

**THE PENTAGON VS PENTAGOD** | William Astore  
**DON'T LET BIG TECH CONTROL OUR LIVES** | Sam Pizzigati  
**FIGHTING THE MERCHANTS OF SPYWARE** | Binoy Kampmark

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# ColdType

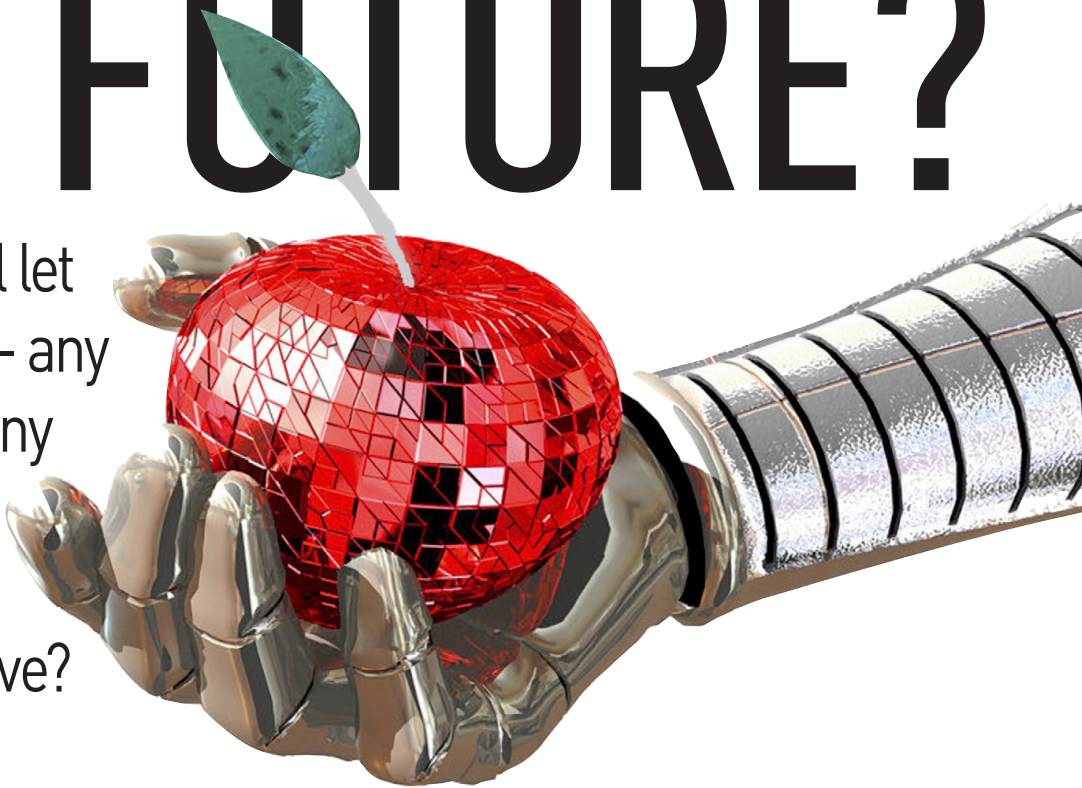
WRITING WORTH READING ■ PHOTOS WORTH SEEING

December 2021

## WELCOME TO THE FUTURE?

The metaverse will let people be anyone – any gender, any race, any species. But is this a world in which we really want to live?

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**PLUS: BIG BROTHER IN DISGUISE – John W. Whitehead – PAGE 18**



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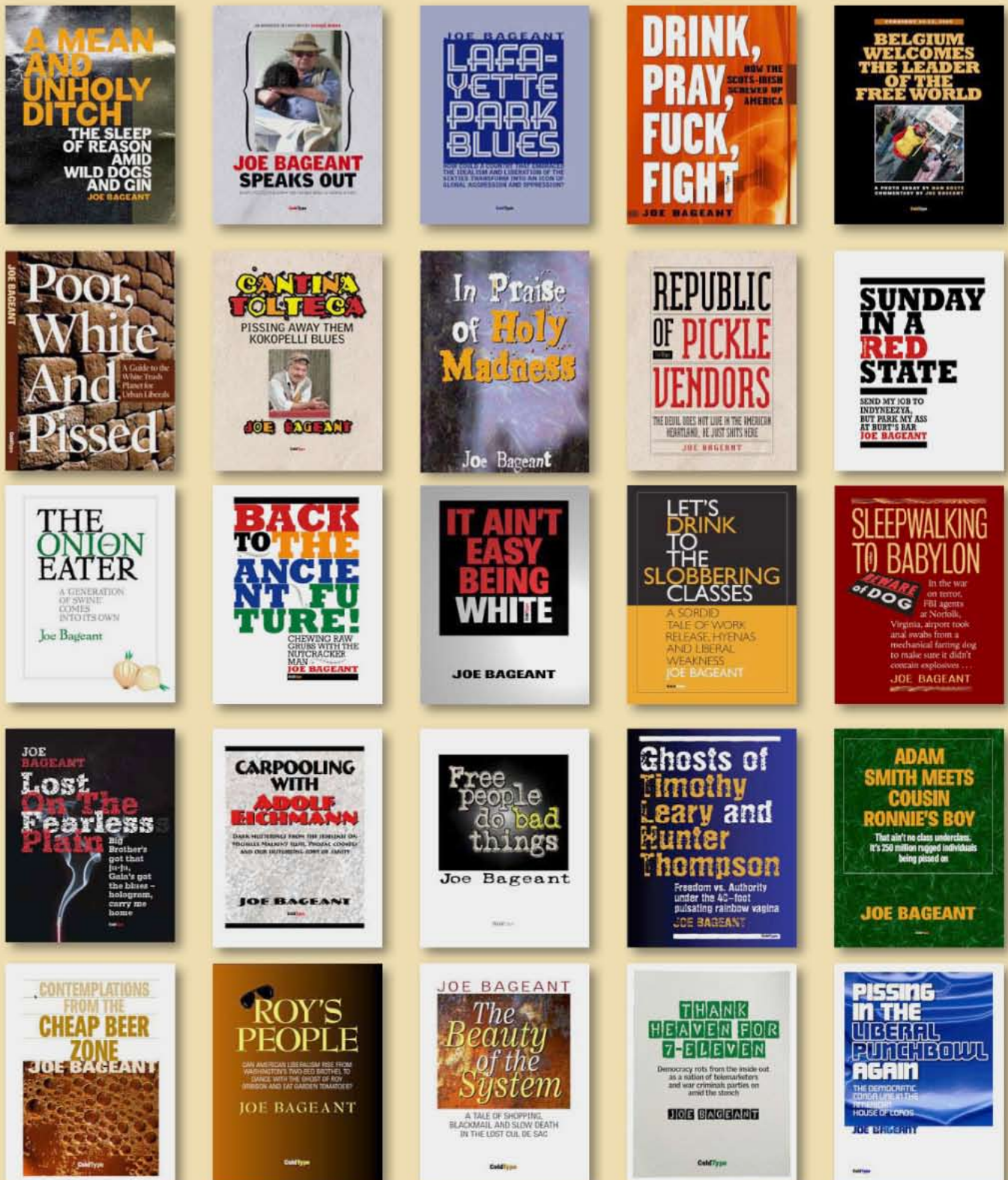
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## INSIGHTS



Photo: Ceasefire.ca

The Raging Grannies, supported by Ceasefire.ca, protest against planned purchase of F-35 fighters at Ottawa on October 26.

YVES ENGLER

## When ‘interoperability’ means ‘Buy American’

At what point does ‘interoperability’ simply mean buy American?

A military concept few have heard of is shaping Canada’s second largest ever government procurement. Ottawa is planning to spend tens of billions of dollars on 88 new fighter jets largely to serve the god of “interoperability”.

At its most basic “interoperability” means the ability for military forces to act together seamlessly because their doctrines, processes

and equipment are compatible. In Canada’s case it means purchasing equipment that empowers the US war machine.

At the 2017 Dubai Air Show Commander of the Royal Canadian Air Force Michael Hood said interoperability was “the most important thing” in determining the purchase of a new fighter jet. “Every step less of interoperability is one step less of effectiveness, so interoperability is right at the top of the list beside

operational advantage”, Hood told Defense News. In a 2018 Skies Mag article headlined “RCAF hints at capabilities that may guide future fighter acquisition Avatar” Chris Thatcher points out that “a critical requirement of the next fighter jet will be interoperability with NORAD and NATO partners.”

French based Dassault’s Rafale failed to make the final stage of the jet procurement competition due to concerns over its ability to be interoperable with the US military. China’s Chengdu J-20 and Russia’s Sukhoi Su-57 were never considered at least partly because they wouldn’t be interoperable with US weapons systems.

Saab’s Gripen, Boeing’s Super Hornet and Lockheed Martin’s F-35 are the three jets that have made the final round of the procure-



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ment competition. Even though it's cheaper, the Gripen is unlikely to be chosen due to interoperability concerns with the Swedish made jet. The two front runners are the F-35 and Super Hornet, which are both produced by US-based firms.

The more emphasis placed on interoperability by Canada and other NATO members the better for US arms manufacturers. Not only does the US have by far the most advanced military, the US Congress restricts foreign weapons purchases, so NATO standardization overwhelmingly takes place on US terms.

Lockheed Martin's F-35 Joint Strike Fighter has tied most NATO members to the US company's US\$1.7 trillion program. Governments purchase the incredibly expensive planes and Lockheed directs business to companies in participating countries. While the federal government has yet to select a new fighter jet, Canada has already spent over US\$600 million on the F-35 project.

The federal government is likely to choose the F-35. But the single-engine jet is incapable of flying long distances, which lessens its usefulness in the north. None of the possible fighter jets will aid with ever worsening climate induced forest fires or floods or be able to detect viruses such as the SARS CoV 2 coronavirus. To put it bluntly, the warplanes are of little use with this country's real security concerns and take public resources away from mitigating the climate crisis.

The quest to stay interoperable with advanced US military technology isn't cheap. The new fighter jets are expected to cost \$19 billion upfront and \$77 billion over their

full life cycle. After some interoperability hiccups during the bombing of the former Yugoslavia in 1999, notes historian Desmond Morton, "Canada is spending \$1.3 billion on an Incremental Modernization Program to update as many of our aging fighters as the government thinks it can afford."

The search for interoperability has repeatedly been used to justify participating in belligerent US-led missions. Militarists justified Canadian jets bombing Iraq/Syria between 2014-16 on these grounds. In a story titled "A military perspective of Canada's mission in Iraq" former Brigadier-General Jim Cox wrote, "the Canadian Armed Forces reap enormous professional, doctrinal and industrial benefits from remaining interoperable with US forces in all five domains of modern warfare: land, sea, air, space and cyberspace." In explaining the Canadian Navy's role in enforcing brutal sanctions on Iraq during the late 1990s and early 2000s Defence Minister Art Eggleton said, "this operation is ex-

tremely beneficial in ensuring our interoperability with our allies and particularly the United States. It will further strengthen our navy's relationship with the U.S. Navy."

The Canadian Forces' are fixated on interoperability. "Maintaining interoperability [with the US] is the key to the future relevance of the CF," noted the Chief of Defence Staff in his 2002 annual report. The government's 2017 Defence Policy statement cited the importance of being "interoperable"/"interoperability" with US and NATO forces at least 19 times.

When it comes to purchasing fighter jets interoperability will be more important than cost, Canada's geography or real security threats. It's almost as if our military wishes it were American. **CT**

*Yves Engler is a Montréal-based activist and author who has published 12 books including his latest Stand on Guard For Whom? A People's History of the Canadian Military. His website is [www.yvesengler.com](http://www.yvesengler.com)*

REBEKAH ENTRALGO

## Rediscovering the power of unions

It was called "Striketober." While politicians in Washington bickered over infrastructure, jobs, and the social safety net, unionised workers across the heartland went on strike to get their fair share directly.

At one point in October, over 90,000 unionised workers issued strike authorisations – including 10,000 John Deere United Auto Workers (UAW) members, 37,000 nurses and other health care workers at Kaiser Permanente, and

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60,000 film and television workers organised with International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE).

That trend has continued into November, as John Deere workers in Iowa, Kansas, and Illinois recently rejected the latest contract proposal from management and are continuing their strike.

More than 22,000 workers across the country went out on strike. From hospital staff in West Virginia, steelworkers in Ohio, and educators in Pennsylvania to student workers in New York City, workers are rising up against poverty wages, long hours, and dangerous working conditions.

Decades ago, when unions were strong, it wasn't uncommon to see millions of workers on strike each year. But union membership has rapidly declined over the last few decades, from a peak of over 33 percent of American workers in 1944 to just under 11 percent in 2020.

And as unions weakened, inequality skyrocketed. The share of income going to the top one percent of Americans has doubled from 11 percent in the 1940s to over 22 percent today. It is this pervasive inequality that is driving tens of thousands of US workers to strike.

At John Deere, workers have expressed growing frustration over proposals from management to slash pensions and wage increases while the company has enjoyed record-breaking profits. John Deere is projected to rake in up to \$5.9-billion this year, far exceeding its previous high of \$3.5-billion in 2013.

Meanwhile, CEO John May gave himself a 160 percent raise – and shareholders a 17 percent

raise on dividends. As one worker described it, “We are the last thing they think about.”

President Biden's Build Back Better agenda, while reduced in scope due to powerful corporate Democrats wielding their influence, includes a number of policies to strengthen worker protections and hold corporations accountable.

One provision in particular, lifted directly from the Protecting the Right to Organize (PRO) Act, would fine employers \$50,000 to \$100,000 for each violation of the National Labor Relations Act. The bill would also invest over \$2-billion in enforcement of work-

ers' rights, helping government officials more effectively protect workers by investigating and enforcing labour laws.

That would be a big victory. Better wages, health care, paid leave, and real curbs on inequality may always face headwinds in Washington. But as workers across the country are rediscovering, a strong union can win those things directly. **CT**

*Rebekah Entralgo is the managing editor of [Inequality.org](http://Inequality.org) at the Institute for Policy Studies. This op-ed was distributed by [OtherWords.org](http://OtherWords.org).*

NIGEL YATES

## Pandemic notes from New Zealand



**COVERED UP:** New Zealanders follow government advice.

An old friend visited recently. We'd been close for almost fifty years. I'd photographed both his weddings, watched his children grow from babies to parents, attended the funerals of family and mutual friends. We'd even collaborated on a book of regional history. Yes, that close.

However, that day he had a sombre message for me: because he'd received two doses of the Pfizer Covid injection and was immune-compromised from chemotherapy, and I remain “unvaccinated”, he'd have to keep his distance from me, from now on.

This wasn't too much of a shock:

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the political rhetoric surrounding the pandemic has lately become disturbingly ominous in New Zealand

Covid-19 Response Minister Chris Hipkins reportedly wants to “hunt out the unvaccinated”, while the Leader of the Opposition Judith Collins recently claimed “the unvaccinated are holding the country to ransom.”

Somehow the “vaccine refusers”, “vaccine hesitant”, and straight out “anti-vaxxers” – as we are referred to in mainstream media – are a threat to the vaccine-compliant majority, notwithstanding the common knowledge that the Pfizer “vaccine” allegedly doesn’t even stop the infection or transmission of the Sars-CoV-2 virus, and therefore can’t be said to provide immunity.

Such logic is superfluous to the mantra delivered from Prime Minister Ardern down that the vaccine is “safe and effective.” Try to point out to someone in thrall of what it is tempting to call the Government propaganda machine, that their free Pfizer genetic therapy is not really a vaccine, hasn’t been tested for long and doesn’t provide immunity as we understand the word, and you’ll be treated with incredulity or derision.

“But it will stop me from going to hospital”, is the usual response, echoing the sage advice of the media-friendly microbiologist Siouxsie Wiles. This is so nauseatingly common that it is wise to avoid the subject with anyone who might be a true believer in this wonderful new technological panacea.

The roots of this profound, almost religious, attitude have been obvious for at least a year: the



SAYING NO! Other New Zealanders would rather share hugs.

state broadcast media and my local daily newspaper have regularly featured reports and interviews with experts in conspiracy theories warning against “misinformation and disinformation” – without acknowledging that history is replete with conspiracies and government lies. Prime Minister Ardern even told a reporter recently that the Government is “the single source of truth” on the pandemic.

This apparent product placement combined with an unprecedented propaganda blitz using all forms of popular media, with heavy dollops of anxiety-inducing statistics and manipulation of language (last year’s rules, requirements and restrictions have morphed into the no-nonsense “mandates” for instance) has been joined by a historically-resonant new tactic: social ostracism for the vaccine-refusers.

From November 15, all government health and education workers

are “mandated” to have their first doses of the injection or they will lose their employment. These mandates cover 40 percent of the New Zealand workforce.

Many other employers are instructing their workers to “get the job” or lose their jobs, under threat of loss of government financial support. This looks remarkably like a breach of local and international laws – the Nuremberg Code is being mentioned in social media – but that is apparently no deterrent to the increasingly authoritarian administration. It is easier to list what the recalcitrant unvaccinated may in future be allowed to do than what they will be excluded from: visit supermarkets and pharmacies. No gyms, no hairdressers, no movies, no cafes, no restaurants, no concerts. The unvaccinated will be punished for exercising their freedom of choice; New Zealand has changed from a pseudo-democracy to a tyranny.



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But that is not the end of this particular contemporary story.

For most of the year, New Zealand's largely captive "team of five million" has been assailed with news of the Delta variant – usually described as "deadly" and "highly transmissible" – which is coming our way. The familiar crew of epidemiologists and modellers have issued dire predictions of thousands of cases, numerous deaths and hospitals overflowing with mostly unvaccinated patients.

This is despite there being only one (my friend reckons two) reported Covid deaths since Delta arrived on a plane from Sydney several months ago, allegedly causing hundreds of positive cases.

These alarming projections seem to have led to two recent events: the imminent ditching of the convoluted "alert level" system of social control, for a simpler "traffic light" model indexed to vaccination rates and positive cases, and a "Super Saturday" vaxathon on October 17, when 130,000 (2 percent of the eligible population) did "the right thing" and rolled up their sleeves to be injected by mainly lay vaccinators. It wasn't reported whether proper informed consent procedures were followed.

Two weeks after this event I attended a gathering in a park organised by the local coordinators of the fledgeling Voices For Freedom protest group. More than 200 adults and children were there, none of whom were practising social distancing or mask wearing, so the meeting was probably in breach of a Government Health Order or two.

I spoke with a hospital nurse and three care workers, all destined

to lose their jobs for not complying with the vaccination mandate. One of showed me a photo of her son surrounded by hospital emergency department staff with what looked like an oxygen tube down his throat. He'd arrived there with palpitations straight after his first Pfizer injection, yet the doctors told her his condition wasn't related to the vaccine. Then the nurse told me she was on a night shift after the mass vaccination event and noticed that "the rescue helicopters were coming all night."

This is perhaps the untold story of the worldwide mass injection programme. Informal anecdotes of deaths and serious adverse reac-

tions to the injections are not uncommon and social media has been replete with such accounts.

The government and mainstream media play down or ignore the matter, however a citizen's database has recorded over 230 deaths and more than a thousand serious adverse reactions since the vaccine rollout began a few months ago.

Could this be, as one of the compilers of this project claimed "A crime against humanity"? Time will tell, I suppose. **CT**

*Nigel Yates is former newspaper photographer and bookseller who lives off-the-grid near Dunedin, New Zealand.*

LINDA MCQUAIG

## China retaliation is what we don't need

Call me faint-hearted, but it strikes me as a bad idea to deliberately stir up trouble against a country armed with nuclear weapons. So it's ominous to hear the rattling of sabres by Canadians trying to push Ottawa towards punitive action against China for its detention of two Canadians called Michael.

China is an authoritarian, repressive country and its long detentions of Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor, whom they accused of spying, were cruel and wrong; it's wonderful the two men are finally free.

But the animus being stirred up

against it is reckless and dangerous, and seems aimed at backing US efforts by both the Trump and Biden administrations to isolate China and push back against its rising economic and technological power and the challenge this poses to U.S. hegemony.

These rustlings toward a new Cold War – while useful to US military contractors keen to make the case that Washington faces a freshly stirring military threat from China – is exactly what the world does not need now.

Today's most urgent global threat is climate change; we have at most 10 years left to get coun-

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tries to start seriously recreating a world without fossil fuels. This requires co-operation (particularly with China, the world's largest greenhouse gas emitter), not hostility, trade wars or a fresh arms race.

Yet a number of prominent Canadians, including diplomats, academics and the right-wing Ottawa-based Macdonald-Laurier Institute (MLI), have been ramping up calls for tougher actions against the Chinese government.

In an article on the MLI website last month, Howard Anglin, a former top adviser to former prime minister Stephen Harper, argued that, now that the Michaels are released, it's time for a "reckoning" with China. He called for "retaliation" against the "evil regime."

"Retaliation against the Chinese Communist regime would come with a price. No question. But ... whatever the price of facing down China's regime is now, it will only grow the longer it is put off."

What kind of reckless, swaggering talk is this?

In addition to being reckless, it's also unwarranted – in that it fails to take into account Canada's role in provoking the detention of the Michaels.

The crisis began with Canada's highly unusual and provocative house arrest of Chinese corporate executive Meng Wanzhou, chief financial officer of the high tech giant Huawei.

Canada had no reason or interest in detaining Meng, but Ottawa arrested her and held her for extradition on a far-fetched fraud charge for more than two years at the request of the United States.

The fraud charge appeared to be US harassment towards Huawei,

which is in fierce competition with US tech giants for control of the North American telecommunications market. Washington has also placed Huawei on an export blacklist, denying it access to key technologies.

In charging Meng, the US was acting well beyond its jurisdiction in what amounted to "imperial overreach at its worst", according to John Price, professor emeritus of History at the University of Victoria.

Furthermore, Meng's "fraud", committed on behalf of Huawei, was an attempt to get around the Trump administration's sanctions against Iran – sanctions enacted in defiance of the nuclear treaty signed between Iran and the Obama administration and endorsed by the UN Security Council and the EU, in hopes of reducing the risk of nuclear war.

Given the dubious US charge against Meng – intended to enforce Trump's capricious sanctions and to harass a competitor to US tech dominance – Ottawa should have declined to co-operate with the US

extradition request. That would have been well within our legal rights under Canada's Extradition Act, according to extradition lawyer Gary Botting.

Instead, the Trudeau government capitulated, then tried to dress up its subservience to Washington as respect for "the rule of law" – ignoring America's much more serious flouting of the "rule of law" in charging Meng to enforce illegal US sanctions against Iran.

It was Canada's cowardly, unprincipled submission to the US extradition request that put Meng under house arrest in Vancouver – and prompted China to retaliate by imprisoning the two Michaels.

Calling for a "reckoning" and "retaliation" against a nuclear-armed superpower is foolish and provocative – especially when we threw the first stone. **CT**

*Linda McQuaig is a journalist and author of "The Sport & Prey of Capitalists: How the Rich are Stealing Canada's Public Wealth". This article first appeared in the Toronto Star.*

SAM PIZZIGATI

## Don't let Big Tech control our lives

Why has the gap between America's rich and most everyone else widened so much over recent decades? The two most basic arithmetic reasons: Our rich

are raking in fabulously more than ever before, and, at the same time, millions of working people are taking in significantly less.

But why? What explains the sinking incomes of so many Ameri-

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can workers today? Globalisation plays a role. So do the fading value of the minimum wage and the ever smaller share of workers with collectively bargained contracts. But another factor, says MIT economist Daron Acemoglu, may be the most potent driver of these shrinking wages: automation.

Automation happens when machines or algorithms – essentially, instructions for computers – do the work real people used to perform. We’ve been seeing plenty of this substituting over recent decades, Acemoglu recently told the House Select Committee on Economic Disparity and Fairness in Growth. The result: Americans who’ve been performing “routine tasks” in industries rapidly automating “have almost uniformly experienced large declines in their real wages.”

So what to do? Above all, many movers and shakers argue, we must not stop automating. Automation, their argument goes, will always be disruptive. This disruption amounts to the price we simply have to pay for progress. We have no choice. We cannot and should not stop technology’s grand march forward. Only fools – “Luddites” – would even try.

But MIT’s Acemoglu and other analysts argue that we do have a choice, not between accepting and rejecting technological progress, but a choice between two competing visions of what automation can and should be.

“Not all automation technologies”, as Acemoglu told Congress, “are created equal.”

The vision currently driving automation comes from our high-tech corporate giants, mostly in the United States and China, that



MIT economist Daron Acemoglu.

are now laying out two out of every three dollars spent globally on the artificial intelligence right at the core of modern automation. These tech giants, Acemoglu explains, operate on a business model that rests “not on creating jobs but automating them”. Automation, for Big Tech, serves to primarily provide an “easy way of reducing labor costs.”

So Big Tech automates away, even if the tech they introduce makes little contribution to significantly raising productivity. And that has become Big Tech’s dirty little secret: Much of what passes as high-tech “progress” today merely substitutes tech for people. Google is employing, Acemoglu points out, less than a tenth of the workers that General Motors used to employ.

This approach pays off sweetly – for Big Tech execs. Eight of the world’s ten richest people, the Bloomberg Billionaires Index reminds us, owe their fortunes to high-tech.

The rest of us, meanwhile, are subsidising – through the tax code – Big Tech’s profiteering approach to automation. Firms that substi-

tute machines for people pay less in federal payroll and income taxes. Throw in the “generous depreciation allowances” and other sorts of tax subsidies now on the books, adds Acemoglu, and we have a situation where software and equipment get taxed close to zero.

“This generates”, notes the MIT economist, “a powerful motive for excessive automation”, the automating that replaces workers without appreciably – or at all – enhancing productivity.

Technological progress doesn’t have to play out this way. Indeed, technological progress didn’t play out this way back in the middle of the 20th-century. Back then, government-funded research drove technological progress, and government, for the most part, set the research agenda.

“The transformative technologies of the 20th-century, such as antibiotics, sensors, modern engines, and the Internet, have the fingerprints of the government all over them”, notes Acemoglu.

These transformative technologies didn’t aim to replace workers. They aimed to seriously increase productivity and, in the process, created new job opportunities. One example: The automation of the decades right after World War II, Acemoglu told Congress, “created millions of jobs and achieved broadly shared prosperity.”

Today, by contrast, the federal government has essentially handed oversight over technological research to Corporate America. Instead of directly funding research that promises broadly shared economic benefits, the govern-



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ment is bestowing upon Corporate America hefty tax breaks and subsidies to do whatever research top execs would like to pursue.

Top US corporate execs, naturally, like things this way. They want us to see their approach to automation as the only alternative that fits the realities of the 21st-century. But alternatives do exist. Other nations are vividly demonstrating that the technological cutting edge need not become a bleeding edge for working people.

In highly unionised Germany, the House Economic Disparity panel's overview for Tuesday's hearing points out, industrial robots have turned out to be "far more prevalent than in the rest of Europe and the United States". Employers and unions worked together to introduce these robots. Thanks to their joint planning, the intro of robots into the German economy has not resulted "in overall job loss". Most workers have remained "in their original workplace even if performing new tasks."

In Sweden, "job security councils" jointly run by employers and unions "have been providing proactive support, including re-skilling opportunities, and guidance to displaced workers – even before displacement occurs."

No technological factors are preventing the United States from moving in that same direction. We could be automating and innovating – expanding opportunities for meaningful work – at the same time. What would that take? For starters, a robust federal commitment to "scaling up" programmes for life-long learning, as outlined last December in a landmark House Education and Labor Com-

mittee Future of Work report.

We would need to couple those expanded training opportunities with government R&D efforts that, MIT's Acemoglu suggests, specifically advance "technologies that help human productivity and increase labour demand". And then the toughest tasks: We need to break Big Tech's monopoly grip and rewrite those federal tax code provisions that encourage our cor-

porate execs to see automation as their fast track to grand personal fortune – at worker expense. **CT**

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

ROSA MIRIAM ELIZALDE

## America's unhealthy obsession with Cuba

The piggy bank has rattled again. In September 2021, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) gave \$6,669,000 in grants for projects aimed at "regime change" in Cuba, a euphemism to avoid saying "direct intervention by a foreign power".

The United States' current Democratic administration has especially favoured the International Republican Institute (IRI) with a bipartisan generosity that Donald Trump never had.

Other groups in Miami, Washington and Madrid that have also received generous amounts have been among those calling for an invasion of the island. These groups paint an apocalyptic panorama in Havana to secure greater funding next year.

Public funding for the anti-Castro industry in the United

States seems inexhaustible. In the last year, at least 54 organisations have benefitted from the State Department, the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and USAID programs for Cuba. In the last 20 years, this agency has given Creative Associates International, a CIA front, more than \$1.8-billion for espionage, propaganda and the recruitment of agents of "change" including on the island.

One of its best-known projects, the so-called "Cuban Twitter" or ZunZuneo, resulted in a superb failure that unveiled a plot of corruption and flagrant violations of US law. ZunZuneo cost the USAID director his job, but Creative Associates International continues to operate, only now undercover.

The American researcher Tracey Eaton, who for years

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has followed the route of these funds, commented in a recent interview that many of the financing programmes for “regime change” in Cuba are so stealthy that we will probably never know who all the recipients are or what the total amount is, and judging by the known millions, the subsidy must reach an even greater figure.

According to letters from the State Department and USAID that Eaton has received, “democracy-building” strategies are considered “trade secrets” and are exempt from disclosure under the US Freedom of Information Act.

The United States goes berserk at the alleged hint of Russian, Chinese or Islamic intrusion into local politics and online platforms. However, it does not hesitate for a minute to rudely intervene in Cuba, as exposed by the digital daily MintPress News, which documented how private Facebook groups instigated the July 11 riots in several Cuban cities.

“The involvement of foreign nationals in the domestic affairs of Cuba is on a level that can scarcely be conceived of in the United States”, says the publication, adding: “the people who sparked the July 11 protests in Cuba are planning similar actions for October and November.”

The United States is a military superpower whose plans for political subversion are a shame and a scandal, and there is no indication that Washington will now achieve what it has failed to do in 60 years.

In fact, the US government’s obsession with Cuba is two centuries old, as Louis A. Pérez, a historian

at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, has shown in a brilliant essay entitled “Cuba as an Obsessive Compulsive Disorder”.

“The subject of Cuba has rarely been a topic of reasoned disquisition. It defies facile explanation, and certainly cannot be understood solely – or even principally – within the logic of the policy calculus that otherwise serves to inform US foreign relations, mostly because it is not logical”, writes the historian.

What does make sense is the permanence in time of Cuban “intransigence”. Ernesto Che Guevara used to repeat in his speeches in



Che Guevara: “Cuba will not be another Guatemala.”

the first years of the 1959 revolution that “Cuba will not be another Guatemala”. In other words, its independence from the US empire could not be boycotted with media bombings first, induced mobilisations and military attacks later.

The custom of overthrowing independent alternatives is so long and the arrogance by an overwhelming military and media force is so blind that the US government has not been able to foresee its continuous defeats nor has it overcome the trauma of having a rebellious

island “almost within sight of our shores,” as John Quincy Adams put it, and to top it all, without the slightest interest in being “the state that we lack between the entrance to the Gulf and the exit of the vast Mississippi Valley.”

The great truth of all this, as Louis A. Pérez wisely comments, is that Cubans have learned from history, but Washington has not. **CT**

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◆  
JOE ALLEN

# The transhuman roots of the metaverse

The metaverse will allow people to be anyone – any gender, any race, any species. Sounds fun, but is this a world in which we really want to live?

As the name implies, the goal of transhumanism is to transform human beings into superbots through technology. Like all delusional ideas, the end result will be disastrous. Ray Kurzweil, the Google-sanctioned prophet of this techno-cult, predicts that by 2045 (or 2049, or whatever) our souls will exist in a liminal state between the physical and digital worlds.

Right on cue, the metaverse arrived to fulfill yet another of his dismal prophecies.

“The Singularity will represent the culmination of the merger of our biological thinking and existence with our technology”, he foretold in his 2005 scripture *The Singularity is Near*. “There will be no distinction, post-Singularity, between human and machine or between physical and virtual reality. ... [O]ur experiences will increasingly take place in virtual environments. In virtual reality, we can be a different person both physically and emotionally. In fact, other people (such as your romantic partner) will be able to select a different body for you than you might select for yourself (and vice versa).”

More sober voices in the transhumanist movement approach Kurzweil’s predictions with cau-

tion. The same goes for futurists who avoid the “trans-” moniker altogether. Despite those reservations, they’re all facing the same direction. One way or another, we’re gonna fuse with machines.

“VR isn’t simply a new form of media; it sweeps away the barriers of all previous forms”, *Wired* editor Peter Rubin evangelised in his 2018 book *Future Presence*. “[W]e have the ability to become the art – to be part of a world, even to be a character. ... [I]t promises to upend every industry you can name.”

The metaverse couldn’t have come at a better time. As real-life droids take over decent jobs, unemployed schmoes can shoot at robots in virtual reality. A population lost in digital hallucinations doesn’t need brain implants or drugs to keep it pacified. If the VR realm is fun enough, people will keep themselves on lockdown.

Ever since Facebook staked its claim on the metaverse last month, dozens of tech companies have tossed their brainscan helmets in the ring. As I wrote last summer, and reiterated last month, this craze is not a one-off.

Microsoft is now hyping its own virtual workspace. Roblox is entic-

ing the youth with advanced virtual reality games. Reddit’s KarmaLab is coaching companies to thrive in metaspace. Nvidia is offering up custom avatars. Companies like The Sandbox are selling virtual real estate as NFTs.

All across Asia, virtual influencers – computer-generated popstars whom fans treat like people – are preparing to take the metaverse stage. Even the Chinese tech firm Tencent wants in, pending CCP approval. Wall Street investors are pouring gazillions into this lunacy. Big capital en-



Art: 123rf.com



sure its development in some form or another, however corny it turns out to be.

For those who enter the metaverse through high-end equipment, I have no doubt the experience will be thrilling. There will be fantastic adventures in alien environments, epic battles as robots or wizards, and whole battalions of gametes lost to first-person 360° porn.

That thrill is the first major problem. After decades of goofy graphics and simulation sickness, VR is now officially awesome.

Just as LSD molecules will slide right into your serotonin receptors, easy as you please, the new head-mounted displays trick the brain into experiencing a virtual world as if it were real. VR

If augmented and virtual reality become a primary mode of experience, the metaverse will leave young people unprepared to confront the real world

fans call this state “presence.”

Stereoscopic screens and precision headphones create the illusion of depth. Because these visual and audio fields track with your physical body’s motion – detected by external cameras and synced with onboard gyroscopes and accelerometers – you become “embodied” in the VR experience. Add a fully motorised artificial vagina, and there goes your weekend. Fast-forward a decade or three, and there goes a future generation.

“Given VR’s mind-bending capacity to elicit emotional reactions with a simulation, intimacy can be found with a

reactions we have in virtual worlds promise to change us in some fundamental ways.”

The second problem, which will afflict millions, is a chronic disassociation from one’s body and culture. Kissing an actual woman may be scary at first, but it’s certainly worth the risks and fumbles. It just takes a little practice. The same is true of brawling, mountaineering, or climbing a vaulting steel structure. These sorts of rough-and-tumble pastimes turn boys into men. But you have to get physical.

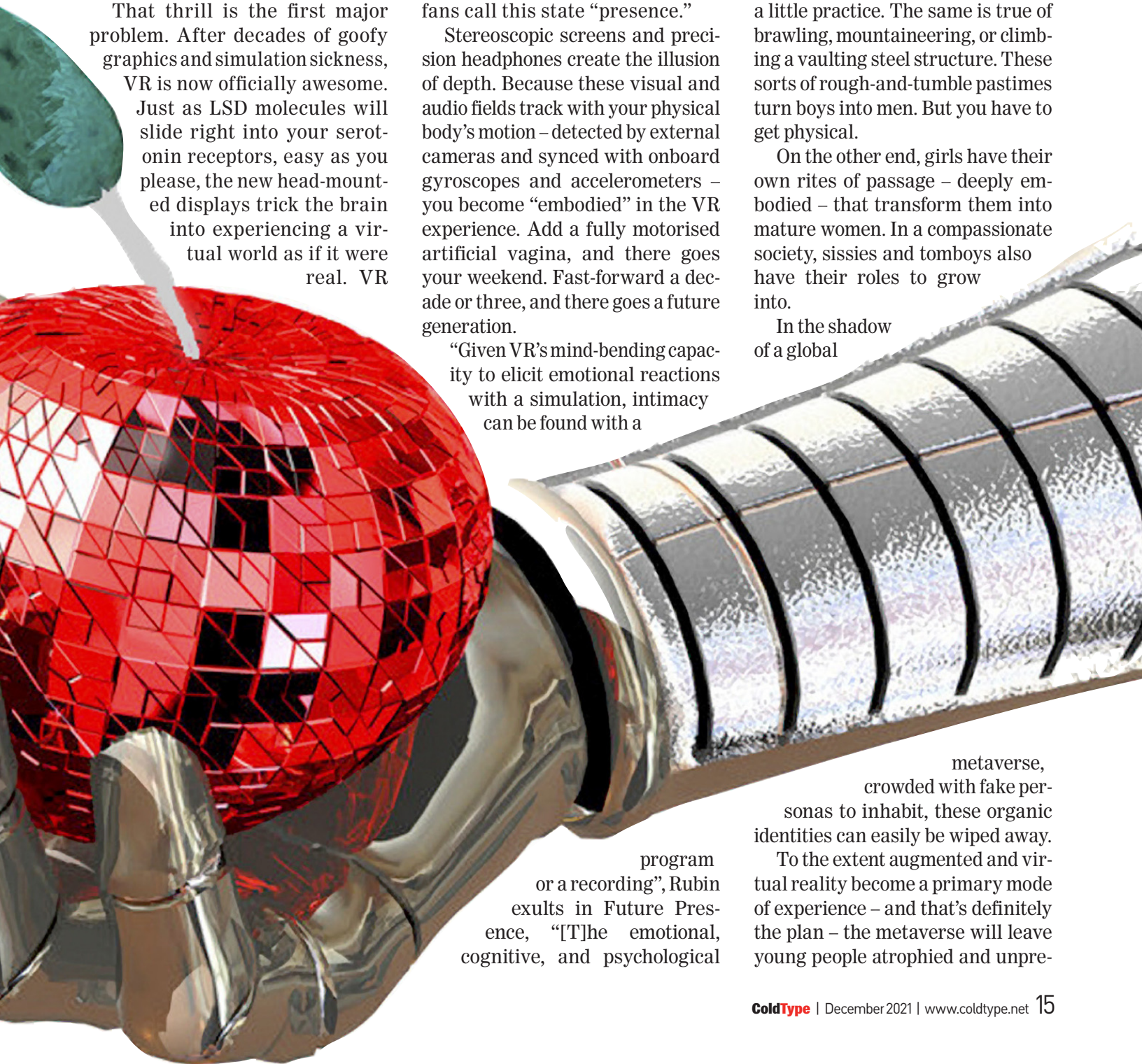
On the other end, girls have their own rites of passage – deeply embodied – that transform them into mature women. In a compassionate society, sissies and tomboys also have their roles to grow into.

In the shadow of a global

metaverse, crowded with fake personas to inhabit, these organic identities can easily be wiped away.

To the extent augmented and virtual reality become a primary mode of experience – and that’s definitely the plan – the metaverse will leave young people atrophied and unpre-

program or a recording”, Rubin exults in *Future Presence*, “[T]he emotional, cognitive, and psychological





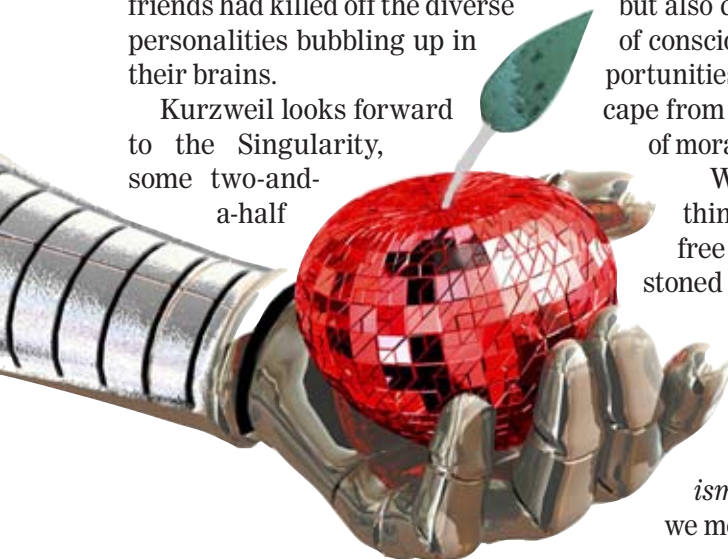
pared to confront the real world head-on. VR creators and ad-men know that, of course, but detachment from reality isn't just part of their business model. It's a religious conviction.

Of all the weird quirks Ray Kurzweil exhibits – and we're talking about a long list – his fetish for becoming a woman in virtual reality is at the top. Back in 2001, he appeared onscreen at a TED Talk as "Ramona", an electronic trollop who sings and dances. While Kurzweil performed Jefferson Airplane's "White Rabbit" (as Ray onstage, as Ramona onscreen), his teenage daughter boogied in the background as a digital dude.

"The experience was a profound and moving one for me", he recounted in *The Singularity Is Near*. "When I looked in the 'cybermirror'...I saw myself as Ramona rather than the person I usually see in the mirror. I experienced the emotional force – and not just the intellectual idea – of transforming myself into someone else."

Five years later, he did a spot on C-SPAN as his alter-ego. Speaking in a Southern drawl, "Ramona" lamented that, unlike Ray, her ex-boyfriends had killed off the diverse personalities bubbling up in their brains.

Kurzweil looks forward to the Singularity, some two-and-a-half



## A virtual environment could allow a chick who identifies as a "fat, gay, pre-medical transition trans man" to find validation

decades away, when people are finally "liberated" from their birth bodies to take on a rainbow of immortal avatars. This will occur in virtual space, he believes, but also out in the real world through pills, injections, bionic implants, blood-borne nanobots, and other perverse technologies.

This gender-bending, borderline schizophrenic desire is a hallmark of the techno-cult. In his (her?) 2013 essay "Transavatars", William Sims Bainbridge wrote:

"True transhumanism does seek to enable each of us to alter and improve (by our own standards) the human body and champions morphological freedom [including to] be able to inhabit different bodies, including virtual bodies.... Avatars point out to us that enhancement is not merely a matter of increasing the effectiveness of a person in taking action, but also can mean an altered form of consciousness that expands opportunities for experiences, and escape from the conventional system of moral restraints."

When God is dead, everything is permitted and may be free to download. In 2015, the stoned prodigy R.U. Sirius drew back the curtain on this loosey-goosey mindset in *Transcendence: The Disinformation Encyclopedia of Transhumanism and the Singularity*: "As we move into an age of shifting

identities, where we can be whatever or whoever we choose to be in our virtual lives, where biotechnology may soon offer changes in skin melanin bringing about the age of the trans-racial, as people start to evolve novel body ornamentations and eventually parts, as we learn how to control our hormones to amp up our estrogen or testosterone to suit the needs of the day, we should always remember to thank the transgendered."

Which brings us to an absurd article just published in the once-respectable *MIT Technology Review*. The author frets that women will be self-conscious about their pudgy avatars in the metaverse. On the other hand, a virtual environment could allow a chick who identifies as a "fat, gay, pre-medical transition trans man" to find validation.

"For me, the joy of seeing myself represented accurately would mean that I am not the only person who believes my existence is valid", he says. "It means a team of developers also see the potential of me existing, as I look, as a man."

As if PC speech codes and expensive medical procedures weren't enough, soon we'll have a vast electronic infrastructure to coddle delusional minds. You can be certain that, just as social media and 24/7 screen time induces teen gender dysphoria, the madhouse of the metaverse will extend identity crises to cartoon teddy bears and polymorphic aliens.

Yes, the miracles of technology allow for infinite possibilities. But at least half of them suck.

Virtual reality is just another jewel on the crown of King Crazy. It allows people to forget who they are and where they come from.

Unlike great films or fine literature, which trigger memory and help

interpret the real world, VR offers a universe unto itself – one devoid of sentience and soul. Those who get lost in this lifeless abyss will have no idea where they're going, out in reality, and no means to control their lives beyond the imaginary powers they've been sold.

As with most delusional states, their madness will seem to have no consequence at first. It'll be hidden behind plastic goggles and closed doors. Normal people can look the other way and hum right along, as they did with the race riots, opioid addictions, smartphone schizoids,

You can be certain that the madhouse of the metaverse will extend identity crises to cartoon teddy bears and polymorphic aliens

and toddlers in dresses. But as more and more vulnerable souls retreat into immersive worlds, losing themselves in preposterous scenarios behind phony digital masks, their

minds will become unglued. Real relationships will dissolve. Eventually, reality will come crashing in.

By that time, everyone who invested in the metaverse will have made their millions. With any luck, we'll have mortuary bots to sweep up the wreckage. Then none of us will have to go outside and get our hands dirty. **CT**

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

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JOHN W. WHITEHEAD & NISHA WHITEHEAD

# Big Brother in disguise: the metaverse beckons

A place where reality is virtual, freedom is only as free as one's technological overlords allow, and artificial intelligence renders humanity obsolete

*“The term metaverse, like the term meritocracy, was coined in a sci-fi dystopia novel written as cautionary tale. Then techies took metaverse, and technocrats took meritocracy, and enthusiastically adopted what was meant to inspire horror.” – Antonio García Martínez*

Welcome to the Matrix (ie the metaverse), where reality is virtual, freedom is only as free as one's technological overlords allow, and artificial intelligence is slowly rendering humanity unnecessary, inferior and obsolete.

Mark Zuckerberg, the CEO of Facebook, sees this digital universe – the metaverse – as the next step in our evolutionary transformation from a human-driven society to a technological one.

Yet while Zuckerberg's vision for this digital frontier has been met with a certain degree of skepticism, the truth – as journalist Antonio García Martínez\* concludes – is that we're already living in the metaverse (see link below)\*.

The metaverse is, in turn, a dystopian meritocracy, where freedom is a conditional construct based

on one's worthiness and compliance.

In a meritocracy, rights are privileges, afforded to those who have earned them. There can be no tolerance for independence or individuality in a meritocracy, where political correctness is formalised, legalised and institutionalised. Likewise, there can be no true freedom when the ability to express oneself, move about, engage in commerce and function in society is predicated on the extent to which you're willing to “fit in.”

We are almost at that stage now.

Consider that in our present virtue-signalling world where fascism disguises itself as tolerance, the only way to enjoy even a semblance of freedom is by opting to voluntarily censor yourself, comply, conform and march in lockstep with whatever prevailing views dominate.

Fail to do so – by daring to espouse “dangerous” ideas or support unpopular political movements – and you will find yourself shut out of commerce, employment, and society: Facebook will ban you, Twitter will shut you down, Instagram will de-platform you, and your employer will issue ultimatums that force you to choose between your so-called freedoms and economic survival.

This is exactly how Corporate America plans to groom us for a world in which “we the people” are unthinking, unresistant, slavishly obedient automatons in bondage to a Deep State policed by computer algorithms.

Science fiction has become fact. Twenty-something years after the Wachowskis' iconic film, *The Matrix*, introduced us to a futuristic world in which humans exist in a computer-simulated non-reality powered by authoritarian machines – a world where the choice between existing in a denial-ridden virtual dream-state or facing up to the harsh, difficult realities of life comes down to a blue pill or a red pill – we stand at the precipice of a technologically-dominated matrix of our own making.

We are living the prequel to *The Matrix*, falling further under the spell of technologically-driven virtual communities, virtual realities and virtual conveniences managed by artificially intelligent machines that are on a fast track to replacing human beings and eventually dominating every aspect of our lives.

In *The Matrix*, computer programmer Thomas Anderson a.k.a. hacker Neo is wakened from a virtual slumber by Morpheus, a freedom fighter

\* <https://bariweiss.substack.com/p/youre-already-living-in-the-metaverse>

# The Meta(morphosis)

A Giant Insect awoke one morning  
to find himself Transformed into a  
Surveillance Capitalist!



seeking to liberate humanity from a lifelong hibernation state imposed by hyper-advanced artificial intelligence machines that rely on humans as an organic power source. With their minds plugged into a perfectly crafted virtual reality, few humans ever realise they are living in an artificial dream world.

Neo is given a choice: to take the red pill, wake up and join the resistance, or take the blue pill, remain asleep and serve as fodder for the powers-that-be.

Most people opt for the blue pill.

In our case, the blue pill – a one-way ticket to a life sentence in an electronic concentration camp – has been honey-coated to hide the bitter aftertaste, sold to us in the name of expediency and delivered by way of blazingly fast Internet, cellphone signals that never drop a call, thermostats that keep us at the perfect temperature without our having to raise a finger, and entertainment that can be simultaneously streamed to our TVs, tablets and cell phones.

Yet we are not merely in thrall with these technologies that were in-

tended to make our lives easier. We have become enslaved by them.

Look around you. Everywhere you turn, people are so addicted to their internet-connected screen devices – smartphones, tablets, computers, televisions – that they can go for hours at a time submerged in a virtual world where human interaction is filtered through the medium of technology.

This is not freedom. This is not even progress. This is technological tyranny and iron-fisted control delivered by way of the surveillance state, corporate giants such as Google and Facebook, and government spy agencies such as the National Security Agency.

So consumed are we with availing ourselves of all the latest technologies that we have spared barely a thought for the ramifications of our heedless, headlong stumble towards a world in which our abject reliance on internet-connected gadgets and gizmos is grooming us for a future in which freedom is an illusion.

Yet it's not just freedom that hangs in the balance. Humanity itself is on the line. If ever Americans find themselves in bondage to technological tyrants, we will have only ourselves to blame for having forged the chains through our own lassitude, laziness and abject reliance on internet-connected gadgets and gizmos that render us wholly irrelevant.

Indeed, we're fast approaching Philip K. Dick's vision of the future as depicted in the film *Minority Report*. There, police agencies apprehend criminals before they can commit a crime, driverless cars populate the highways, and a person's biometrics are constantly scanned and used to track their movements, target them for advertising, and keep them under

perpetual surveillance.

Cue the dawning of the Age of the Internet of Things (IoT), in which internet-connected “things” monitor your home, your health and your habits in order to keep your pantry stocked, your utilities regulated and your life under control and relatively worry-free.

The key word here, however, is control. In the not-too-distant future, “just about every device you have – even products like chairs, that you don’t normally expect to see technology in – will be connected and talking to each other.”

By the end of 2018, according to Jacob Kastrenakes, who wrote at [theverge.com](http://theverge.com) in 2015, “there were an estimated 22-billion internet of things connected devices in use around the world... Forecasts suggest that by 2030 around 50-billion of these IoT devices will be in use around the world, creating a massive web of interconnected devices spanning everything from smartphones to kitchen appliances.”

As the technologies powering these devices have become increasingly sophisticated, they have also become increasingly widespread, encompassing everything from toothbrushes and lightbulbs to cars, smart meters and medical equipment.

It is estimated that 127 new IoT devices are connected to the web every second. This “connected” industry has become the next big societal transformation, right up there with the Industrial Revolution, a watershed moment in technology and culture.

Between driverless cars that completely lacking a steering wheel, accelerator, or brake pedal, and smart pills embedded with computer chips, sensors, cameras and robots, we are poised to outpace the imagina-

## How do you defend yourself against the robotic cop being developed by the Pentagon programmed to respond to any perceived threat with violence?

tions of science fiction writers such as Philip K. Dick and Isaac Asimov. (By the way, there is no such thing as a driverless car. Someone or something will be driving, but it won’t be you.)

These Internet-connected techno gadgets include smart light bulbs that discourage burglars by making your house look occupied, smart thermostats that regulate the temperature of your home based on your activities, and smart doorbells that let you see who is at your front door without leaving the comfort of your couch.

Nest, Google’s suite of smart home products, has been at the forefront of the “connected” industry, with such technologically savvy conveniences as a smart lock that tells your thermostat who is home, what temperatures they like, and when your home is unoccupied; a home phone service system that interacts with your connected devices to “learn when you come and go” and alert you if your kids don’t come home; and a sleep system that will monitor when you fall asleep, when you wake up, and keep the house noises and temperature in a sleep-conducive state.

The aim of these internet-connected devices, as Nest proclaims, is to make “your house a more thoughtful and conscious home”. For example, your car can signal ahead that you’re on your way home, while Hue lights can flash on and off to get your attention if Nest Protect senses

something’s wrong. Your coffee maker, relying on data from fitness and sleep sensors, will brew a stronger pot of coffee for you if you’ve had a restless night.

Yet given the speed and trajectory at which these technologies are developing, it won’t be long before these devices are operating entirely independent of their human creators, which poses a whole new set of worries. As technology expert Nicholas Carr notes, “As soon as you allow robots, or software programs, to act freely in the world, they’re going to run up against ethically fraught situations and face hard choices that can’t be resolved through statistical models. That will be true of self-driving cars, self-flying drones, and battlefield robots, just as it’s already true, on a lesser scale, with automated vacuum cleaners and lawnmowers.”

For instance, just as the robotic vacuum, Roomba, “makes no distinction between a dust bunny and an insect”, weaponised drones will be incapable of distinguishing between a fleeing criminal and someone merely jogging down a street. For that matter, how do you defend yourself against a robotic cop – such as the Atlas android being developed by the Pentagon – that has been programmed to respond to any perceived threat with violence?

Moreover, it’s not just our homes and personal devices that are being reordered and reimagined in this connected age: it’s our workplaces, our health systems, our government, our bodies and our innermost thoughts that are being plugged into a matrix over which we have no real control.

It is expected that by 2030, we will all experience The Internet of Senses (IoS), enabled by Artificial Intel-



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ligence (AI), Virtual Reality (VR), Augmented Reality (AR), 5G, and automation. The Internet of Senses relies on connected technology interacting with our senses of sight, sound, taste, smell, and touch by way of the brain as the user interface. As journalist Susan Fourtane explains:

Many predict that by 2030, the lines between thinking and doing will blur. Fifty-nine percent of consumers believe that we will be able to see map routes on VR glasses by simply thinking of a destination... By 2030, technology is set to respond to our thoughts, and even share them with others... Using the brain as an interface could mean the end of keyboards, mice, game controllers, and ultimately user interfaces for any digital device. The user needs to only think about the commands, and they will just happen. Smartphones could even function without touch screens.

In other words, the IoS will rely on technology being able to access and act on your thoughts.

Fourtane outlines several trends related to the IoS that are expected to become a reality by 2030:

1. Thoughts become action: using the brain as the interface, for example, users will be able to see map routes on VR glasses by simply thinking of a destination.

2. Sounds will become an extension of the devised virtual reality: users could mimic anyone's voice re-

This is the metaverse, wrapped up in the siren-song of convenience and sold to us as the secret to success, entertainment and happiness

alistically enough to fool even family members.

3. Real food will become secondary to imagined tastes. A sensory device for your mouth could digitally enhance anything you eat, so that any food can taste like your favourite treat.

4. Smells will become a projection of this virtual reality so that virtual visits, to forests or the countryside for instance, would include experiencing all the natural smells of those places.

5. Total touch: Smartphones with screens will convey the shape and texture of the digital icons and buttons they are pressing.

6. Merged reality: VR game worlds will become indistinguishable from physical reality by 2030.

This is the metaverse, wrapped up in the siren-song of convenience and sold to us as the secret to success, entertainment and happiness.

It's a false promise, a wicked trap to snare us, with a single objective: total control.

George Orwell understood this. His masterpiece, *Nineteen Eighty-*

*Four*, portrays a global society of total control in which people are not allowed to have thoughts that in any way disagree with the corporate state. There is no personal freedom, and advanced technology has become the driving force behind a surveillance-driven society. Snitches and cameras are everywhere. And people are subject to the Thought Police, who deal with anyone guilty of thought crimes. The government, or "Party", is headed by Big Brother, who appears on posters everywhere with the words: "Big Brother is watching you."

As I make clear in my book *Battlefield America: The War on the American People* and in its fictional counterpart *The Erik Blair Diaries*, total control over every aspect of our lives, right down to our inner thoughts, is the objective of any totalitarian regime.

The metaverse is just Big Brother in disguise. **CT**

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

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Caught in the glare of a previous generation, Anya Taylor-Joy stars in the film *Last Night in Soho*, a blend of humour and horror.

MELISSA TYLER

# Glamorous and seedy: Soho by night

New film reflects horror, humour, and a sinister version of London in the '60s

**M**uch like west Berlin in *Wings of Desire* or New York in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, location is one of the main characters in Edgar Wright's new film, *Last Night in Soho*. The film's blend of horror and humour is set against a seedy, sinister version of 1960s Soho. Replete with a period soundtrack and aesthetics out of an Italian giallo thriller, it shows how glamour is rarely all it seems and that dreams can quickly descend into nightmares, at least in this place.

Soho might occupy less than a square mile of central London, but it has a global reputation as one of the English capital's most tantalising areas. People feel drawn to it. As the film's protagonist Eloise says in the film, "if I could live any place and any time, I'd live here."

Known for its glitz and glamour and on the doorstep of the West End, it has been at the heart of the capital's sex industry throughout its history. This heady mix made it the ideal stage for swinging London in the '60s.

It's an area that drew me, too,

as I devoted ten years to studying the people working in the area's sex shops for my book, *Soho at Work*. Collating material from interviews, literary sources, photographs and observations, I came to understand Soho as a place of complexity, contrast and change. Some think it is over-sanitised, over-developed or just plain "over", but this is not necessarily irreversible, all-encompassing or even new.

**H**istorian Judith Summers notes that one of the earliest recordings of

the name “So-Hoe!” (a common hunting cry) originates from 1562 when the lord mayor of London and his aldermen hunted hare, feasted and indulged thereafter undertaking a formal inspection of the city’s water conduits. As *Last Night in Soho* reminds us, this blend of commerce and pleasure has been an enduring, if not always endearing, feature of Soho life ever since.

Fast forward 400 years from the 1560s to the 1960s, and Soho experiences one of its many “golden” periods. This is a time of blue films and red lights, which in combination produced the kind of enticing chromatic and cultural landscape that Wright captures. Given the “edgy” allure of this period, it is not surprising that ’60s Soho has been widely written about and much romanticised.

To the hero of Colin MacInnes’s novel *Absolute Beginners*, Soho is the place where “all the things they say happen, do”. Contrasting the vivacious life of Soho with neighbouring Leicester Square, he says, “You don’t go into Soho to see films because Soho is a film.”

But this period also cast long shadows over the area, in the form of violence and exploitation. As the sex industry flourished, so too did protection rackets and organised crime.

The Street Offences Act (1959), designed to clear sex workers off the streets, effectively pushed them into the grip of pimps and property owners. This act had yet another beneficial effect on the sex industry from a profiteer’s perspective: “near beer” bars (immortalised in the Kinks’ song *Lola*) sprung up all over Soho in the ’60s serving overpriced non-alcoholic drinks masquerading as expensive cocktails, fleecing unsuspecting punters and bypassing licensing regulations in the process.

## Known for its glitz and glamour and on the doorstep of the West End, Soho has been at the heart of the capital’s sex industry throughout its history

If the Street Offences Act (1959) was a bonus for the men who controlled sex workers, the 1959 Obscene Publications Act paved the way for hardcore porn to rapidly become a multi-million-pound business. The act relaxed some restrictions on printed material and, as a result, the sex industry seemed to swallow Soho whole, as the area became synonymous with commercial sex throughout the ’60s.

In the decades since, Soho has changed considerably, with the number of

sex shops, hostess bars and adult cinemas steadily declining, and a proliferation of post-production media studios, cafes and restaurants gradually replacing them.

Writing in the 1920s, well ahead of what many regard as Soho’s bohemian “heyday”, the writer Alec Waugh lamented that, as “a dingy and rather pathetic sham” of its former self, over-commercialised and faux-bohemian, Soho was not what it had been. However, now, like then, Soho retains an “edge” to it, an eyebrow-raising association that connects its 16th-century past to its mid-20th century heyday, and no doubt to its future.

Soho is phoenix-like in its capacity to continually reinvent itself and is arguably at its best when under threat. The work of the Soho Society, a community group formed in 1972 to preserve the area’s distinctive history, geography and culture, is an ongoing testimony to this spirit. And Soho’s ethos of openness means that LGBTQ+ groups, venues and organisations have flourished in recent years, countering the hegemonic masculinity that once dominated Soho’s sexual landscape.

In reality, then, there is not one Soho but many, sometimes intertwining, often in conflict, or living or looking past each other. This is part, but only part, of what makes it so fascinating and for those who seek to control, regulate and develop it. While Edgar Wright’s film might evoke a neon-lit ’60s fantasy, it shines a suitably red glow on Soho’s multiple and enduring characters, then and now. **CT**

**Melissa Tyler** is Professor in Work and Organisation Studies, at the University of Essex. This article was first published in *The Conversation* at [www.theconversation.com](http://www.theconversation.com)



Poster for the Edgar Wright film, *Last Night in Soho*

Focus Features



GEORGE MONBIOT

# Surface tension

Our survival depends on piercing the glassy surface of distraction, and ceasing to obey

**T**here is a myth about human beings that withstands all evidence. It's that we always put our survival first. This is true of other species. When confronted by an impending threat, such as winter, they invest great resources into avoiding or withstanding it: migrating or hibernating, for example. Humans are a different matter.

When faced with an impending or chronic threat, such as climate or ecological breakdown, we seem to go out of our way to compromise our survival. We convince ourselves that it's not so serious, or even that it isn't happening. We double down on destruction, swapping our ordinary cars for SUVs, jetting to Oblivia on a long-haul flight, burning it all up in a final frenzy. In the back of our minds, there's a voice whispering, "If it were really so serious, someone would stop us". If we attend to these issues at all, we do so in ways that are petty, tokenistic, comically ill-matched to the scale of our predicament. It is impossible to discern, in our response to what we know, the primacy of our survival instinct.

**H**ere is what we know. We know that our lives are entirely dependent on complex natural systems: the at-

mosphere, ocean currents, the soil, the planet's webs of life. People who study complex systems have discovered that they behave in consistent ways. It doesn't matter whether the system is a banking network, a nation state, a rainforest or an Antarctic ice shelf; its behaviour follows certain mathematical rules. In normal conditions, the system regulates itself, maintaining a state of equilibrium. It can absorb stress up to a certain point. But then it suddenly flips. It passes a tipping point, then falls into a new state of equilibrium, which is often impossible to reverse.

Human civilisation relies on current equilibrium states. But, all over the world, crucial systems appear to be approaching their tipping points. If one system crashes, it is likely to drag others down, triggering a cascade of chaos known as systemic environmental collapse. This is what happened during previous mass extinctions.

Here's one of the many ways in which it could occur. A belt of savannah, known as the Cerrado, covers central Brazil. Its vegetation depends on dew forming, which depends in turn on deep-rooted trees drawing up groundwater, then releasing it into the air through their leaves. But over the past few years, vast tracts of the Cerrado have been

Photo: Tim Drennell/flickr.com



4,000 people march to a rally outside Sheffield City Hall in England demanding greater action on reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

cleared to plant crops – mostly soya to feed the world's chickens and pigs. As the trees are felled, the air becomes drier. This means smaller plants die, ensuring that even less water is circulated. In combination with global heating, some scientists warn, this vicious cycle could – soon and suddenly – flip the entire system into desert.

The Cerrado is the source of some of South America's great rivers, including those flowing north into the Amazon basin. As less water feeds the rivers, this could exacerbate the stress afflicting the rainforests. They are being hammered by a deadly combination of clearing, burning and heating, and are already threatened with possible systemic collapse. The Cerrado and the rainforest both create "rivers in the sky" – streams of wet air – that distribute rainfall around the world and help to drive global circulation: the movement of air and ocean currents.





Global circulation is already looking vulnerable. For example, the Atlantic meridional overturning circulation (AMOC), which delivers heat from the tropics towards the poles, is being disrupted by the melting of Arctic ice, and has begun to weaken. Without it, the UK would have a climate similar to Siberia's.

AMOC has two equilibrium states: on and off. It has been on for almost 12,000 years, following a devastating, thousand-year off state called the Younger Dryas (12,900 to 11,700 years ago), which caused a global spiral of environmental change. Everything we know and love depends on AMOC remaining in the on state.

Regardless of which complex system is being studied, there's a way of telling whether it is approaching a tipping point. Its outputs begin to flicker. The closer to its critical threshold it comes, the wilder the fluctuations. What we've seen this

year is a great global flickering, as Earth systems begin to break down. The heat domes over the western seaboard of North America; the massive fires there, in Siberia and around the Mediterranean; the lethal floods in Germany, Belgium, China, Sierra Leone – these are the signals that, in climatic morse code, spell “mayday.”

You might expect an intelligent species to respond to these signals swiftly and conclusively, by radically altering its relationship with the living world. But this is not how we function. Our great intelligence, our highly evolved consciousness that once took us so far, now works against us.

An analysis by the media sustainability group Albert found that “cake” was mentioned 10 times as often as “climate change” on UK TV programmes in 2020. “Scotch

egg” received double the mentions of “biodiversity”. “Banana bread” beat “wind power” and “solar power” put together.

I recognise that the media are not society, and that television stations have an interest in promoting banana bread and circuses. We could argue about the extent to which the media are either reflecting or generating an appetite for cake over climate. But I suspect that, of all the ways in which we might measure our progress on preventing systemic environmental collapse, the cake-to-climate ratio is the decisive index.

The current ratio reflects a determined commitment to irrelevance in the face of global catastrophe. Tune in to almost any radio station, at any time, and you can hear the frenetic distraction at work. While around the world wildfires rage, floods sweep cars from the streets and crops shrivel, you will hear a debate about whether to sit down

or stand up while pulling on your socks, or a discussion about charcuterie boards for dogs. I'm not making up these examples: I stumbled across them while flicking between channels on days of climate disaster. If an asteroid were heading towards Earth, and we turned on the radio, we'd probably hear: "So the hot topic today is – what's the funniest thing that's ever happened to you while eating a kebab?" This is the way the world ends, not with a bang but with banter.

Faced with crises on an unprecedented scale, our heads are filled with insistent babble. The trivialisation of public life creates a loop: it becomes socially impossible to talk about anything else. I'm not suggesting that we should discuss only the impending catastrophe. I'm not against bants. What I'm against is nothing but bants.

It's not just on the music and entertainment channels that this deadly flippancy prevails. Most political news is nothing but court gossip: who's in, who's out, who said what to whom. It studiously avoids what lies beneath: the dark money, the corruption, the shift of power away from the democratic sphere, the gathering environmental collapse that makes a nonsense of its obsessions.

I'm sure it's not deliberate. I don't think anyone, faced with the prospect of systemic environmental collapse, is telling themselves: "Quick, let's change the subject to charcuterie boards for dogs". It works at a deeper level than this. It's a subconscious reflex that tells us more about ourselves than our conscious actions do. The chatter on the radio sounds like the distant signals from a dying star.

There are some species of caddisfly

If we can't pierce the glassy surface of distraction, and engage with what lies beneath, we won't secure the survival of our children or our species

whose survival depends on breaking the surface film of the water in a river. The female pushes through it – no mean feat for such a small and delicate creature – then swims down the water column to lay her eggs on the riverbed. If she cannot puncture the surface, she cannot close the circle of life, and her progeny die with her.

This is also the human story. If we cannot pierce the glassy surface of distraction, and engage with what lies beneath, we will not secure the survival of our children or, perhaps, our species. But we seem unable or unwilling to break the surface film. I think of this strange state as our "surface tension". It's the tension between what we know about the crisis we face, and the frivolity with which we distance ourselves from it.

Surface tension dominates even when we claim to be addressing the destruction of our life-support systems. We focus on what I call micro-consumerist bollocks (MCB): tiny issues such as plastic straws and coffee cups, rather than the huge structural forces driving us towards catastrophe. We are obsessed with plastic bags. We believe we're doing the world a favour by buying tote bags instead, though, on one estimate, the environmental impact of producing an organic cotton tote bag is equivalent to that of 20,000 plastic ones.

We are rightly horrified by the image of a seahorse with its tail wrapped around a cotton bud, but apparently unconcerned about the elimination

of entire marine ecosystems by the fishing industry. We tut and shake our heads, and keep eating our way through the life of the sea.

A company called Soletair Power receives wide media coverage for its claim to be "fighting climate change" by catching the carbon dioxide exhaled by office workers. But its carbon-sucking unit – an environmentally costly tower of steel and electronics – extracts just 1kg of carbon dioxide every eight hours. Humanity produces, mostly by burning fossil fuels, roughly 32-billion kg of CO<sub>2</sub> in the same period.

I don't believe our focus on microscopic solutions is accidental, even if it is unconscious. All of us are expert at using the good things we do to blot out the bad things. Rich people can persuade themselves they've gone green because they recycle, while forgetting that they have a second home (arguably the most extravagant of all their assaults on the living world, as another house has to be built to accommodate the family they've displaced). And I suspect that, in some deep, unlit recess of the mind, we assure ourselves that if our solutions are so small, the problem can't be so big.

I'm not saying the small things don't matter. I'm saying they should not matter to the exclusion of things that matter more. Every little counts. But not for very much.

Our focus on MCB aligns with the corporate agenda. The deliberate effort to stop us seeing the bigger picture began in 1953 with a campaign called Keep America Beautiful. It was founded by packaging manufacturers, motivated by the profits they could make by replacing reusable containers with disposable plastic. Above all, they wanted to sink state laws insisting that glass bottles were



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returned and reused. Keep America Beautiful shifted the blame for the tsunami of plastic trash the manufacturers caused on to “litter bugs”, a term it invented.

The “Love Where You Live” campaign, launched in the UK in 2011 by Keep Britain Tidy, Imperial Tobacco, McDonald’s and the sweet manufacturer Wrigley, seemed to me to play a similar role. It had the added bonus – as it featured strongly in classrooms – of granting Imperial Tobacco exposure to schoolchildren.

The corporate focus on litter, amplified by the media, distorts our view of all environmental issues. For example, a recent survey of public beliefs about river pollution found that “litter and plastic” was by far the biggest cause people named. In reality, the biggest source of water pollution is farming, followed by sewage. Litter is way down the list. It’s not that plastic is unimportant. The problem is that it’s almost the only story we know.

In 2004, the advertising company Ogilvy & Mather, working for the oil giant BP, took this blame-shifting a step further by inventing the personal carbon footprint. It was a useful innovation, but it also had the effect of diverting political pressure from the producers of fossil fuels to consumers. The oil companies didn’t stop there. The most extreme example I’ve seen was a 2019 speech by the chief executive of the oil company Shell, Ben van Beurden. He instructed us to “eat seasonally and recycle more”, and publicly berated his chauffeur for buying a punnet of strawberries in January.

The great political transition of the past 50 years, driven by corporate marketing, has been a shift from addressing our problems collectively to addressing them individually. In other words, it has turned us from citizens into consumers. It’s not hard

All the crises we seek to avert **today** become twice as hard to address as global economic activity doubles, then twice again, then twice again

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to see why we have been herded down this path. As citizens, joining together to demand political change, we are powerful. As consumers, we are almost powerless.

In his book *Life and Fate*, Vasily Grossman notes that, when Stalin and Hitler were in power, “one of the most astonishing human traits that came to light at this time was obedience”. The instinct to obey, he observed, was stronger than the instinct to survive. Acting alone, seeing ourselves as consumers, fixating on MCB and mind-numbing trivia, even as systemic environmental collapse looms: these are forms of obedience. We would rather face civilisational death than the social embarrassment caused by raising awkward subjects, and the political trouble involved in resisting powerful forces. The obedience reflex is our greatest flaw, the kink in the human brain that threatens our lives.

What do we see if we break the surface tension? The first thing we encounter, looming out of the depths, should scare us almost out of our wits. It’s called growth. Economic growth is universally hailed as a good thing. Governments measure their success on their ability to deliver it. But think for a moment about what it means. Say we achieve the modest aim, promoted by bodies like the IMF and the World Bank, of 3 percent global growth a year. This

means that all the economic activity you see **today** – and most of the environmental impacts it causes – doubles in 24 years; in other words, by 2045. Then it doubles again by 2069. Then again by 2093. It’s like the Gemino curse in Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, which multiplies the treasure in the Lestrange vault until it threatens to crush Harry and his friends to death. All the crises we seek to avert today become twice as hard to address as global economic activity doubles, then twice again, then twice again.

Have we reached the bottom yet? By no means. The Gemino curse is just one outcome of a thing we scarcely dare mention. Just as it was once blasphemous to use the name of God, even the word appears, in polite society, to be taboo: capitalism.

Most people struggle to define the system that dominates our lives. But if you press them, they’re likely to mumble something about hard work and enterprise, buying and selling. This is how the beneficiaries of the system want it to be understood. In reality, the great fortunes amassed under capitalism are not obtained this way, but through looting, monopoly and rent grabbing, followed by inheritance.

One estimate suggests that, over the course of 200 years, the British extracted from India, at current prices, \$45-trillion. They used this money to fund industrialisation at home and the colonisation of other nations, whose wealth was then looted in turn.

The looting takes place not just across geography, but also across time. The apparent health of our economies today depends on seizing natural wealth from future generations. This is what the oil companies, seeking to distract us with MCB and

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carbon footprints, are doing. Such theft from the future is the motor of economic growth. Capitalism, which sounds so reasonable when explained by a mainstream economist, is in ecological terms nothing but a pyramid scheme.

Is this the riverbed? No. Capitalism is just a means by which something even bigger is pursued. Wealth.

It scarcely matters how green you think you are. The main cause of your environmental impact isn't your attitude. It isn't your mode of consumption. It isn't the choices you make. It's your money. If you have surplus money, you spend it. While you might persuade yourself that you are a green mega-consumer, in reality you are just a mega-consumer. This is why the environmental impacts of the very rich, however right-on they may be, are massively greater than those of everyone else.

Preventing more than 1.5C of global heating means that our average emissions should be no greater than two tonnes of carbon dioxide per person per year. But the richest 1 percent of the world's people produce an average of more than 70 tonnes. Bill Gates, according to one estimate, emits almost 7,500 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub>, mostly from flying in his private jets. Roman Abramovich, the same figures suggest, produces almost 34,000 tonnes, largely by running his gigantic yacht.

The multiple homes that ultra-rich people own might be fitted with solar panels, their supercars might be electric, their private planes might run on biokerosene, but these tweaks make little difference to the overall impact of their consumption. In some cases, they increase it. The switch to biofuels favoured by Bill Gates is now among the greatest causes of habitat destruction, as forests are felled to produce wood

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pellets and liquid fuels, and soils are trashed to make biomethane.

But more important than the direct impacts of the ultra-wealthy is the political and cultural power with which they block effective change. Their cultural power relies on a hypnotising fairytale. Capitalism persuades us that we are all temporarily embarrassed millionaires. This is why we tolerate it. In reality, some people are extremely rich because others are extremely poor: massive wealth depends on exploitation. And if we did all become millionaires, we would cook the planet in no time at all. But the fairytale of universal wealth, one day, secures our obedience.

The difficult truth is that, to prevent climate and ecological catastrophe, we need to level down. We need to pursue what the Belgian philosopher Ingrid Robeyns calls limitarianism. Just as there is a poverty line below which no one should fall, there is a wealth line above which no one should rise. What we need are not carbon taxes, but wealth taxes. It shouldn't surprise us that ExxonMobil favours a carbon tax. It's a form of MCB. It addresses only one aspect of the many-headed environmental crisis, while transferring responsibility from the major culprits to everyone. It can be highly regressive, which means that the poor pay more than the rich.

But wealth taxes strike at the heart of the issue. They should be high enough to break the spiral of accumulation and redistribute the riches accumulated by a few. They could be used to put us on an entirely different track, one that I call "private sufficiency, public luxury". While there is not enough ecological or even physical space on Earth for everyone to enjoy private luxury, there is enough to provide everyone with public luxury: magnificent parks, hospitals, swimming pools, art galleries, tennis courts and transport systems, playgrounds and community centres. We should each have our own small domains – private sufficiency – but when we want to spread our wings, we could do so without seizing resources from other people.

In consenting to the continued destruction of our life-support systems, we accommodate the desires of the ultra-rich and the powerful corporations they control. By remaining trapped in the surface film, absorbed in frivolity and MCB, we grant them a social licence to operate.

We will endure only if we cease to consent. The 19th-century democracy campaigners knew this, the suffragettes knew it, Gandhi knew it, Martin Luther King knew it. The environmental protesters who demand systemic change have also grasped this fundamental truth. In Fridays for Future, Green New Deal Rising, Extinction Rebellion and the other global uprisings against systemic environmental collapse, we see people, mostly young people, refusing to consent. What they understand is history's most important lesson. Our survival depends on disobedience. **CT**

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







MEL D. COLE

# Capturing the faces of protest

Concert photographer finds a place in the front line of an American uprising

30 **ColdType** | December 2021 | [www.coldtype.net](http://www.coldtype.net)





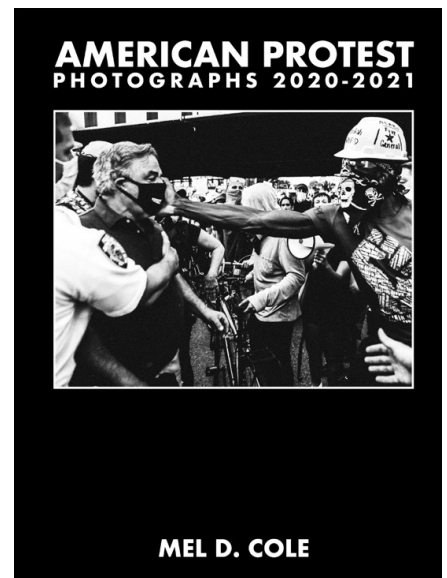


**M**el D. Cole has spent the last 20 years specialising in the photography of music and nightlife. Then, in April 2020, as work on his entertainment beat dried up during the early days of the Covid-19 lockdowns, he started driving around New York documenting life on the city's streets.

The angry disruption that followed the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis on May 25, 2020, persuaded Cole to dedicate the rest of that year and 2021 to recording the Black Lives Matter protests as they swept the country. In addition to capturing the action in New York City, Cole travelled to cover protests in other hot spots including Washington, DC, Houston, Minneapolis, and Richmond, Virginia.

The body of work produced during that electrifying summer of 2020 and beyond is a powerful chronicle of the hurt, outrage and courage of people compelled to take action following Floyd's brutal murder.

Inspired by the black-and-white



**AMERICAN PROTEST:  
Photographs 2020-2021**

Mel D. Cole

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**ABOVE:** Cops battle protesters and counter-protesters in Washington on Jan. 6, 2021

**LEFT:** A man receives medical attention outside the US Capitol in Washington.

**TOP, RIGHT:** Counter-protester arrested at a pro-Trump rally in New York's Times Square.









LEFT: threatening graffiti in Philadelphia after police killed 27-year-old Walter Wallace Jr.

TOP: Robert E. Lee statue in Richmond, which was dismantled a year later.

ABOVE: Clash at a "Blue Lives Matter" event in support of police in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, New York.

documentary tradition of the 1960s, Cole seeks, in his new book, *American Protest*, to create what he calls "a collective memory" that continues the legacy of the civil rights movement.

The success of this vibrant output is endorsed by actor Jamie Lee Curtis who says, in the book's introduction, "It is crucial work from a talented, independent voice in photojournalism and reportage. ... The last year of protests has cracked this country wide open with the exposure of systemic issues of racism, police brutality and the resulting response of pent up rage . . . These pictures will help heal and foster needed change." **CT**

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JOHN PILGER

# Justice for Assange is justice for all

Julian Assange is a truth-teller who has revealed government crimes and lies on a vast scale and so performed one of the great public services of my lifetime

When I first saw Julian Assange in Belmarsh prison, in 2019, shortly after he had been dragged from his refuge in the Ecuadorian embassy, he said, “I think I am losing my mind.”

He was gaunt and emaciated, his eyes hollow and the thinness of his arms was emphasised by a yellow identifying cloth tied around his left arm, an evocative symbol of institutional control.

For all but the two hours of my visit, he was confined to a solitary cell in a wing known as “healthcare”, an Orwellian name. In the cell next to him a deeply disturbed man screamed through the night. Another occupant suffered from terminal cancer. Another was seriously disabled.

“One day we were allowed to play Monopoly”, he said, “as therapy. That was our healthcare!”

“This is One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest”, I said.

“Yes, only more insane.”

Julian’s black sense of humour has often rescued him, but no more. The insidious torture he has suffered in Belmarsh has had devastating effects. Read the reports of Nils Melzer, the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture, and the clinical opinions

of Michael Kopelman, emeritus professor of neuropsychiatry at King’s College London and Dr. Quentin Deeley, and reserve a contempt for America’s hired gun in court, James Lewis QC, who dismissed this as “malingering.”

I was especially moved by the expert words of Dr. Kate Humphrey, a clinical neuropsychologist at Imperial College, London. She told the Old Bailey last year that Julian’s intellect had gone from “in the superior, or more likely very superior, range” to “significantly below” this optimal level, to the point where he was struggling to absorb information and “perform in the low to average range.”

On October 27, at another court hearing in this shameful Kafkaesque drama, I watched him struggle to remember his name when asked by the judge to state it.

For most of his first year in Belmarsh, he was locked up. Denied proper exercise, he strode the length of his small cell, back and forth, back and forth, for “my own half-marathon”, he told me. This reeked of despair. A razor blade was found in his cell. He wrote “farewell letters”. He phoned the Samaritans repeatedly.

At first he was denied his reading

glasses, left behind in the brutality of his kidnapping from the embassy. When the glasses finally arrived at the prison, they were not delivered to him for days. His solicitor, Gareth Peirce, wrote letter after letter to the prison governor protesting the withholding of legal documents, access to the prison library, the use of a basic laptop with which to prepare his case. The prison would take weeks, even months, to answer. (The governor, Rob Davis, has been awarded an Order of the British Empire).

Books sent to him by a friend, the journalist Charles Glass, himself a survivor of hostage-taking in Beirut, were returned. Julian could not call his American lawyers. From the start, he has been constantly medicated. Once, when I asked him what they were giving him, he couldn’t say.

At the High Court hearing on to decide finally whether or not Julian would be extradited to America, he appeared only briefly by video link on the first day. He looked unwell and unsettled. The court was told he had been “excused” because of his “medication”. But Julian had asked to attend the hearing and was refused, said his partner Stella Moris. Attendance in a court sitting in judgement on you is surely a right.

This intensely proud man also





demands the right to appear strong and coherent in public, as he did at the Old Bailey last year. Then, he consulted constantly with his lawyers through the slit in his glass cage. He took copious notes. He stood and protested with eloquent anger at lies and abuses of process.

The damage done to him in his decade of incarceration and uncertainty, including more than two years in Belmarsh (whose brutal

regime is celebrated in the latest Bond film) is beyond doubt.

But so, too, is his courage beyond doubt, and a quality of resistance and resilience that is heroism. It is this that may see him through the present Kafkaesque nightmare – if he is spared an American hellhole.

I have known Julian since he first

came to Britain in 2009. In our first interview, he described the moral imperative behind WikiLeaks: that our right to the transparency of governments and the powerful was a basic democratic right. I have watched him cling to this principle when at times it has made his life even more precarious.

Almost none of this remarkable side to the man's character has been reported in the so-called "free press" whose own future, it is said, is in jeopardy if Julian is extradited.

Of course, but there has never been a "free press". There have been extraordinary journalists who have occupied positions in the "mainstream" – spaces that have now closed, forcing independent journalism on to the internet.

There, it has become a "fifth estate", a samizdat of dedicated, often unpaid work by those who were honourable exceptions in a media now reduced to an assembly line of platitudes. Words like "democracy", "reform", "human rights" are stripped of their dictionary meaning and censorship is by omission or exclusion.

October's fateful hearing at the High Court was "disappeared" in the "free press". Most people would not know that a court in the heart of London had sat in judgement on their right to know: their right to question and dissent.

Many Americans, if they know anything about the Assange case, believe a fantasy that Julian is a Russian agent who caused Hillary Clinton to lose the presidential election in 2016 to Donald Trump. This is strikingly similar to the lie that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction, which justified the invasion of Iraq and the deaths of a million or more people.

They are unlikely to know that the main prosecution witness underpinning one of the concocted

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charges against Julian has recently admitted he lied and fabricated his “evidence.”

Neither will they have heard or read about the revelation that the CIA, under its former director, the Hermann Goering lookalike Mike Pompeo, had planned to assassinate Julian. And that was hardly new. Since I have known Julian, he has been under threat of harm and worse.

On his first night in the Ecuadorian embassy in 2012, dark figures swarmed over the front of the embassy and banged on the windows, trying to get in. In the US, public figures – including Hillary Clinton, fresh from her destruction of Libya – have long called for Julian’s assassination. The current President Biden damned him as a “hi-tech terrorist.”

The former prime minister of Australia, Julia Gillard, was so eager to please what she called “our best mates” in Washington that she demanded Julian’s passport be taken from him – until it was pointed out to her that this would be against the law. The current prime minister, Scott Morrison, a PR man, when asked about Assange, said, “He should face the music.”

**I**t has been open season on the WikiLeaks’ founder for more than a decade. In 2011, the *Guardian* exploited Julian’s work as if it was its own, collected journalism prizes and Hollywood deals, then turned on its source.

Years of vituperative assaults on the man who refused to join their club followed. He was accused of failing to redact documents of the names of those considered at risk. In a *Guardian* book by David Leigh and Luke Harding, Assange is quoted as saying during a dinner in a London

On his first night in the Ecuadorian embassy in 2012, dark figures swarmed over the front of the embassy and banged on the windows, trying to get in

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restaurant that he didn’t care if informants named in the leaks were harmed. Neither Harding nor Leigh was at the dinner. John Goetz, an investigations reporter with *Der Spiegel*, actually was at the dinner and testified that Assange said nothing of the kind.

The great whistleblower Daniel Ellsberg told the Old Bailey last year that Assange had personally redacted 15,000 files. The New Zealand investigative journalist Nicky Hager, who worked with Assange on the Afghanistan and Iraq war leaks, described how Assange took “extraordinary precautions in redacting names of informants”.

In 2013, I asked the film-maker Mark Davis about this. A respected broadcaster for SBS Australia, Davis was an eyewitness, accompanying Assange during the preparation of the leaked files for publication in the *Guardian* and the *New York Times*. He told me, “Assange was the only one who worked day and night extracting 10,000 names of people who could be targeted by the revelations in the logs”.

Lecturing a group of City University students, David Leigh mocked the very idea that “Julian Assange will end up in an orange jumpsuit”. His fears were an exaggeration, he sneered. Edward Snowden later revealed that Assange was on a “man-hunt timeline”.

Luke Harding, who co-authored with Leigh the *Guardian* book that

disclosed the password to a trove of diplomatic cables that Julian had entrusted to the paper, was outside the Ecuadorian embassy on the evening Julian sought asylum. Standing with a line of police, he gloated on his blog, “Scotland Yard may well have the last laugh”.

The campaign was relentless. *Guardian* columnists scraped the depths. “He really is the most massive turd”, wrote Suzanne Moore of a man she had never met.

The editor who presided over this, Alan Rusbridger, has lately joined the chorus that “defending Assange protects the free press”. Having published the initial WikiLeaks revelations, Rusbridger must wonder if the *Guardian*’s subsequent excommunication of Assange will be enough to protect his own skin from the wrath of Washington.

The High Court judges are likely to announce their decision on the US appeal in the new year. What they decide will determine whether or not the British judiciary has trashed the last vestiges of its vaunted reputation; in the land of Magna Carta this disgraceful case ought to have been hurled out of court long ago.

The missing imperative is not the impact on a collusive “free press”. It is justice for a man persecuted and wilfully denied it.

Julian Assange is a truth-teller who has committed no crime but revealed government crimes and lies on a vast scale and so performed one of the great public services of my lifetime. Do we need to be reminded that justice for one is justice for all? **CT**

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





JONATHAN COOK

# ‘Honest mistakes’

How the US and Israel justify – and get away with –  
the targeting and killing of civilians

**T**he states that claim they kill innocents “by accident” or “unintentionally”, or because “the terrorists shield behind them”, are also the ones that keep killing innocents

An “honest mistake” is buying your partner the wrong perfume or copying someone into an email chain by accident. It is not firing a drone missile at a car, killing 10 civilians – and doing so when a small child was clearly visible moments earlier.

And yet, a supposedly “independent” Pentagon inquiry last month claimed just such a good-faith mistake after US commanders authorised a drone strike in late August that killed an Afghan family, including seven children. A US air force general concluded that there was no negligence or misconduct, and that no disciplinary action should be taken.

Then the Pentagon exonerated it-

self again: It called a 2019 air strike on Baghuz in Syria that killed dozens of women and children “justified”. It did so even after an investigation by the *New York Times* showed that the group of civilians who were bombed had already been identified as fleeing fighting between US-backed militias and the Islamic State group.

A US military lawyer, Dean Korsak, flagged the incident at the time as a potential war crime but the Pentagon never carried out an investigation. It came to public attention only because Korsak sent details to a Senate oversight committee.

In announcing the conclusions of its Afghanistan inquiry, the Pentagon made clear what its true priorities are in the wake of its hurried, Saigon-style exit from Afghanistan following two decades of failed occupation. It cares about image management, not accountability.

Contrast its refusal to take action against the drone operators and

commanders who fired on a civilian vehicle with the Pentagon’s immediate crackdown on one of its soldiers who criticised the handling of the withdrawal. Veteran marine Stuart Scheller was court-martialled last month after he used social media to publicly berate his bosses.

Which of the two – Scheller’s comment or the impunity of those who killed an innocent family – is likely to do more to discredit the role of the US military, in Afghanistan or in other theatres around the globe in which it operates?

**T**he Pentagon is far from alone in expecting to be exempted from scrutiny for its war crimes.

The “honest mistake” is a continuing colonial narrative western nations tell themselves, and the rest of us, when they kill civilians. When western troops invade and occupy other people’s lands – and maybe

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help themselves to some of the resources they find along the way – it is done in the name of bringing security or spreading democracy. We are always the Good Guys, they are the Evil Ones. We make mistakes, they commit crimes.

This self-righteousness is the source of western indignation at any suggestion that the International Criminal Court at The Hague should investigate, let alone prosecute, US, European and Israeli commanders or politicians for carrying out or overseeing war crimes. It is only African leaders or enemies of Nato who need to be dragged before tribunals and made to pay a price. But nothing in the latest Pentagon inquiry confirms the narrative of an “honest mistake”, despite indulgent coverage in western media referring to the drone strike as “botched”.

Even the establishment of the inquiry was not honest. How is it “independent” for a Pentagon general to investigate an incident involving US troops?

The drone operators who killed the family of Zemerai Ahmadi, an employee of a US aid organisation, were authorised to do so because his white Toyota Corolla was mistaken for a similar vehicle reported as belonging to the local franchise of Islamic State. But that make is one of the most common vehicles in Afghanistan.

The head of the aid organisation where he worked told reporters pointedly: “I do not understand how the most powerful military in the world could follow [Mr Ahmadi], an aid worker, in a commonly used car for eight hours, and not figure out who he was, and why he was at a US aid organisation’s headquarters.”

The decision was, at best, recklessly indifferent as to whether Ahmadi was a genuine target and whether children would die as a

There is no “honest mistake” defence when the same mistakes keep happening. “Honest mistakes” can’t be a pattern of behaviour

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result. But more likely, when it attacked Ahmadi’s vehicle, the entire US military system was in the grip of a blinding thirst for revenge. Three days earlier, 13 American soldiers and 169 Afghan civilians had been killed when a bomb exploded close to Kabul airport, as Afghans massed there in the hope of gaining a place on one of the last evacuation flights.

That airport explosion was the final military humiliation – this one inflicted by Islamic State – after the Taliban effectively chased American troops out of Afghanistan. Revenge – even when it is dressed up as restoring “deterrence” or “military honour” – is not an “honest mistake”.

But there is an even deeper reason to be sceptical of the Pentagon inquiry. There is no “honest mistake” defence when the same mistakes keep happening. “Honest mistakes” can’t be a pattern of behaviour.

And yet the long years of US occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq, and meddling in Syria, have been pockmarked with air strikes that obliterated families or slammed into wedding parties. That information rarely makes headlines, eclipsed by the Pentagon’s earlier, faulty claims of the successful “neutralisation of terrorists”. But just such “mistakes” were the reason why the US occupation of Afghanistan ultimately imploded. The Pentagon’s scatter-gun killing of Afghans created so many

enemies among the local population that US-backed local rulers lost all legitimacy.

Something similar happened during the US and UK’s occupation of Iraq. Anyone who believes the Pentagon commits “honest mistakes” when it kills civilians needs to watch the video, *Collateral Murder*, issued by WikiLeaks in 2012. It shows the aerial view of helicopter pilots in 2007 as they discuss with a mix of technical indifference and gruesome glee their missile strikes on a crowd of Iraqis, including two Reuters journalists, moving about on the streets of Baghdad below.

When a passing van tries to come to the aid of one of wounded, the pilots fire again, even though a child is visible in the front seat. In fact, two children were found inside the van. US soldiers arriving at the scene made the decision to deny both treatment from US physicians.

As the pilots were told of the casualties, one commented: “Well, it’s their fault for bringing their kids into a battle”. The other responded: “That’s right.”

Before the video was leaked, the military claimed that the civilians killed that day had been caught in the crossfire of a gun battle. “There is no question that coalition forces were clearly engaged in combat operations against a hostile force”, a statement read.

The video, however, shows that there was nothing honest or mistaken about the way those Iraqis died, even if there was no specific intention to kill civilians. They were killed because US commanders were uninterested in the safety of those it occupied, because they were indifferent to whether Iraqis, even Iraqi children, lived or died.

The states that cry loudest that they kill innocents “by accident” or “unintentionally” or because



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“the terrorists shield behind them” are also the ones that keep killing innocents.

Israel’s version of this is the “tragic mistake” – the excuse it used in 2014 when its navy fired two precision missiles at a beach in Gaza at exactly the spot where four boys were playing football. They were killed instantly. In seven weeks of pummelling Gaza in 2014, Israel killed more than 500 Palestinian children and more than 850 adult civilians. And yet all were apparently “honest mistakes” because no soldiers, commanders or politicians were ever held to account for those deaths.

Palestinian civilians keep dying year after year, decade after decade, and yet they are always killed by an “honest mistake”. Israel’s excuses are entirely unconvincing for the same reason the Pentagon’s carry no weight. Both have committed their crimes in another people’s territory to which they have not been invited. Both militaries rule over those people without good cause, treating the local population as “hostiles”. And both act in the knowledge that their soldiers enjoy absolute impunity.

In reaching its decision on the killing of the Afghan family this month, the Pentagon stated that it had not “broken the law”. That verdict too is not honest. What the US military means is that it did not break its own self-serving rules of engagement, rules that permit anything the US military decides it wants to do. It behaves as if no laws apply to it when it invades others’ lands, not even the laws of the territories it occupies.

That argument is dishonest too. There are the laws of war and the laws of occupation. There is international law. The US has broken those laws over and over again in Afghanistan and Iraq, as has Israel in ruling

What the US military means is that it did not break its own self-serving rules of engagement, rules that permit anything the US military decides it wants to do

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over the Palestinians for more than five decades and blockading parts of their territory.

The problem is that there is no appetite to enforce international law against the planet’s sole military superpower and its allies. Instead it is allowed to claim the role of benevolent global policeman. Both the US and Israel declined to ratify the Rome Statute, which established the International Criminal Court (ICC) that judges war crimes. That refusal was no “honest mistake” either. Each expected to avoid the court’s scrutiny.

US and Israeli leaders know their soldiers commit war crimes, and that they themselves commit war crimes by approving either the wars of aggression these soldiers are expected to wage or the messy, long-term belligerent occupations they are supposed to enforce. But whatever they hope, the failure to ratify the statute does not serve as a stay-out-of-jail card. US and Israeli leaders still risk falling under the ICC’s jurisdiction if the countries they invade or occupy have ratified the statute, as is the case with Afghanistan and Palestine.

The catch is that the Hague court can be used only as a last resort – in other words, it has to be shown first that any country accused of war crimes failed to seriously investigate those crimes itself. The chorus from the US and Israel of “honest mistake”

every time they kill civilians is just such proof. It shows that the US and Israeli legal systems are entirely incapable of upholding the laws of war, or holding their own political and military officials to account. That must be the job of the ICC instead.

But the court is fearful. The Trump administration launched a mafia-style campaign against it last year to stop its officials investigating US war crimes in Afghanistan. The assets of the court’s officials were blocked and they were denied the right to enter the US.

That is the reason why the court keeps failing to stand up for the victims of western war crimes like Zemerai Ahmadi and his children. The ICC had spent 15 years dragging its feet before it finally announced last year that it would investigate allegations of US war crimes in Afghanistan. That resolve quickly dissolved under the subsequent campaign of pressure.

In September, shortly after Ahmadi’s family was killed by US drone operators, the court’s chief prosecutor declared that investigations into US actions in Afghanistan, including widespread claims of torture of Afghans, would be “deprioritised”. The investigation would focus instead on the Taliban and Islamic State.

Once again, enemies of the US, but not the US itself, will be called to account. That too is no “honest mistake”.

CT

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WILLIAM ASTORE

# The Pentagon vs. Pentagod

Country steps into the abyss of weapons and warmaking

**W**ho is America's god? The Christian god of the beatitudes, the one who healed the sick, helped the poor, and preached love of neighbour? Not in these (dis)United States. In the Pledge of Allegiance, we speak proudly of One Nation under God, but in the aggregate, this country doesn't serve or worship Jesus Christ, or Allah, or any other god of justice and mercy. In truth, the deity America believes in is the five-sided one headquartered in Arlington, Virginia.

*In God We Trust* is on all our coins. But, again, which god? The one of "turn the other cheek"? The one who found his disciples among society's outcasts? The one who wanted nothing to do with money-changers or swords? As Joe Biden might say, give me a break.

America's true god is a deity of wrath, whose keenest followers profit mightily from war and see such gains as virtuous, while its most militant disciples, a crew of losing generals and failed Washington officials, routinely employ murderous violence across the globe. It contains multitudes, its name is legion, but if this deity must have one name, citing a need for some restraint, let it be known as the Pentagod.

Yes, the Pentagon is America's true god. Consider that the Biden administration requested a whopping \$753-billion for military spending in fiscal year 2022 even as the Afghan War was cratering. Consider that the House Armed Services Committee then boosted that blockbuster budget to \$778-billion in September. Twenty-five billion dollars extra for "defense", hardly debated, easily passed, with strong bipartisan support in Congress. How else, if not religious belief, to explain this, despite the Pentagod's prodigal \$8-trillion wars over the last two decades that ended so disastrously? How else to account for future budget projections showing that all-American deity getting another \$8-trillion or so over the next decade, even as the political parties fight like rabid dogs over roughly 15 percent of that figure for much-needed domestic improvements?

**P**araphrasing Joe Biden, show me your budget and I'll tell you what you worship. In that context, there can't be the slightest doubt: America worships its Pentagod and the weapons and wars that feed it.

I confess that I'm floored by this simple fact: for two decades in which "forever war" has served as an apt

descriptor of America's true state of the union, the Pentagod has failed to deliver on any of its promises. Iraq and Afghanistan? Just the most obvious of a series of war-on-terror quagmires and failures galore.

That ultimate deity can't even pass a simple financial audit to account for what it does with those endless funds shoved its way, yet our representatives in Washington keep doing so by the trillions. Spectacular failure after spectacular failure and yet that all-American god just rolls on, seemingly unstoppable, unquenchable, rarely questioned, never penalized, always on top.

Talk about blind faith!

The Pentagod advances a peculiar form of war, one that would puzzle most classic military strategists. In fact, its version of war is beyond strategy of the Clausewitzian sort. I think of it as prefabricated war, borrowing a term from the inestimable Ann Jones's recent piece for [www.TomDispatch.com](http://www.TomDispatch.com) on our Afghan disaster. It's a term pregnant with meaning.

Prefabricated war is how the Pentagod has ruled for so endlessly long. There is, as a start, the fabrication of false causes for war. In Vietnam, it was the Gulf of Tonkin Incident, the "attacks" on US Navy ships that never happened. In Afghanistan, it





was vengeance for the 9/11 attacks against a people who neither planned nor committed them. In Iraq, it was the weapons of mass destruction that Saddam Hussein didn't have. Real causes don't matter much to America's war god since false ones can always be fabricated, after which enough true believers – especially in Congress – will embrace them fervently and faithfully.

But prefabricated war doesn't just start with or consist of manufactured causes. It's fabricated far ahead of time in a colossal cathedral of violence – President Eisenhower's military-industrial-congressional complex – that sends its missionaries and minions around the planet on a mission of global reach, global power, and full-spectrum dominance. War is prefabricated on 750 military bases scattered across the globe on every continent except

Antarctica, in America's giant arms corporations like Boeing, Lockheed Martin, and Raytheon, and by Special Operations forces that act much like the Jesuits of the Catholic Counter-Reformation, spreading the one true faith to 150 countries.

Since America's war god is also a jealous deity, it insists on dominating all domains – not just land, sea, and air but space as well. Even more ethereal realms like cyberspace and virtual/augmented realities must

Real causes don't matter much to America's war god since false ones can always be fabricated, after which enough true believers – will embrace them fervently

be captured and controlled. It seeks omnipotence and omniscience in the name of your safety and, if you let it, will also know everything about you, while having the power to smite you, should you stop blindly worshipping it and feeding it more money.

Yet, as strong as it may be, its urge to fabricate threats and exaggerate vulnerabilities never ends. China and Russia are allegedly the biggest threats of the moment, two “near-peer” rivals supposedly driving a new cold war. China, for example, now reportedly has a navy of 355 ships, an ostensibly alarming development (even if those vessels are nowhere near as powerful as their American equivalents). That naturally requires yet more shipbuilding by the US Navy.

Russia may have an economy

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that's smaller than California's, but it's allegedly leading in hypersonic missile development (and China, too, has now entered the fray with, as the chairman of the Joint Chiefs put it recently, something "very close" to a "Sputnik moment"). As a result, the Pentagon demands yet more money to bridge this alleged missile gap. Like earlier bomber and missile gaps from the previous Cold War, such vulnerabilities exist mostly in the minds of its proselytisers.

And in that context, here's an article of faith rarely questioned by true believers: while America prides itself on having the world's best and most powerful military, it perennially declares itself in danger of being overmatched. As a result, from aircraft carriers to stealth bombers to nuclear missiles, ever more weaponry must be fabricated. Who cares that it takes the next 11 nations combined to come close to matching the American "defense" budget? Beware the cry, "O ye of little faith!" should you dare to question any of the Pentagon's fabricated "needs."

The notion of prefab war goes deeper still, notes Ann Jones. As she wrote me recently:

"I would also carry the implications of prefabricated war to its source in the industrial world that does the material fabrication that dictates the strategy and style of war and pockets the profits.

"In Afghanistan prefabrication meant forcing Afghan soldiers to drop their trusty Kalashnikovs and retrain endlessly on new US rifles (I forget the model) so heavy and temperamental as to be close to useless; they were particularly sensitive to dust, which in Afghanistan is the principal constituent of the air. The US also trained Afghan soldiers how to enter houses, to search inside and kill every occupant; it erected on the training ground some prefabricated

## The Pentagon didn't deliver democracy in a box to Afghanistan. Instead, it brought prefab war, made in the USA, exported globally

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wooden houses for the practice of home invasions. (I witnessed this stuff myself.)"

To her point, I'd add the notion of a prefab "government in a box". a bizarre aspect of the Afghan surge early in President Barack Obama's first term in office. The idea was to drop ready-made mini-democracies into less-than-stable regions of Afghanistan that had been conditionally secured by US troops. Those prefab governments would then supposedly provide a democratic toehold, freeing American troops to do what they did best: apply "kinetic" force elsewhere through massive firepower.

But the Pentagon didn't deliver democracy in a box to Afghanistan. Instead, it brought prefab war, made in the USA, exported globally. Or, as Ann Jones put it to me, "The Afghan war was pulled from a box to be used to pave the way for the Big Box war already planned for Iraq by the Bush/Cheney administration". That such a "Big Box" war then failed so dismally, of course, to no diminution in the Pentagon's power or authority, blind devotion being what it is.

Judging by the Vietnam, Afghan, and Iraq wars, a shoddy yet destructive form of prefab war has been the ultimate American export of these years.

I was once an acolyte of the Pentagon. I served for 20 years in the

US Air Force, working in Cheyenne Mountain near the end of the original Cold War. I hunkered down there waiting for the nuclear Armageddon that fortunately never came (though the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 was certainly a near miss). A cathedral of power, Cheyenne Mountain could have served as the ultimate temple of doom, but America ultimately "won" the Cold War when the Soviet Union imploded after a disastrous conflict in Afghanistan. That proved a setback indeed for a deity that feared the very thought of a "peace dividend" in the wind. Fortunately, that singular moment of victory proved only temporary, as America's incessant conflicts since Desert Storm in 1991 have shown.

In 1992, the year after the Soviet collapse, I found myself walking around the Trinity test site in Alamogordo, New Mexico, where the first atomic blast rumbled and roared in July 1945. You might say that, before using two atomic bombs on the Japanese, this country used the first one on ourselves, or at least on all the creatures living near ground zero at that desert site.

"I have become death, the destroyer of worlds", mused J. Robert Oppenheimer, the father of the atomic bomb, after his "gadget" exploded, irradiating the surrounding desert in a historically unprecedented way. Oppenheimer himself emerged a changed man. He tried unsuccessfully to block the development of the far more powerful hydrogen bomb, an act of clarity and conscience for which, he would be accused of communist sympathies in 1953 and stripped of his security clearance. He and others who followed learned how unwise it is to resist America's god of war and its drive for yet more power.

During that same trip in 1992, I visited Los Alamos National Labo-



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ratory, the site where those atomic “gadgets” were first assembled. Fifty years earlier, during World War II, America began to bring together its best and brightest to create a device more destructive than any ever built. They succeeded, in a sense, in tapping into the power of the gods, even if in a remarkably one-sided fashion, gaining an astonishing ability to destroy, but none whatsoever to create. Armageddon, not genesis, became and remains the Pentagon’s ultimate power.

Back in 1992, the mood at Los Alamos was glum. A national laboratory to create ever newer, more powerful nuclear warheads and weapons didn’t seem to have a promising future with the demise of the Soviet Union. Where, then, did the future lie? Perhaps the best and brightest could turn their thoughts from bombs to consumer goods, or computers, or even what we today call green-energy technologies?

But no such luck. So here I sit, 30 years later, a bit heavier, my hair and beard greying, having lost whatever faith I had. Why? Because the god I served always wanted more. Even now, it wants to spend up to \$2 trillion in the coming decades to build “modernized” versions of the nuclear weaponry that I knew, even then, could only create a darker future.

Consider the Ground-Based Strategic Deterrent, or GBSD. It’s an in-

Here I sit, 30 years later, a bit heavier, my hair and beard greying, having lost whatever faith I had. Why? Because the god I served always wanted more

nocuous acronym for what someday will be hundreds of land-based nuclear missiles, one leg of this country’s nuclear “triad” (the others being the Navy’s Trident submarine force and the Air Force’s strategic bombers). Deploying the GBSD, the Air Force plans to replace its “aging” ICBMs with “youthful” ones, even though such missiles, old or new, were rendered redundant decades ago by equally accurate ones that could be launched from stealthy submarines.

No matter. Northrop Grumman won the contract at a potential lifecycle cost of \$264-billion. Think of those future missiles and the silos where the present ones sit in flyover states like Wyoming and North Dakota as so many subterranean chapels of utter destructive power, serviced by dedicated Air Force crews who believe that deterrence is best achieved by a policy that once was all-too-accurately known as MAD, or mutual assured destruction.

Yet, before I bled Air Force blue,

before I was stationed in a cathedral of military power under who knows how many tons of solid granite, I was raised a Roman Catholic. Recently, I caught the words of Pope Francis, God’s representative on earth for Catholic believers. Among other entreaties, he asked “in the name of God” for “arms manufacturers and dealers to completely stop their activity, because it foments violence and war, it contributes to those awful geopolitical games which cost millions of lives displaced and millions dead.”

Which country has the most arms manufacturers? Which routinely and proudly leads the world in weapons exports? And which spends more on wars and weaponry than any other, with hardly a challenge from Congress or a demurral from the mainstream media?

And as I stared into the abyss created by those questions, who stared back at me but, of course, the Pentagon. **CT**

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# The Truck Safari: One trip, one tonne

How a group of international volunteers smuggled 40 tonnes of weapons into South Africa aboard a safari truck during the fight against Apartheid

*In this excerpt from the book, **International Brigade Against Apartheid: Secrets of the People's War that Liberated South Africa**, Riaz Saloojee, Benno Smith, Muff Andersson, Jenny Evand and Winston Harper, all former members of Umkhonto weSizwe (MK) the armed wing of the African National Congress (ANC), tell the story of Operation Laaitie, a seven-year infiltration of 40 tonnes of arms by safari truck into South Africa at the height of Apartheid – without a single casualty – in the years 1987–1993.*

*In other chapters, the book tells of volunteers who acted as couriers, provided safe houses in the neighbouring states and within South Africa, helped infiltrate combatants across borders, and smuggled tonnes of weapons into the country in the most creative of ways.*

***International Brigade Against Apartheid: Secrets of the People's War that Liberated South Africa**, is edited by Ronnie Kasrils, and published by Johannesburg's Jacana Media.*

By Riaz Saloojee, Benno Smith, Muff Andersson, Jenny Evans and Winston Harper

**T**he origin of Operation Laaitie is this: the idea for the project originated with Rodney Wilkinson, who had fled South Africa after the December 1982 sabotage of the Koeberg nuclear power station. He met leading ANC official Aziz Pahad twice a month in a London pub, coming up with various ideas to transport arms – initially for a smaller convoy of vehicles. Says Rodney:

“I shared the concept of using paying tourists as a cover for cross-border sanctions-busting ... The problem faced was the ratio of weapons going into South Africa compared to the number of comrades getting arrested. Thus was born the concept of a large vehicle with a small team rather than lots of small vehicles. Less risk. It took years for me to research, design the truck and write up the business plan for the truck and many meetings with Aziz before it was submitted to J.S. [MK chief of staff, Joe Slovo]”

The reason for a Bedford was that both the British and South African armies used those vehicles, and overland tour companies could buy them cheap at state auctions so they

were common and would not raise eyebrows. “When we ordered that one ... I asked for a specially made steel drop-side body to fool the metal detectors. The military trucks had timber decks. It took me most of a year to physically adapt the truck: extra petrol tanks, extended chassis, extra spare wheel, military roof platform, compartments, underfloor lockers, personal lockers, camping gear, tools, spares, trailer etc.”

Slovo assembled a team called the London Traders, and appointed Mannie Brown, a long-time fellow exile, to manage the project along with Laurence Harris, a British comrade close to the ANC. It met many times, with Rodney, and occasionally with Aziz and Slovo.

Overall charge of the operation was given to Job Shimankana Tabane, aka Cassius Make, the Ordnance chief and member of Military Headquarters. He deployed MK cadres based in Zambia to handle operations and liaise with London. Among these were Cal (MK name for Riaz Saloojee), Yasmin (Muff Andersson) and Chips (Govind Chiba). Ronald (Benno Smith), Henry (Winston Harper) and Kate (Jenny Evans) were recruited a bit later.

To maintain operational security, Cassius separated the tasks. Those he sent to London working under





Over seven years, this Africa Hinterland safari truck – photographed at Johannesburg's Lillesleaf Museum – delivered 40 tonnes of explosives into South Africa at the height of the ANC's armed struggle against Apartheid.

discipline from MK, Cal and Muff, were the link to Lusaka and the covert aspects of the operation. Others already in London dealt with the office, the finances, staff and drivers, which Mannie and Laurence did superbly. On 30 June 1986 Mannie registered Africa Hinterland as a tourist company aimed at backpackers looking for a cheap bumpy camping adventure. The office was in Greenwich, South London. Here unsuspecting customers responding to advertisements could book tickets to travel overland through Heather Newham and Jenny Harris. Backroom 'boys' in London were extremely dedicated. The young Chris Kasrils spent two years sitting in a matchbox office servicing coded calls from the drivers and enquiries

for Mannie.

Although six-weekly tours for the safari were initially booked by the Greenwich tourist office, command and control of the operation were located in Lusaka. Outside of the drivers involved in the operation, the comrades on the 'tour' side had no idea of the scale of the operation or of the operatives in Lusaka, Zimbabwe, Botswana and South Africa. Comrades in Lusaka had to figure out the logistics around the movement of material, and further on, others were responsible for the movement of the material inside the country.

Hence those authoring this article and one or two others dealt with the covert side of Laaitie; we started in 1986 when we were young and rar-

ing to go, in our twenties and thirties. We worked from the time Cassius Make commanded it, through the period it was commanded by Aboobaker Ismail (Rashid) after the assassination of Cassius in 1987, and until it ended with the demobilisation process.

Laaitie developed faster and faster turnaround times as material was loaded not only from Lusaka but also from Bulawayo. It was an operation with multi-dimensional networks well compartmentalised to ensure security at all times.

The operation successfully tied internationalist support – including southern African – with that of MK comrades based in Lusaka, the forward areas (Zimbabwe and Botswana), and inside the country.

It was efficient because it built on existing experience and infrastructure developed over the years in partnership with the internationalists who worked as drivers and internal operatives. It reflected the non-racial content of the struggle and could deliver material to MK units more tailored to their needs and more responsive to demand. We are proud that, over seven years of operation, there were no casualties or exposures.

### Why did we use internationalists?

Let us historicise. The period we talk about is the mid to late 1980s, post-Nkomati when Mozambique had closed up as a safe haven for MK, and there had been raids by the SADF on all of the forward areas (Swaziland, Botswana, Zimbabwe). It was increasingly difficult to move material across the border. So asking people from other countries to carry weapons across borders on behalf of the South African struggle became a very logical solution to solve this problem. Using internationalists inside the country to store and distribute weapons was a pragmatic choice. Freedom of movement for the vast majority of South Africans was inhibited. A relatively small number of white South Africans sided with the armed wing of the liberation struggle. They were hard to reach and recruit. However, we would not often use people with left-wing profiles in Ordnance as they would likely be

### Tourists flew to Tanzania to board the Bedford overland vehicle. . . . Then would begin the long bumpy seven-week trip from Nairobi to Cape Town

searched. Our commander Cassius Make asked us to look for individuals who would not attract the attention or suspicion of the enemy.

People in other countries had strong views against apartheid, and they were unknown to the apartheid regime. Foreigners, particularly whites, moved relatively freely across borders as tourists and were welcomed with open arms. We met internationalists via the Anti-Apartheid Movement, Communist Party formations, student movements, disinvestment- and direct-action groups, or befriended individuals independently.

However, in talking about internationalists, we cannot forget our African brothers and sisters who helped with Laaitie. In Masvingo, where Winston and others loaded the truck once we had the Joburg Hinterland office, we used the premises of a Zimbabwean farmer. He is a former combatant, who does not wish to be named. He was a contact of the late former regional

Ordnance commander in Zimbabwe George Sibanda, aka Moss.

### The trip

Underground ANC funding paid the start-up budget for the truck and office in London, which was just under £80,000 – though this amount did not cover the costs incurred in the other regions. Rodney and Cal fine-tuned the size of the compartments so that the weapons were exceptionally well concealed and undetectable.

Tourists flew to Tanzania to board the Bedford overland vehicle, which was shipped to Mombasa in December 1986. Then would begin the long bumpy seven-week trip along sinuous roads from Nairobi to Cape Town.

The trips from Nairobi would wind through Tanzania, Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe, and then from Botswana to South Africa. Drivers had to entertain the passengers – the majority of whom were backpackers who had never been to Africa before – and answer their questions along the way.

Stuart Round, one of the drivers, has described the experience. He got his driver's licence weeks before the trip started:

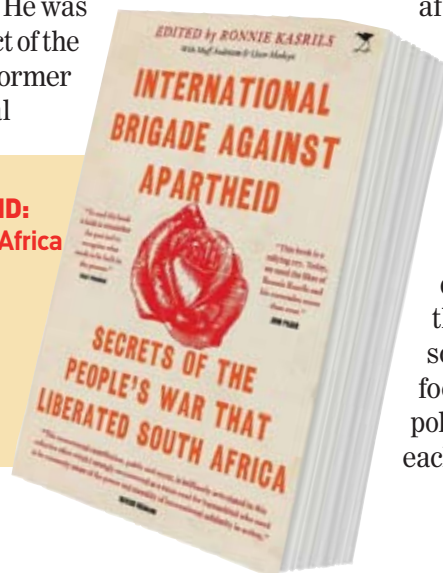
“Some days I would be driving for 18 hours, and then do routine checks and maintenance on the truck afterwards. The responsibility weighed very heavily on my shoulders; the dangers weighed on my mind. The roads were treacherous, potholed and narrow, there were wild animals to contend with, there was a whole catalogue of diseases to catch – all with life-threatening consequences – and southern Africa was on a war footing with armed soldiers and police checkpoints everywhere. As each day passed though, my confi-

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dence grew. Every other overland driver I came across was a source of valuable information and advice and I would pick their brains ravenously. I became familiar with the truck, its size, and handling, how the various systems on it worked, and the Bedford manual was never far from my side. Somehow, I reached Lusaka on time, in one piece and with a fairly contented full complement of passengers.”

In Lusaka, Zambia, the driver would tell the passengers that the truck had to be serviced at a garage but really the vehicle was being “doctored” – loaded with weapons. While tourists visited the city of Lusaka, the MK comrades would pack the custom-made boxes of material.

Shortly after the August 1990 Pretoria Minute when armed action was suspended, Rashid had the London African Hinterland office closed, and another opened and run in Johannesburg by Menno Schroeder. For the final part of Laaitie, trips offered were only in southern Africa, no longer on the Nairobi to Cape Town stretch. African Hinterland drivers were Mike Harris and Jo Lewis (1986–1987) and Stuart Round (1986–1991), all from the UK. The Dutch Menno Schroeder and the British Roger Allingham were the final drivers for the internal office (1991–1993).

Besides Stuart’s hair-raising experiences as a first-time driver, other drivers also had scary moments.

On the very first trip when Mike and Jo Lewis were the scheduled drivers, Cassius advised that the border gate officials were planning to search an orange truck with the word “Africa” on it. The intelligence came from the Soviet embassy. Laaitie then had an orange canvas covering over the load area. We decided to proceed with an empty vehicle. Border officials searched a

While passengers from the safari truck visited the city of Lusaka, the MK comrades would pack the custom-made boxes of material

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truck, but it was one from a Truck Africa fleet, with orange branding. Africa Hinterland sailed through.

Another incident affected Roger Allingham and Menno Schreuder in Bulawayo. Roger went into Bulawayo to get the truck loaded [by Winston, etc]. Once this was done, he parked in central Bulawayo to buy food. Returning to the truck, Roger found it had been broken into and his passport, in a false name, and some money stolen. He and Menno reported the theft. A Bulawayo police officer produced a letter explaining the circumstances, requesting the South African authorities to assist

Allingham to get back to the British consulate in Johannesburg. The pair drove on to Great Zimbabwe with the tourists. The following day at Beit Bridge crossing they convinced South African border officials that Roger was an essential driver on the trip and that some tourists had to catch flights. After some tut-tutting, the truck was allowed to proceed.

Within South Africa, after the drivers had dropped off the passengers to do their own thing, they would park the truck in a safe place and hire a closed van. Next, they would pack the boxes into the van, use prearranged stickers and fluffy toys and park the van in an agreed spot for collection by an internal operative. The operative would collect and stash the boxes until it was time to hack away at the hard

earth to build a DLB to house the combination of material that had been ordered. For security reasons, it was necessary to ensure a complete break between those bringing in material, burying it, and the MK operatives using it for operations in South Africa.

This was roughly the process, albeit with variations depending on factors like security, problems faced by various comrades, and the need to alter the routes, and so on.

The boxes contained AKs, limpets and grenades. The packages were sealed in plastic and heavy tin foil, fitted into each box. The entire box could be stored easily. Why this particular choice of hardware? The contents of the boxes reflected the particular stage of our armed struggle to hit legitimate targets.

## Political issues

In the early part of the struggle, the targets were economic. Post the 1985 Kabwe conference, when Operation Laaitie was conceptualised, we were in a different stage of struggle. We were preparing for People’s War. Operation Zikomo was launched to speed up the infiltration of MK units inside the 108 International Brigade Against Apartheid country. The training of comrades was taking place inside the country. It was critical to provide arms to the ever-increasing numbers of self-defence units set up, as the townships in South Africa were occupied by South African Defence Force troops, and people were living permanently in a state of siege. The IFP was also working closely with the SADF, attacking hostels and communities with impunity. So the AKs were there for self defence, limpets for armed propaganda, and grenades to attack the enemy.

In addition to that, in what was

defined under apartheid as Indian and mixed race or 'coloured' areas, stooges of the regime had opted to join in with various National Party parliamentary structures – the President's Council, the House of Representatives, the House of Delegates, and urged their communities to do the same. There was a lot of resistance in these areas to show that they could not get away with dividing the black majority. Typically, limpets and grenades were used as scare tactics in such structures. They were also used in support of various workers' strikes.

Jameel Chand, the former commissar of the Ahmed Timol unit who used a tonne of weapons brought in by Operation Laaitie, recorded in his TRC application that of 40 operations, none caused loss of life or injury.

There was only damage to property because the operatives were so careful. However, two members of the unit died during an operation.

We in Ordnance were not necessarily privy to which operation would take place. People from other MK structures and units did these, but we communicated what was buried and where.

## Modus operandi

Initially, Muff and Cal recruited and trained the internal comrades and Jenny joined in these activities once she was set up in Botswana. Cal helped Rodney with the truck specifications and scale of compartments.

The late Chips was responsible for the packaging of materials together with Ronald, Abie, Douglas, Henry

Packing did not always go smoothly. In Zambia foam from London to spray into the boxes to keep the stuff stable turned into a sticky mess

and Flo, among others, in Zambia and the regional side. Packing did not always go smoothly. In Zambia foam from London to spray into the boxes to keep the stuff stable turned into a sticky mess. Ronald also oversaw the team constructing the boxes; various other comrades gave information about the traffic at the border gates.

Muff, Cal and Jenny dealt with the internal comrades and establishing those units.

Chips once suggested that the team saw bits off the stabilisers on the RPG7s to fit more stuff into the boxes. The response of JM, MK commander Joe Modise, was, "The Ruskie had a good reason for the shape and size of those stabilisers, leave them as is."

Many different comrades transported material over borders and inside the country, kept it in safe houses, dug DLBs, buried arms, drew maps.

Many others did the same. Of those who have written, James Garraway and Sue Godt worked during the era of Cassius Make. Andrea Meeson, Pierre Koster, John Spyropolous, Martha Gordon and Peter Craig were under Rashid's

command. In most cases, the international comrades settled in South Africa afterwards and became permanent residents or citizens. The operation began in 1986 and terminated in 1993.

Cached materials not used were handed in to the newly established SANDF after 1994, under Defence Minister Joe Modise.

All these comrades reflected the values of MK, often at tremendous cost to themselves as individuals. These comrades were prepared to face loneliness and isolation and sacrifice their own lives to contribute to the freedom of our people. We admire them and salute them. Sadly, we cannot name all the African comrades who helped Laaitie in the same way.

For the first time in the history of MK, we were able to successfully infiltrate large quantities of arms in support of our combatants. **CT**

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BINOY KAMPMARK

# Blacklisting the merchants of spyware

Government efforts to attack encrypted communications while trampling human rights have become unrelenting

In a modest effort to disrupt the global spyware market, the United States announced last month that four entities had been added to its blacklist. On November 3, the US Department of Commerce revealed that it would be adding Israel-based companies NSO Group and Candiru to its entity list “based on evidence that these entities developed and supplied spyware to foreign governments that used these tools to maliciously target government officials, journalists, businesspeople, activists, academics, and embassy workers.”

Russian company Positive Technologies and the Singapore-based Computer Security Initiative Consultancy also made the list “based on a determination that they traffic in cyber tools used to gain unauthorised access to information systems, threatening the privacy and security of individuals and organisations worldwide.”

The move had a measure of ap-

proval in Congress. “The entity listing signals that the US government is ready to take strong action to stop US exports and investors from engaging with such companies”, came the approving remarks in a joint statement from Democrat House Representatives Tom Malinowski, Anna Eshoo and Joaquin Castro.

This offers mild comfort to students of the private surveillance industry, who have shown it to be governed by traditional capitalist incentive rather than firm political ideology. Steven Feldstein of the Carnegie Endowment’s Democracy, Conflict, and Governance Program observes how such entities have actually thrived in liberal democratic states. “Relevant companies, such as Cellebrite, FinFisher, Blue Coat, Hacking Team, Cyberpoint, L3 Technologies, Verint, and NSO group, are headquartered in the most democratic countries in the world, including the United States, Italy, France,

Germany, and Israel.”

The relationship between Digital China and Austin-based Oracle shows how talk about democracy and such ideals are fairly meaningless in such transactions. Digital China is credited with aiding the PRC develop a surveillance state; software and data analytics company Oracle, despite pledging to “uphold and respect human rights for all people” was still happy to count Digital China a global “partner of the year” in 2018. Its products have been used to aid police in Liaoning province to gather details on financial records, travel information, social media and surveillance camera footage. What’s bad for human rights is very good for business.

In its indignant response to the Commerce Department’s blacklisting, NSO told US authorities how its own “technologies support US national security interests and policies by preventing terrorism and crime, and thus we will advocate for this de-



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cision to be reversed.” Portraying itself as a member of the human rights fraternity, the company claimed to have “the world’s most rigorous compliance and human rights programs that are based [on] the American values we deeply share”. Previous contracts with governments had been terminated because they had “misused our products.”

As NSO has shown on numerous previous occasions, such strident assertions rarely match the record. In July, an investigation known as the Pegasus Project, an initiative of 17 media organisations and groups, reported how 50,000 phone numbers had appeared on a list of hackable targets that had interested a number of governments. The spyware used in question was Pegasus, that most disturbingly appealing of creations by NSO designed to infect the phone in question and turn it into a surveillance tool for the relevant user.

The range of targets was skin crawlingly impressive: human rights activists, business executives, journalists, politicians and government officials. None of this was new to those who have kept an eye on the exploits of the Israeli concern. Its sale of Pegasus has seen it feature in lawsuits from private citizens and companies such as WhatsApp keen to rein in its insidious practices.

Despite denying any connection, the company will be forever associated with providing the tools to one of its clients, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, to monitor calls made by Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi and a fellow dissident scribbler, Omar Abdulaziz. In October 2018, Khashoggi was carved to oblivion on the premises of the Saudi consulate in Istanbul by a hit squad with prints stretching back to Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. In a legal suit against NSO, lawyers for Abdulaziz argue that the hacking of his phone “contributed in a

In July, the Citizen Lab based at the University of Toronto identified more than 750 websites that had been influenced by the use of Candiru spyware

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significant manner to the decision to murder Mr Khashoggi”. To date, the vicious, petulant modernist royal remains at large, feted by governments the world over as a reformer.

While NSO has hogged the rude limelight on the international spyware market, that other Israeli-based concern, Candiru, has been a rolling hit with government clients. Their products are also tailored to infecting and monitoring iPhones, Androids, Macs, PCs, and cloud accounts. Those behind this company seem to have a distasteful sense of humour; the original candiru of Amazon River fame is, goes one account in the *Journal of Travel Medicine*, “known as a little fish keen on entering the nether regions of people urinating in the Amazon River”. Equipped with spikes, the fish invades and fastens itself within penis, vagina or rectum, making it a gruesome challenge to remove. However colourful the imaginative accounts of the candiru’s exploits are – William S. Burroughs’ *Naked Lunch* is merely one – the Israeli version is more sinister.

In July, the Citizen Lab based at the University of Toronto identified more than 750 websites that had been influenced by the use of Candiru spyware. “We found many domains masquerading as advocacy organisations such as Amnesty International, the Black Lives Matter movement, as well as media companies, and other civil-society themed

entities”. The company, founded in 2014, maintains an opaque operations and recruitment structure, reputedly drawing expertise from the Israeli Defence Forces Unit 8200, responsible for code encryption and gathering signals intelligence.

Within two years of its founding, the company had raked in \$30-million in sales, establishing a slew of clients across Europe, states across the former Soviet Union, the Persian Gulf, Asia and Latin America. A labour dispute between a former senior employee and the company shed some light on the company’s activities, with one document, signed by an unnamed vice president, noting the offering of a “high-end cyber intelligence platform dedicated to infiltrate PC computers, networks, mobile handsets, by using explosions and disseminations operations.”

NSO Group’s reputation, and credentials, are impossible to ignore. The Israeli government, which grants the export licenses that enable the likes of NSO and Candiru to operate, is splitting hairs. “NSO is a private company”, insists Israel’s Foreign Minister Yair Lapid, “it is not a governmental project and therefore even if it is designated, it has nothing to do with the policies of the Israeli government”. In his view, no other country had “such strict rules according to cyber warfare” and “imposing those rules more than Israel and we will continue to do so.”

The efforts by governments the world over to attack encrypted communications while trampling human rights on route have become unrelenting. In that quest, it matters little whether you are a citizen journalist, a master criminal, or a terrorist. Those deploying the spyware rarely make such distinctions. **CT**

**Binoy Kampmark lectures at RMIT University, Melbourne.**

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