facilities meet higher standards of animal care than required by law.

All the rest are privately owned tigers, meaning they don't belong to one of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums' 236 sponsored institutions. These are considered generic and fall outside of federal oversight.

There's no legal requirement to register these generic tigers, nor a comprehensive national database to track and monitor them. The best educated guess puts the number of tigers at around 10,000 in the US. Estimates put the global captive tiger population as high as 25,000.

In comparison, there are fewer than 4,000 tigers in the wild – down from 100,000 a century ago.

2. How do tigers change hands?

The Endangered Species Act and the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna prevent the importation of tigers from the wild. So all tigers in the US are born in captivity, with the rare exception of an orphaned wild cub that may end up in a zoo.

Only purebred tigers that are one of the six definitive subspecies are accounted for; these are the tigers you see in places like the Smithsonian National Zoo and generally belong to the Species Survival Plan, a captive breeding programme de-



Photo: Allison Skidmore

Bottle-feeding at a 'pseudo-sanctuary' in Southern California.

signed to regulate the exchange of specific endangered species between member zoos in order to maintain genetic diversity.

All other tigers are found in zoos, sanctuaries, carnivals, wildlife parks, exhibits and private homes that aren't sanctioned by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums. They can change hands in any number of ways, from online marketplaces to exotic animal auctions. They can be bought for as little as \$800 to \$2,000 for a cub and \$200 to \$500 for an adult, which is less expensive than many purebred dog puppies.

3. Can I legally buy a tiger?

The US is plagued with complicated and vague laws concerning tiger ownership. However, there are no federal statutes or regulations that expressly forbid private ownership of tigers. State and local jurisdictions have been given this authority, and some

do pass bans or require permits. Thirty-two states have bans or partial bans, and 14 states allow ownership with a simple license or permit. Four states – Alabama, Wisconsin, North Carolina and Nevada – have no form of oversight or regulation at all.

An overarching, cohesive framework of regulations is missing, and even in states that ban private ownership, there are loopholes. For example, in all but three states, owners can apply for what's called a "federal exhibitor license", which is remarkably cheap and easy to obtain and circumvents any stricter state or local laws in place.

You now need a permit to transport tigers across state lines, but there's still no permit required for intra-state travel.

4. What's in it for the owners?

Some see it as a business venture, while others claim they care about conservation. I consider the latter reason insincere.

Many facilities promote themselves as wildlife refuges or sanctuaries. These places frame their breeding and exhibition practices as stewardship, as if they're contributing to an endangered animal's survival. The reality is that no captive tiger has ever been released into the wild, so it's not like these facilities can augment wild populations. A true sanctuary or refuge should have a strict no breeding or handling policy, and should have education programmes dedicated to promoting conservation.

Ultimately, tigers are big money makers, especially tiger cubs. The Animal Welfare Act al-

lows cub petting from eight to 12 weeks of age. People pay \$100 to \$700 to pet, bottle-feed, swim with or take a photo with a cub.

None of these profits go toward the conservation of wild tigers, and this small window of opportunity for direct public contact means that exhibitors must continually breed tigers to maintain a constant supply of cubs.

The value of cubs declines significantly after 12 weeks. Where do all these surplus tigers go? Unfortunately, due to a lack of regulatory oversight, it's hard to know.

Since many states don't account for their live tigers, there's also no oversight regarding the reporting and disposal of dead tigers. Wildlife criminologists fear that these tigers can easily end up in the black market where their parts can cumulatively be worth up to \$70,000. There's evidence of US captive tigers tied to the domestic black market trade: In 2003, an owner of a tiger "rescue" facility was found to have 90 dead tigers in freezers on his property. And in 2001, an undercover investigation led by the US Fish and Wildlife Service ended up leading to the prosecutions of 16 people for buying, selling and slaughtering 19 tigers.

5. What role does social media play? Posing with tigers on social media platforms like Instagram and on dating apps has become a huge problem. Not only can it create a health and safety risk for both the human and tiger, but it also fosters a false narrative.

If you see thousands of photos of people with captive tigers, it

masks the true problem of endangered tigers in the wild. Some might wonder whether tigers are really so endangered if they're so easy to pose with.

The reality of the wild tiger's plight has become masked behind the pomp and pageantry of social media. This marginalises meaningful ideas about conservation

and the true status of tigers as one of the most endangered big cats. **CT**

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■ NORMAN SOLOMON

Sanders: Don't confuse retreat with surrender

POLITICS is ultimately about life and death, as the current pandemic horrors make clear. Policies that can seem abstract not only routinely harm quality of life; they also kill.

Both Bernie Sanders campaigns for US president have brought a principled seriousness to the national discourse that no other candidate has come near matching. Now, we seem to be entering new terrain. Or are we?

You might not like "war" metaphors – but a vicious reality is that various types of warfare are constantly happening against billions of people on this planet. Humanity is under siege from structured injustice due to anti-democratic power.

We don't have a choice of whether or not we're in a class war. It's going on perpetually – waged with enormous financial, political and media firepower.

The firepower of class warfare against Bernie Sanders has been ferocious and unrelenting. The Bernie campaign is dissipating, but class war is sure to remain unrelenting.

Our choices revolve around whether and how to fight back against the centralised wealth and huge corporate interests waging that endless war. Now, as the era after the Bernie 2020 campaign gets underway, I'd like to tell you a little about one of the countless inspiring activists I've met – and why his outlook is so connected to the moment we're in now.

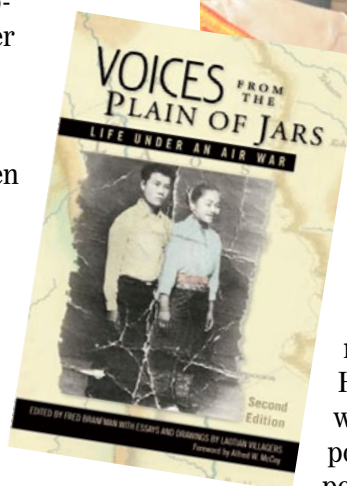
Fifty years ago, Fred Branfman saw the human consequences of war in Laos – an airborne genocide that took place courtesy of US taxpayers and the Orwellian-named Defense Department. Fred was a

humanitarian-aid volunteer in Laos when he discovered that his country was taking the lives of peasants there by the thousands.

Fred assembled *Voices from the Plain of Jars*. Published in 1972, with the subtitle *Life Under an Air War*, the book included essays by Laotian people living under long-term US bombardment as well drawings by children who depicted the horrors all around them. As one bookseller put it, “This is the story of the first society to be totally destroyed by aircraft.”

In 2006, when I talked with Fred, he said: “At the age of 27, a moral abyss suddenly opened before me. I was shocked to the core of my being as I found myself interviewing Laotian peasants, among the most decent, human and kind people on Earth, who described living underground for years on end, while they saw countless fellow villagers and family members burned alive by napalm, suffocated by 500-pound bombs, and shredded by antipersonnel bombs dropped by my country, the United States”.

Fred moved to Washington, where he worked with antiwar groups to lobby Congress and



Above: Fred Branfman. Left: The cover of the book *Voices from the Plain of Jars*, essays from Laotian people who lived under US bombardment.

protest the inflicting of mass carnage on Indochina. He saw the urgent need to work inside and outside the political system to change policies and save lives.

More than three decades after his experiences in Laos, Fred wrote about “the effect on the biosphere of the interaction between global warming, biodiversity loss, water aquifer depletion, chemical contamination, and a wide variety of other new threats to the biospheric systems upon which human life depends”. He was far from optimistic. And that’s where, in April 2020, Fred has much to convey to us with a spirit that remains powerful several years after his death.

Many people who pay attention to national and global realities are in despair, and the loss

of the Bernie campaign now adds to the weight of pessimism. Fred would have understood. Looking toward the future, he said, “I find it hard to have much ‘hope’ that the species will better itself in coming decades.”

But, Fred went on, “I have also reached a point in my self-inquiries where I came to dislike the whole notion of ‘hope’. If I need to have ‘hope’ to motivate me, what will I do when I see no rational reason for hope? If I can be ‘hopeful’, then I can also be ‘hopeless’, and I do not like feeling hopeless”.

He added: “When I looked more deeply at my own life, I noticed that my life was not now and never had been built around ‘hope’. Laos was an example. I went there, I learned to love the peasants, the bombing shocked my psyche and soul to the core, and I responded – not because I was hopeful or hopeless, but because I was alive.”

And human.

That should be reason enough for solidarity and determination. We will often lose. We will not give up. We must not give up. **CT**

Norman Solomon is co-founder and national coordinator of RootsAction.org. He was a Bernie Sanders delegate from California to the 2016 Democratic National Convention. Solomon is the author of a dozen books including “War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death.”

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