

DECIDING THE FATE OF ASSANGE AND GAZA | JONATHAN COOK
BOMBING MUSLIMS FOR PEACE | WILLIAM J. ASTORE
FIGHTING FOR THE FUTURE | MICHAEL KERSTGENS

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March 2024



The last superpower?

If I told you a strange yellow-haired man would have won the US presidency, then – three years after leaving office – be back at it again, you would have thought me as mad as a hatter . . . **Tom Engelhardt** [Page 14]

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Issue 230 – January 2022



Issue 231 – February 2022



Issue 232 – March 2022



Issue 233 – April 2022



Issue 233 – May 2022



Issue 234 – June 2022



Issue 235 – July 2022



Issue 237 – September 2022



Issue 238 – October 2022



Issue 239 – November 2022



Issue 240 – December 2022



Issue 241 – January 2023

INSIDE

INSIGHTS

5. **Peaceful protesters feel might of the law**
George Monbiot
7. **It's not inflation. We're being ripped off**
Lindsay Owens & Elizabeth Pancotti
8. **Threatened with prison for parody newspaper**
Janine Jackson
8. **So where exactly should Palestinians go?**
Vijay Prashad
11. **Belfast's International Wall is giant Gaza mural**
Conor McParland
12. **Israel supporters are some of worst people in world**
Caitlin Johnstone
13. **Bendib's World**
Khalil Bendib

ColdType

7 Lewis Street, Georgetown, Ontario,
Canada L7G 1E3.

Contact: Tony Sutton
editor@coldtype.net.

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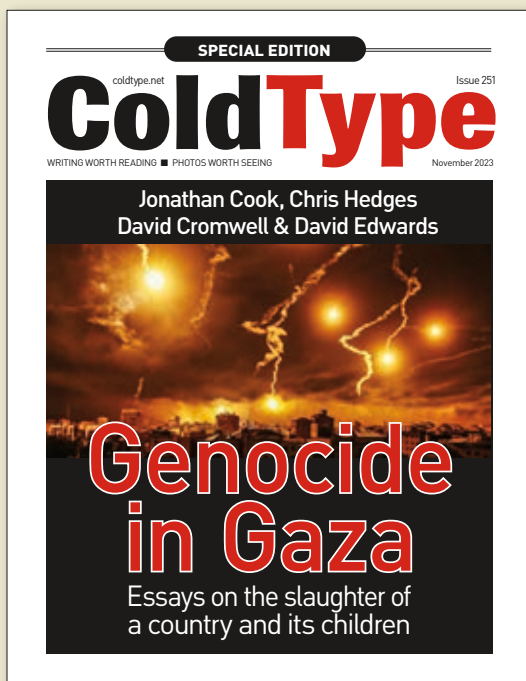
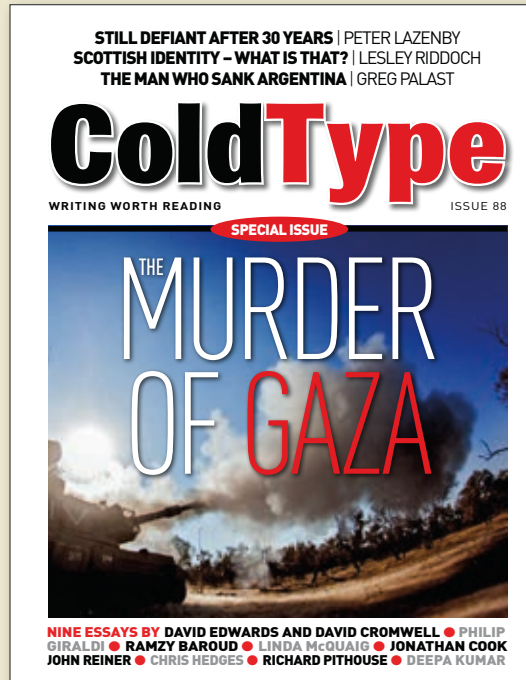


ON STRIKE: Pages 24 - 29

ISSUES

- 14 **The last superpower?**
Tom Engelhardt
- 18 **Five years for telling the truth about tax**
Sam Pizzigati
- 20 **After two years of war in Ukraine, it's time for peace**
Medea Benjamin & Nicolas J.S. Davies
- 23 **We Are All Fried**
Greg Koenderman
- 24 **Fighting for the future**
Michael Kerstgens
- 30 **2024 is the new 1984**
John and Nisha Whitehead
34. **The fates of Julian Assange and Gaza are linked together**
Jonathan Cook
38. **Almost heaven**
Russell Mokhiber
41. **Bombing Muslims for peace**
William J. Astore
45. **Why the US is reimposing sanctions on Venezuela**
Roger D. Harris

Read about Gaza's Struggle for Freedom in these special reports from the ColdType archives



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INSIGHTS



► GEORGE MONBIOT

Peaceful protesters feel the might of the law

Why are peaceful protesters treated like terrorists, while actual terrorists (especially on the far right, and especially in the US) often remain unmolested by the law? Why, in the UK, can you now potentially receive a longer sentence for “public nuisance”

– non-violent civil disobedience – than for rape or manslaughter? Why are ordinary criminals being released early to make space in overcrowded prisons, only for the space to be refilled with political prisoners: people trying peacefully to defend the habitable planet?

There’s a simple explanation.

It was clearly expressed by a former analyst at the US Department of Homeland Security. “You don’t have a bunch of companies coming forward saying: ‘I wish you’d do something about these rightwing extremists.’” The disproportionate policing of environmental protest, the new offences and extreme sentences, the campaigns of extrajudicial persecution by governments around the world are not, as politicians constantly assure us, designed to protect society. They’re a response to corporate lobbying.

Last week the UN’s special rapporteur on environmental defend-

INSIGHTS

ers, Michel Forst, issued the kind of bulletin you might expect to see written about the Sisi regime in Egypt or Vladimir Putin's Russia. But it concerned the UK. It noted that draconian anti-protest laws, massive sentences and court rulings forbidding protesters from explaining their motives to juries are crushing "fundamental freedoms" here. He pointed out that until recently it was very rare "for members of the public to be imprisoned for peaceful protest in the UK". Now you can get six months merely for marching.

He also highlighted the outrageous treatment of people convicted of no crime. Peaceful environmental campaigners are being held on bail for up to two years, subjected to electronic tags, GPS tracking and curfews, and deprived of their social lives and political rights. This is one of many examples of process as punishment. Even before you have been tried, let alone found guilty,

your life is shredded.

This bombshell report was ignored by almost all the media. You shouldn't be surprised. With a few exceptions, the media belongs to the corporate-political complex that demanded these laws. All over the world, the billionaire press has been demonising peaceful campaigners and lobbying for ever more oppressive measures against those who challenge destructive industries.

However absurd the media's hyperbole, governments rush to meet its demands. In Germany, the authorities launched an organised crime investigation into the environmental protest movement Letzte Generation. Italy is using anti-mafia laws against an allied group of environmental defenders, Ultima Generazione. In France and the US, peaceful green protesters are labelled and treated as terrorists. These governments must know they aren't dealing with organised crime, the mafia or terrorists. But

by using these labels they hope to isolate and ostracise peaceful protesters while justifying a madly disproportionate legal response.

In many cases, laws are proposed or drafted by corporate-funded lobby groups masquerading as thinktanks, such as Policy Exchange in the UK and the American Legislative Exchange Council in the US. Such groups create legal templates for crushing protest movements, then press for their adoption all over the world. This tactic has been chillingly effective.

In the UK, the government has truncated parliamentary scrutiny to force extreme measures on to the statute books. Judges have jailed environmental defenders for seeking to tell the jury why they took their actions. In 2023, two peaceful protesters who unveiled a banner on a bridge, Marcus Decker and Morgan Trowland, were handed sentences of two and a half and three years: the longest of their kind in modern history. Decker, a German citizen living with his partner in the UK, now faces deportation when he is released. There is nothing just or proportionate about this.

Even worse, both public authorities and corporations have been dropping injunctions on people who have protested, and, for that matter, those they believe might protest. As the UN rapporteur pointed out, many peaceful protesters are "being punished twice for the same action": facing both criminal trials and civil injunctions. Simply being named on an injunction exposes you to potentially massive financial penalties, as the named people – the defendants – typically have to pay the legal costs of the claimants.

➤ 1,000 WORDS (1)



London bus stop - February 2024, via X

INSIGHTS

If the defendants challenge the injunction, the costs can spiral into hundreds of thousands of pounds. I've been contacted by several people who have never committed a crime, who have told me they are being ruined by inclusion on these lists. These costs are, in effect, fines that can be levied by either public or private bodies against anyone who disagrees with them. They amount to punishment of the poor by the rich. Corporations become, in effect, prosecuting authorities.

Worse still, the police can also slap an injunction on peaceful campaigners, even if they've done nothing to offend the law. Last year, Surrey police handed an "antisocial behaviour injunction" to Colin Shearn, a retired corporate executive, on the grounds that he had been asking "endless questions about air traffic" at Farnborough airport. His questions, letters and information requests were polite and considered, but this, apparently, counts for nothing. By pure coincidence, three weeks after its most effective critic was silenced by this injunction, Farnborough airport announced that it planned to double the number of weekend flights.

Why is all this happening? Because the UK, the US and many other nations have become closed shops run by the plutocrats' trade union. This political capture also explains why, despite the alleged perversions of justice that ruined the lives of so many subpostmasters, none of the senior figures at the Post Office or its contracting companies have been held accountable. It explains why, in the US, you can be imprisoned for possession of a few grams of narcotics, yet no pharmaceutical executive has been sent to jail for peddling opioids that

have killed 800,000 people. It tells us why, in the UK, no company has yet been prosecuted for tax evasion under the 2017 Criminal Finances Act, and why Rishi Sunak's government repeatedly sabotaged parliament's attempts to clamp down on major white-collar crime. The powerful are protected while the powerless are exposed to ever more inventive laws.

Inequality demands oppression. The more concentrated wealth and power become, the more those

who challenge the rich and powerful must be hounded and crushed. In other words, economic inequality is mirrored by inequality before the law. You can dispense with all the other indices of democracy. The best measure of the health of a political system is who gets prosecuted. **CT**

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

► LINDSAY OWENS & ELIZABETH PANCOTTI

It's not inflation. We're being ripped off

Many Americans are still experiencing the sticker shock they first faced two years ago when inflation hit its peak. But if inflation is down now, why are families still feeling the pinch? The answer lies in corporate profits – and we have the data to prove it.

Our new report for the Groundwork Collaborative finds that corporate profits accounted for more than half – 53 percent – of inflation from April to September 2023. That's an astronomical percentage. Corporate profits drove just 11 percent of price growth in the four decades prior to the pandemic.

Businesses have been quick to blame rising costs on supply chain shocks from the pan-

demic and the war in Ukraine. But two years later, our economy has mostly returned to normal. In some cases, companies' costs to make things and stock shelves have actually decreased.

Let's demonstrate with one glaring example: diapers.

The hyper-consolidated diaper industry is dominated by just two companies, Procter & Gamble and Kimberly-Clark, which own well-known diaper brands like Pampers, Huggies, and Luvs. The cost of wood pulp, a key ingredient for making diapers absorbent, did spike during the pandemic, increasing by more than 50 percent between 2020 and 2021.

But last year it declined by 25 percent. Did that drop in costs lead Procter &



INSIGHTS

Gamble and Kimberly-Clark to lower their prices? Far from it. Diaper prices have increased to nearly \$22 on average.

These corporate giants have no plans to bring prices down anytime soon. In fact, their own executives are openly bragging about how they're going to "expand margins" on earnings calls. Procter & Gamble predicted \$800 million in windfall profits as input costs decline. Kimberly-Clark's CEO said the company has "a lot of opportunity" to expand margins over time.

It's not just diapers – while many corporations were quick to pass along rising costs, they've been in no hurry to pass along their savings. A recent survey from the Richmond Fed and Duke University revealed that 60 percent of companies plan to hike prices this year by more than they did before the pandemic, even though their costs have moderated.

Corporations across industries, from housing to groceries and used cars, are juicing their profit margins even as the cost of doing business goes down. And they're not hiding the ball. Since the summer of 2021, Groundwork began listening in on hundreds of corporate earnings calls where we heard CEO after CEO boasting about their ability to raise prices on consumers.

Now we hear something slightly different: CEOs crowing about keeping their prices high while their costs go down.

PepsiCo raised its prices on snacks and beverages by roughly 15 percent twice in the last year while bragging to shareholders that their profit margins will grow as input costs come down. Tyson's earnings report flaunted how their higher prices have "more than offset" their

higher costs. The CFO of Hershey said last quarter that pricing gains more than offset inflation and higher costs.

So what can we do about it? The Biden administration has taken important steps to rein in corporate profiteering and address the longstanding affordability crisis, from eliminating junk fees to strengthening global supply chains and cracking down on corporate concentration.

With the 2017 Trump tax cuts set to expire, Congress should also take this opportunity to raise taxes on corporations. Taxing prof-

its helps disincentivise price gouging and profiteering because large corporations will have to send a greater share of their windfall to Uncle Sam. We've come a long way in bringing inflation down since its peak in 2022. But stamping out inflation once and for all will require a concerted effort to rein in the corporate profiteering. **CT**

Lindsay Owens is the Executive Director of the Groundwork Collaborative. Elizabeth Pancotti is Strategic Advisor to Groundwork. This op-ed was distributed by www.OtherWords.org.

➤ JANINE JACKSON

Threatened with prison for parody newspaper

Students at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, produced a parody edition of the school's newspaper, the *Daily Northwestern*, to call out the school's stance on Israel's war on Gaza. Some folks wrapped the fake front pages around copies of the actual school paper.

This exercise in culture jamming got two students brought up on a charge that could have landed them in prison for a year. After widespread protest on campus, and national coverage in the *Intercept* (2/5/24) and *Responsible Statecraft* (2/5/24), charges were dropped against the students.

After the appearance of the look-alike *Northwestern Daily* (right) – bearing the headline "North-



western Complicit in Genocide of Palestinians" – the parent company of the school paper, Students

INSIGHTS

Publishing Company, announced that it was engaging “law enforcement to investigate and find those responsible.”

Intercept and *Responsible Statecraft* said local prosecutors then brought charges against two students. They invoked a little-known statute, originally passed to prevent the Ku Klux Klan from distributing recruitment materials in newspapers, that makes it illegal to insert an “unauthorised advertisement in a newspaper or periodical.” The students, both of whom are black, faced up to a year in jail and a \$2,500 fine.

A representative of Northwestern’s law school clinic noted that SPC chose to go directly to the police rather than issuing a cease-and-desist letter to the students, indicating that they, university police and the state’s attorney’s office all used their discretion to opt for the harshest response.

“The idea that multiple people in a chain of reaction to this incident repeatedly decided to not use any of the other tools of reproof available to them, but rather chose to pursue it as a criminal act,” said Stephanie Kollmann, “is frankly remarkable.”

Reaction to the criminalisation of a press-based protest was sharp. Over 70 student organisations pledged not to speak with the school’s official paper until the charges were dropped, and more than 7,000 people signed a student-led petition for the same.

The *Intercept* quoted Evgeny Stolyarov, a Jewish Northwestern student, warning about the chilling effect, but adding that the incident also “reinvigorates the student body. Hopefully this ends up bringing activists on campus together.”

Responding to the widespread

condemnation, the SPC board issued an apology, saying that the prosecutions were “unintended consequences” of their reporting the wrapping of their paper to campus police, and later signing complaints against the individuals alleged to have taken part in the protest (*Patch*, 2/7/24). The board said it had formally asked the “Cook County state’s attorney’s office to pursue a resolution to this matter that results in nothing punitive or

permanent.”

Prosecutors subsequently dismissed the charges, saying that Northwestern was capable of dealing with the issue “in a manner that is both appropriate to the educational context and respectful of students’ rights.” **CT**

Janine Jackson reports for Fairness and Accuracy In Reporting (FAIR) - www.fair.org - where this article was first published.

► VIJAY PRASHAD

So, where exactly should displaced Palestinians go?

On February 9 Israel’s prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu said that his army would advance into Rafah, the last remaining city in Gaza not occupied by the Israelis. Most of the 2.3-million Palestinians who live in Gaza had fled to its southern border with Egypt after being told by the Israelis on October 13, 2023, that the north had to be abandoned and that the south would be a “safe zone.” As the Palestinians from the north, particularly from Gaza City, began their march south – often on foot – they were attacked by Israeli forces, who gave them no safe passage.

The Israelis said that anything south of Wadi Gaza, which divides the narrow strip, would be safe, but then as the Palestinians moved into Deir-al-Balah, Khan Younis, and Rafah, they found the Israeli jets following them and the Israeli troops coming after them. Now,

Netanyahu has said that his forces will enter Rafah to combat Hamas. On February 11, Netanyahu told NBC news that Israeli would provide “safe passage for the civilian population” and that there would be no “catastrophe.”

The use of the word “catastrophe” is significant. This is the accepted English translation of the word “nakba,” used since 1948 to describe the forced removal that year of half of the Palestinian population from their homes. Netanyahu’s use of the term comes after high officials of the Israeli government have already spoken of a “Gaza Nakba” or a “Second Nakba.” These phrases formed part of South Africa’s application to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on December 29, 2023, alleging that they are part of the “expressions of genocidal intent against the Palestinian people by Israeli state officials.” A month later, the ICJ said

INSIGHTS

that there was “plausible” evidence of genocide being conducted in Gaza, highlighting the words of the Israelis officials. One official, the Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant said, “I have released all restraints” (quoted both by the South African complaint and in the ICJ’s order).

Netanyahu saying that there would be no “catastrophe” after over 28,000 Palestinians have been killed and after two million of the 2.3-million Palestinians in Gaza have been displaced is puzzling. Since the ICJ’s order, the Israeli army has killed nearly 2,000 Palestinians. The Israeli army has al-

ready begun to assault Rafah, a city with a population density now at 22,000 people per square kilometer. In response to the Israeli announcement that it would enter Rafah city, the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) – one of the few groups operating in the southern part of Gaza – said that such an invasion “could collapse the humanitarian response.”

The NRC assessed nine of the shelters in Rafah, which are housing 27,400 civilians and found that the residents have no drinking water. Because the shelters are operating at 150 percent capacity, hundreds of the Palestinians are living

on the street. In each of the areas that the NRC studied, they found the Palestinian refugees in the grip of hepatitis A, gastroenteritis, diarrhoea, smallpox, lice, and influenza. Because of the collapse of this humanitarian response from the NRC, and from the United Nations – whose agency UNRWA has lost its funding and is under attack by the Israelis – the situation will deteriorate further.

Netanyahu says that his government will provide “safe passage” to the Palestinians. These words have been heard by the Palestinians since mid-October when they were told to keep going south to prevent being killed by the Israeli bombing. Nobody believes anything that Netanyahu says. A Palestinian health worker, Saleem, told me that he cannot imagine any place of safety within Gaza. He came to Rafah’s al-Zohour neighbourhood from Khan Younis, walking with his family, desperate to get out of the range of the Israeli guns. “Where do we go now?” he asks me. “We cannot enter Egypt. The border is closed. So, we cannot go south. We cannot go into Israel, because that is impossible. Are we to go north, back to Khan Younis and Gaza City?”

Saleem remembers that when he arrived in al-Zohour, the Israelis targeted the home of Dr. Omar Mohammed Harb, killing 22 Palestinians (among them five children). The house was flattened.

The name of Dr. Omar Mohammed Harb stayed with me because I recalled that two years ago his daughter Abeer was to be married to Ismail Abdel-Hameed Dweik. An Israeli air strike on the Shouhada refugee camp killed Ismail. Abeer was killed in the strike on her fa-

► 1,000 WORDS (2)



No Mercy – Carlos Latuff, @MintPressNews via X

INSIGHTS

ther's house, which had been a refuge for those fleeing from the north. Saleem moved into that area of Rafah. Now he is unsettled. "Where to go?" he asks.

On January 29, 2024, the UN special rapporteur on the right to adequate housing, Dr. Balakrishnan Rajagopal wrote a strong essay in the *New York Times* titled "Domicide: the Mass Destruction of Homes Should be a Crime Against Humanity." Accompanying his article was a photo essay by Yaqeen Baker, whose house was destroyed in Jabalia (northern Gaza) by Israeli bombardment.

"The destruction of homes in Gaza," Baker wrote, "has become commonplace, and so has the sentiment, 'The important thing is that you're safe – everything else can be replaced.'" That is an assessment shared across Gaza amongst those who are still alive. But, as Dr. Rajagopal says, the scale of the destruction of housing in Gaza should not be taken for granted. It is a form of "domicide," a crime against humanity.

The Israeli attack on Gaza, Dr. Rajagopal writes, is "far worse than what we saw in Dresden and Rotterdam during World War II, where about 25,000 homes were destroyed in each city." In Gaza, he says, more than 70,000 housing units have been totally destroyed, and 290,000 partially damaged. In these three months of Israeli fire, he notes, "a shocking 60 to 70 percent of structures in Gaza, and up to 84 percent of structures in northern Gaza, have been damaged or destroyed." Due to this domicile, there is no place for the Palestinians in Rafah to go if they go north. Their homes have been destroyed. "This crushing of Gaza as a place," reflects Dr.

Rajagopal, "erases the past, present, and future of many Palestinians." This statement by Dr. Rajagopal is a recognition of the unfolding genocide in Gaza.

As I speak with Saleem the sound of the Israeli advance can be heard in the distance. "I don't know when we can speak next," he says. "I don't know where I will be." **CT**

Vijay Prashad is an Indian historian, editor, and journalist. He is a writing fellow and chief

correspondent at Globetrotter. He is an editor of LeftWord Books and the director of Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research. He has written more than 20 books, including The Darker Nations and The Poorer Nations. His latest books are Struggle Makes Us Human: Learning from Movements for Socialism and (with Noam Chomsky) The Withdrawal: Iraq, Libya, Afghanistan, and the Fragility of US Power. This article was produced by Globetrotter.

► CONOR McPARLAND

Belfast's International Wall is giant Gaza mural



Mural artist Danny Devenny, leader of Belfast's International Wall project.

The iconic International Wall on Belfast's Falls Road is being transformed into a huge new mural depicting the suffering caused to Palestinians in Gaza by the Israeli onslaught.

In a devastating illustration of the massive toll on innocent lives in

the conflict, three of the Palestinian artists involved in the project have been killed in Gaza.

The idea for the project came about last August when Rana Hammoudeh from Palestine visited Belfast and – impressed by the International Wall – proposed replicating the project in her home country with both Irish and Palestinian artists.

Rana contacted Dr Bill Rolston, who has documented murals from Ireland's Troubles since 1981, seeking advice on the project.

However, following the October 7 attack when Hamas killed almost 1,200 Israelis and took 200 hostages, and the subsequent Israeli war in Gaza, in which more than 26,000 people have been killed to date, the project as it was first conceived was no longer possible.

Instead, Bill and leading mural artist Danny Devenny suggested

INSIGHTS

that Palestinian artists send images to be replicated on the International Wall. Rana responded and the process of ‘Painting for Palestine’ began.

“Ever since the war broke out over in Gaza, Palestinian artists have been documenting it through artwork,” explained Danny.

“One of the images to be featured was designed by well-known Palestinian artist, Heba Zagout, who was killed along with two of her four sons during an Israeli airstrike in October. Three other artists have lost their lives since we started this.

“The project is being led by three mural artists – myself, Michael Doherty and Marty Lyons – but we are encouraging everyone to get involved.”



One of the giant Gaza artworks that are now adorning Belfast’s International Wall.

Showing her support on social media, Rana Hammoudeh said: “Thank you for your support and solidarity with the Palestinian, people especially during these horrific and dark times.

“Palestine and Ireland will always have an unbreakable and historical ties in fighting for humanity, justice and against oppression.”

A fundraiser to pay for the work has already raised over £2,300 with any surplus going towards medical aid for those affected in Palestine. **CT**

Conor McParland is a journalist with the Belfast weekly newspaper Andersonstown News, where this article was first published.

➤ 1,000 WORDS (3)



Never forget - February 2024, via X

➤ CAITLIN JOHNSTONE

Israel supporters are some of worst people in world

Recently I shared a tweet about how Doctors Without Borders are encountering children as young as five in Gaza who say they want to die because of the horrific things they have experienced during Israel’s ongoing genocidal onslaught.

It’s about the most awful thing you can imagine – tiny children so traumatised that they consciously don’t want to go on living. It boggles

the mind to even contemplate it. But almost as soon as I shared my post, I got a response from an Israel supporter saying, “Gazans support Hamas. Hamas conducts Islamic extremist terror. Gazans should reconsider their support for Hamas.”

Later I got another response from an account with a bunch of flag emojis next to its name saying, “Before shedding tears for the people of Gaza, remember that they cre-

INSIGHTS

ated Hamas, elected it, supported it, supplied it, worked for it, hid it, sheltered it, filled its ranks and celebrated all its atrocities.”

I received another response from an anonymous account saying “FAFO”, an acronym for “Fuck Around, Find Out”. Used here, it means that those small children who want to die because of the horrors they have experienced it because they are Gazan. Which is also essentially what the other two responders were saying as well.

Imagine being that way. Imagine being so warped and twisted inside that you think that’s an appropriate way to respond to unthinkable news about small children being so traumatised by mass military violence that they want to die.

This happens all the time. The other day I shared a report from an American doctor saying that IDF snipers have been picking off Gazan children with single shots to the head, and I again received a comment from someone saying “Fuck around and find out.”

It might seem kind of petty to focus on individual comments from random social media accounts, but this happens so often, and I see other people talking about it too – I just saw a screenshot of a guy saying “fuck around and find out” in response to that gut-wrenching photo of a dead Palestinian girl ripped apart by an Israeli airstrike in Rafah earlier this month. So this is definitely a symptom of something profoundly ugly lurking in the underbelly of our society that’s worth drawing some attention to.

If you don’t interact with many Zionists in your day to day life or don’t have a large enough profile to be constantly swarmed by Israel apologists you might be unaware

that this is happening, but the vitriol I’ve been seeing from Israel supporters on social media platforms since October 7 has been one of the most shocking and disturbing things I’ve ever witnessed.

Over the years I’ve butted heads with pretty much every political faction in the English-speaking world at one point or another, and I can honestly say that Israel supporters are by far the worst. No political faction I have ever interacted with is as immoral and dishonest, or so frequently says things that are so jaw-droppingly disgusting I am sure I must be misinterpreting it at first. I’ve never tangled with a more odious group of people.

And to be clear I’m not talking about a faction of just Israelis or Jews here; a huge percentage of these awful comments come from Christian Zionists and American rightists, with a decent smattering of Hindu nationalists from India

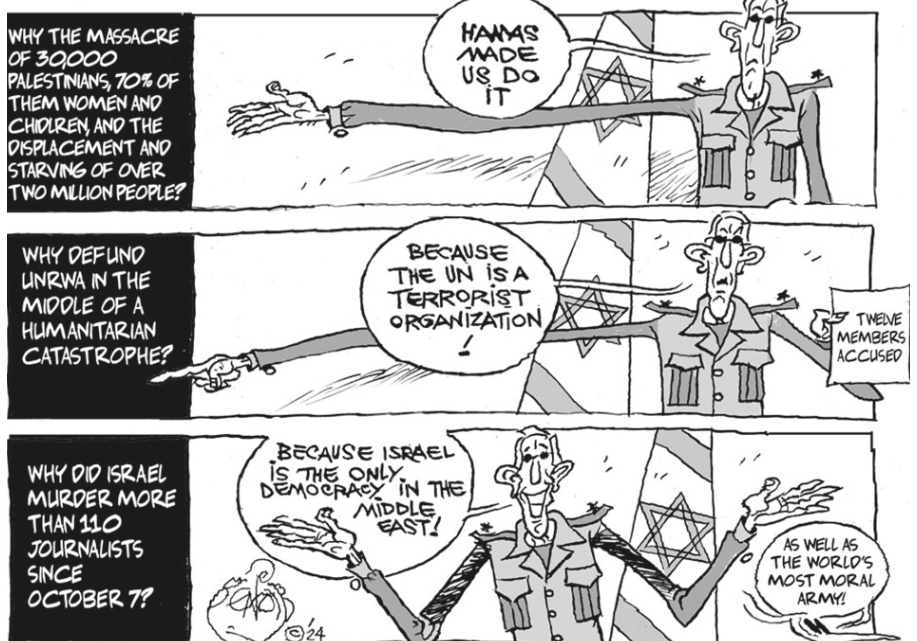
who’ll support any excuse to cheerlead the killing of Muslims.

The only unifying feature I’m seeing in the faction I’m talking about is that they support Israel and its actions in Gaza. What I’m saying here will be spun as antisemitic by Israel supporters no matter how I put it because Israel supporters are manipulative liars, but to be clear this is not about Jews at all.

There’s something seriously wrong with these people. They have no interest in truth or morality; all they care about is supporting their favourite ethnostate and murdering Palestinians. I guess when you’re already able to numb your heart and your mind enough to support an apartheid state that whose existence requires nonstop violence and abuse, when that state ramps up its atrocities to historic levels you’re not going to have enough of a conscience to see anything wrong with it. **CT**

BENDIB'S WORLD

KHALIL BENDIB



► TOM ENGELHARDT

The last superpower?

If I told you a strange yellow-haired man sporting an eerie grimace would have won the US presidency, then – three years after leaving office – be back at it again, you would have thought me mad as a hatter

I was born on July 20, 1944, almost two years after Joe Biden arrived on this planet and almost a year before You Know Who, like me, landed in New York City. The United States was then nearing the end of the second global war of that century and things were about to look up. My dad had been the operations officer for the 1st Air Commandos fighting the Japanese in Burma and, by that July, the tide had distinctly turned. The era that Joe Biden, Donald Trump, and I would enter would quickly become an upbeat one for so many Americans – or at least so many white Americans in the midst of a war economy that would, in some sense, carry over into a growing peacetime economy.

Of course, World War II would end dramatically with the dropping of new weapons – atomic bombs – on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, signalling, though few fully grasped it at the time, that we humans would soon be capable not just of making war in a big-time fashion, but of all too literally destroying humanity.

The “peacetime” that followed the devastation of those two cities and the killing of at least 100,000 Japanese civilians in them would,

for the next 46 years, be stoked by what came to be known as the Cold War. In it, a nuclear-armed America and a soon-to-be-nuclear-armed Soviet Union, as well as its “commie” – the term of the time – allies, faced off against each other globally. (Estimates for the Joint Chiefs of Staff in 1961 suggested that a full-scale US nuclear attack on the Soviet Union and Communist China would have killed between 200-million and 600-million people.) Both sides would rush to create vast nuclear arsenals able not just to obliterate the United States and the Soviet Union, but the planet itself, while, in the course of the next three-quarters of a century, seven other countries would, cheerily enough, join the nuclear “club.”

Two of the countries waging war at this moment, Russia and Israel, are nuclear powers. And today, more than 78 years after those atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, with perhaps 1,700 nuclear weapons deployed (most of them staggeringly more powerful than those first atomic bombs), the US is in the midst of a multi-decade “modernisation” of its nuclear arse-



nal to the tune of at least \$1.5-trillion and possibly far more.

All in all, consider that quite an inheritance from that childhood of mine.

We kids grew up then amid what I came to call a “victory culture” – and what a potentially devastating culture that proved to be! Doesn’t the very thought of it leave you with the urge to dive under the nearest desk (something that, in my youth,



was called “duck and cover” and that we kids practiced at school in case a Russian nuclear bomb were to go off over New York City)? Yes, there would indeed be a certain amount of ducking and covering of all kinds during that 40-odd year-long Cold War with the Soviet Union. After all, for the US, it involved a deeply unsatisfying war in Korea in the early 1950s and a bitter disaster of a war in Vietnam in the

1960s and early 1970s, fearsome anti-communist crusades at home, and Washington’s support across the planet not just for democracies but for quite a crew of autocrats (like the Shah of Iran).

Still, domestically the US became a distinctly well-off land. In the 1960s, the Civil Rights Movement grew to challenge the racial hell that was the inheritance of slavery in this country and, by the end of the

Cold War, Americans were generally living better than ever before.

Of course, a grotesque version of inequality was already starting to spiral out of control as this country gained ever more billionaires, including a fellow named – yes! – Donald Trump who would be no one’s apprentice. But in all those years, one thing few here would have imagined was that American-style democracy itself might, at

some moment, prove increasingly out of fashion for a distinct subset, if not a majority, of Americans.

Now, let's take a leap from the end of the Cold War in 1991 to the present moment and the question is: What are we headed for? Sadly, the answer (no given, but certainly a possibility) could indeed be an all-American version of fascism, brownshirts included, should Donald Trump be reelected in a chaotic November to come, including – absolutely guaranteed! – a contested election result (and god knows what else) if he isn't.

Honestly, tell me that you even believe this world we're supposedly living in exists!

As I approach 80, I find just being in it increasingly unnerving. Wherever I look, nothing seems to be faintly working right. It doesn't matter whether you're talking about our secretary of defense disappearing as this year began (yes, at my age I can empathise with an older guy who doesn't want to share information about his prostate cancer, but still...); the increasingly extreme and disturbingly fascistic – a word I once reserved for Francisco Franco, Benito Mussolini, Adolf Hitler, and the war my father fought in – bent to what's still called the “Republican” Party; the utter madness of one whale of a guy, Donald Trump, and the possibility that such madness could attract a majority of American voters in 2024; the urge of “my” president, that old Cold Warrior Joe Biden, to bomb his way into a larger, far more disastrous war in the Middle East (and who cares whether that bombing is faintly “working” or not?); oh, and (to make sure this is my longest paragraph ever) when some of that bombing is being done to “protect” American troops in Iraq and Syria (not to speak of those who recently were wound-

ed or died in – yes! – Jordan), who cares why in the world our soldiers are stationed there in the first place; not to speak of the all-too-unstoppable human urge to set parts of our globe aflame with war after war (and don't forget the way those wars throw staggering amounts of greenhouse gasses into the atmosphere, so that it isn't just Afghanistan, or Iraq, or Ukraine, or Gaza burning but, in some sense, our whole planet); and, of course, the fact that we humans seem bent on all too literally heating this world to the boiling point in a fashion that, historically speaking, should (but for all too many of us doesn't) seem beyond devastating. I mean, give us credit, since 2023 was the hottest year by far in human history and yet, some

After some rugged years on the foreign policy front, including that disastrous war in Vietnam, victory culture was back in a big-time fashion

years down the line, it may seem almost cool in comparison to what's coming.

Consider that paragraph – possibly the longest I've ever written – my welcome mat to the 2024 version of our world. And welcome, as well, to a country whose leaders, in 1991 when the Soviet Union collapsed, felt distinctly on top of this planet of ours in every imaginable sense. They saw the US then as the ultimate superpower (or perhaps I mean: THE ULTIMATE SUPERPOWER!!!), a power of one and one alone. After some rugged years on the foreign policy front, including that disastrous war in Vietnam that left Americans feeling anything but

triumphant, victory culture was back in a big-time fashion. And that, unbelievably enough, was only a little more than three decades ago. Yet today, while the Biden administration pours weaponry into Israel and bombs and missiles into Yemen and elsewhere in the Middle East, who would claim that the United States (or any other country for that matter) was the “lone superpower” on this planet?

In fact, in 2007, with this country's post-9/11 wars in Afghanistan and Iraq already dragging on disastrously, I wrote a new introduction to my book on victory culture and it was already clear to me that “perhaps when the history of this era is written, among the more striking developments will have been the inability of a mighty empire to force its will or its way on others in the normal fashion almost anywhere on the planet. Since the Soviet Union evaporated, the fact is that most previously accepted indices of power – military power in particular – have been challenged and, in the process, victory has been denied.”

In historical terms, that should be seen as a remarkably swift fall from grace in a world where this country hasn't been able to win a war in living memory (despite having something like 750 military bases scattered across the globe and a near-trillion-dollar “defense” budget that leaves the next 10 countries combined in the dust). These days, in fact, the former lone superpower seems in danger of coming apart at the seams domestically, if not in an actual civil war (though there are certainly enough weapons of a devastating kind in civilian hands to launch one), then in some kind of a strange Trumpbacchanalia.

Yes, if we were in 1991 and I told

you that, in an election season 32 years later, the very phrase “civil war” would no longer just be a reference to a distant historical memory of the Blue and the Gray, but part of everyday conversation and media reportage, you would have laughed me out of the room.

Similarly, if I had told you that a strange yellow-haired man sporting an eerie grimace, a former 14-season TV apprentice (rocked by divorces and bankruptcies), would have won the presidency and then, three years after leaving office, be back at it again, revelling in the mere 91 criminal charges outstanding against him in four cases (not to speak of two civil trials) and campaigning on a promise of a one-day dictatorship on his first day back in office when he would, above all else, just “drill, drill, drill,” you would undoubtedly have thought me mad as a hatter.

If I had told you then that North Korea – yes, North Korea! – might have a missile that could reach the United States with a nuclear weapon and that its ruler (the man President Trump first called “a sick puppy” and later a “great leader”) was threatening his southern neighbour with nuclear war, would you have believed it?

If I had told you then that the US was fervently backing its ally Israel, after its own version of 9/11, in a war in Gaza in which staggering amounts of housing, as well as hospitals and schools in that 25-mile strip of land were being destroyed, damaged, or put out of action, more than 27,000 Palestinians (including thousands of children) slaughtered, 85 percent of the population turned into refugees, and perhaps half of them now in danger of starvation, would you have believed me? I doubt it.

If I had told you that, more than 22 years after its own 9/11, my country would still be fighting the “war on

terror” it launched then, would you have believed me? I doubt that, too.

If I had told you that, in 2024, the two candidates for president would be 81 and 77 years old (keep in mind that the oldest American president previously, Ronald Reagan, left office at age 77); that one of them would look ancient wherever he went and whatever he did, while the other, on the campaign trail, would begin slurring his words, while mixing up his Republican opponent with the former Democratic House leader, what might you think? (Oh, and don’t forget that the leader of the Senate Republicans, Mitch McConnell, is almost 82 and last year froze twice while speaking with reporters.)

Honestly, could you have ever im-

If I had told you that, more than 22 years after its own 9/11, my country would still be fighting the “war on terror” it launched then, would you have believed me?

aged such an ancient version of an all-American world – the world of a distinctly disintegrating superpower? And yet given how we humans are acting, the US could well prove to be the last superpower ever. Who knows if, in a future that seems to be heading downhill fast in an endless blaze of heat, any country, including China, could become a superpower.

In all those years past, the one thing few could have imagined was that democracy itself might begin to go out of fashion right here in the US of A.

Of course, the question now is: What are we headed for? And the answer could indeed be an all-American version of fascism, should Don-

ald Trump be reelected this year, or an unimaginably chaotic scene if he isn’t.

And by the way, don’t blame Donald Trump for all of this. Consider him instead the biggest Symptom – and given that giant Wendy’s burger of a man, the word does need to be capitalised – around!

Imagine this: in a mere 30-plus years, we’ve moved from a world with a “lone superpower” to one in which it’s becoming harder to imagine a super anything on a planet that’s threatening to go down in a welter of wars, as well as unprecedented droughts, fires, floods, storms, and heat.

And if Donald Trump were to be elected, we would also find ourselves in an almost unimaginable version of – yes! – defeat culture (and maybe that will have to be the title of the book I’ll undoubtedly never write after I turn 80 and am headed downhill myself).

But don’t make me go on! Honestly, you know just as well as I do that, if the man who only wants to “drill, drill, drill” ends up back in the White House, you can more or less kiss this country (which already happens to be the biggest oil producer and natural gas exporter around) and possibly this planet goodbye. And if he doesn’t... well, you may have to kiss it goodbye anyway.

And that would be defeat culture, big time. **CT**

*Tom Engelhardt created and runs the website www.TomDispatch.com, where this article was first published. He is also a co-founder of the American Empire Project and the author of a highly praised history of American triumphalism in the Cold War, *The End of Victory Culture*. A fellow of the Type Media Center, his sixth book is *A Nation Unmade by War*.*

Five years for telling the truth about tax

Tax consultant Charles Littlejohn faces prison while America's richest continue to feel precious little tax-time pain

A US federal district court has just sentenced Charles Littlejohn to five years in prison. What exactly did Littlejohn – a contractor for the IRS – do? He committed a public service. He revealed just how astoundingly little America's richest are paying in federal taxes.

In 2019, after Donald Trump had reneged on his campaign pledge to publicly share his personal tax data, the then 33-year-old Littlejohn passed detailed info from Trump's tax returns to the *New York Times*. The subsequent *Times* exposé revealed that Trump, in 2016, had paid a mere \$750 in federal income taxes and not paid any such taxes in all but five of the fifteen previous years.

A year later, Littlejohn shared a much wider federal income tax data set with the nonprofit news organisation *ProPublica*. These new numbers helped expose how a variety of wealthy public officials, including the mega-millionaire Rick Scott, a Republican US senator from Florida, had exploited tax code loopholes “to preserve their family fortunes for their heirs.”

A fuming Senator Scott would go on to position himself – before Littlejohn's sentencing last month – as among the “thousands of American taxpayers” that Littlejohn had subjected to “partisan abuse.”

The *Wall Street Journal* shared Scott's indignation. “The man behind the largest heist of taxpayer data,” the *Journal* insisted, fully deserves a “multiyear sentence” severe enough to “deter future political raids on unpopular Americans.”

But the outrage over Littlejohn's IRS data leaks went far beyond the ranks of right-wing lawmakers and editorial boards. The presiding US district court judge on Littlejohn's case, Ana Reyes, could barely contain her fury.

“I cannot overstate how troubled I am by what occurred,” Reyes announced last October at the hearing where Littlejohn pleaded guilty to one count of unauthorised disclosure of income tax returns. Reyes went on to promise “serious consequences” for Littlejohn's transgressions.

“People taking the law into their own hands,” she intoned, will always be “unacceptable.”

US Attorney-General Merrick Garland would be equally aghast.

“By using his role as a government contractor to gain access to private tax information, steal that information, and disclose it publicly,” Garland harumphed, “Charles Littlejohn broke federal law and betrayed the public's trust.”

The federal prosecutors on Littlejohn's case, meanwhile, totally rejected any suggestion that the government ought to be taking Littlejohn's noble motives into account.

“Based on his training, his personal experience, and his work, he understood the gravity of his offense,” the prosecutors charged. “He understood the impact that it would have on his victims. But he acted anyway.”

By “stealing and leaking private, personal tax information,” prosecutors would add, Littlejohn had stripped “individuals of the legal protection of their most sensitive data.” He had denied them “equal protection under the law.” He deserved the maximum sentence for his offence. End of story.

But the “law” – in a plutocracy – protects some individuals far more than others. Take the top execs at consulting firm Booz Allen Hamilton. Littlejohn had three separate stints working as an IRS contractor for Booz Allen, the last between 2017 and 2021. These execs would do their best, before the sentencing, to distance themselves from Littlejohn and his leaks.

“We condemn in the strongest possible terms the actions of this individual, who was active with the company years ago,” a Booz Allen spokesperson told the *Washington*

Post. “We have zero tolerance for violations of the law and operate under the highest ethical and professional guidelines.”

But these professed law-abiding execs at Booz Allen, turns out, have themselves been playing exceptionally fast and loose with the law. Just last July, the Justice Department’s Office of Public Affairs announced that Booz Allen had “agreed to pay” Uncle Sam some \$377.5-million “to resolve allegations” that the company had violated the False Claims Act and improperly billed “commercial and international costs to its government contracts.”

The difference between these Booz Allen misdeeds and the misdeeds of Charles Littlejohn? Booz Allen execs advanced their own private gain at public expense. Littlejohn did his leaking, his lawyers noted in their pre-sentencing filings, “out of a deep, moral belief that the American people had a right to know the information and sharing it was the only way to effect change.”

The Booz Allen settlement with the government does not require any prison time for any of the firm’s executives. Littlejohn, by contrast, now has to spend his next five years in prison, do another three years under probation, and perform 300 hours of community service. He also has to pay a \$5,000 fine.

All this amounts to a perfectly justified penalty, federal prosecutors would have us believe, for Littlejohn’s heinous offence. The “extensive and ongoing” harm from his disclosures, they avow, remains “impossible to quantify.”

We can quantify, on the other hand, exactly how much our feder-

al tax system’s current operations are costing the American public, thanks to the work that *ProPublica* has done with Littlejohn’s leaked disclosures.

One example: Since the start of this century, *ProPublica* reports, billionaire Jeff Bezos has had at least two years where he paid “not a penny in federal income taxes.” His fellow mega-billionaire Elon Musk enjoyed the same privileged status in 2018.

From 2014 through 2018, Bezos reported income of \$4.22-billion and paid just 0.98 percent of his increased wealth during those years in federal taxes. Musk, for his part, paid just 3.27 percent of his wealth



FIVE YEARS: Charles Littlejohn

gains in taxes over the course of those years.

In those five years overall, *ProPublica*’s data crunching indicates, America’s 25 richest paid only 3.4 percent of what they added to their fortunes in federal tax.

Some perspective: Over those same years, 40-something Americans holding the “typical amount of wealth for people their age” paid almost as much in federal taxes – about \$62,000 – as the \$65,000 they added to their personal net worths.

How do we stop this pervasive perversion of tax justice? Simple. We could start by making basic data

from tax returns available for public scrutiny. So argues Boston University’s Laurence Kotlikoff.

“Disclosure,” this economist notes, “could be an automatic enforcement device.”

And that disclosure doesn’t have to be particularly invasive. The information released need only be an individual’s income and tax liability, “figures that cannot be readily used to steal someone’s identity,” observes business journalist Anna Bernasek.

The United States, Bernasek points out, has actually had moments when the public could see just how much the richest among us were – and weren’t – paying in taxes. In 1923 and 1924, individual and corporate taxpayers had to reveal what they were paying out in federal income tax. Newspapers had “a field day,” notes Bernasek, publishing the tax liabilities of the famous and their corporations.

America’s rich would not be pleased. US Treasury Secretary Andrew Mellon, himself one of the nation’s richest men, would flex his ample political muscles and soon get Congress to drop the disclosure mandate.

Today, a century later, we average taxpayers need to flex our own political muscles. Our wealthiest should no longer be able to keep private how precious little they’re paying at tax time. **CT**

Sam Pizzigati, an Institute for Policy Studies associate fellow, 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.

● **Want to learn more about the Charles Littlejohn case and how you can help defray Littlejohn’s legal fees and expenses behind bars. Check the GoFundMe legal defence fund site that Littlejohn’s friends and supporters have just created online – <https://www.gofundme.com/f/charles-littlejohns-legal-defense-fund>**

After two years of war in Ukraine, it's time for peace

How many more people have to die before the United States and its European allies allow serious talks to begin?

As we mark two full years since Russia invaded Ukraine, Ukrainian government forces have withdrawn from Avdiivka, a town they first captured from the self-declared Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) in July 2014. Situated only 10 miles from Donetsk city, Avdiivka gave Ukrainian government forces a base from which their artillery bombarded Donetsk for nearly ten years. From a pre-war population of about 31,000, the town has been depopulated and left in ruins. The mass slaughter on both sides in this long battle was a measure of the strategic value of the city to both sides, but it is also emblematic of the shocking human cost of this war, which has degenerated into a brutal and bloody war of attrition along a nearly static front line. Neither side made significant territorial gains in the entire 2023 year of fighting, with a net gain to Russia of a mere 188 square miles, or 0.1 percent of Ukraine.

And while it is the Ukrainians and Russians fighting and dying in this war of attrition with over half a million casualties, it is the United States, with some of its Western allies, that has stood in the way of peace talks. This was true of talks between Russia and Ukraine that took place in March 2022, one month after the Russian invasion, and it is

true of talks that Russia tried to initiate with the United States as recently as January 2024.

In March 2022, Russia and Ukraine met in Turkey and negotiated a peace agreement that should have ended the war. Ukraine agreed to become a neutral country between east and west, on the model of Austria or Switzerland, giving up its controversial ambition for NATO membership. Territorial questions over Crimea and the self-declared republics of Donetsk and Luhansk would be resolved peacefully, based on self-determination for the people of those regions.

But then the US and UK intervened to persuade Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky to abandon the neutrality agreement in favour of a long war to militarily drive Russia out of Ukraine and recover Crimea and Donbas by force. US and UK leaders have never admitted to their own people what they did, nor tried to explain why they did it.

So it has been left to everyone else involved to reveal details of the agreement and the US and UK's roles in torpedoing it: President Zelensky's advisers; Ukrainian negotiators; Turkish foreign minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu and Turkish diplomats; Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, who was another mediator; and former German

Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, who mediated with Russian President Vladimir Putin for Ukraine.

The US sabotage of peace talks should come as no surprise. So much of US foreign policy follows what should by now be an easily recognisable and predictable pattern, in which our leaders systematically lie to us about their decisions and actions in crisis situations, and, by the time the truth is widely known, it is too late to reverse the catastrophic effects of those decisions. Thousands of people have paid with their lives, nobody is held accountable, and the world's attention has moved on to the next crisis, the next series of lies and the next bloodbath, which in this case is Gaza.

But the war grinds on in Ukraine, whether we pay attention to it or not. Once the US and UK succeeded in killing peace talks and prolonging the war, it fell into an intractable pattern common to many wars, in which Ukraine, the United States and the leading members of the NATO military alliance were encouraged, or we might say deluded, by limited successes at different times into continually prolonging and escalating the war and rejecting diplomacy, in spite of ever-mounting, appalling human costs



The ruins of Avdiivka.

for the people of Ukraine.

US and NATO leaders have repeated ad nauseam that they are arming Ukraine to put it in a stronger position at the “negotiating table,” even as they keep rejecting negotiations. After Ukraine gained ground with its much celebrated offensives in the fall of 2022, US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley went public with a call to “seize the moment” and get back to the negotiating table from the position of strength that NATO leaders said they were waiting for. French and German military leaders were reportedly even more adamant that that moment would be short-lived if they failed to seize it.

They were right. President Biden rejected his military advisers’ calls for renewed diplomacy, and Ukraine’s failed 2023 offensive wasted its chance to negotiate from a position of strength, sacrificing many more lives to leave it weaker than before.

On February 13, 2024, Reuters Moscow bureau broke the story that

the United States had recently rejected a new Russian proposal to reopen peace negotiations. Multiple Russian sources involved in the initiative told Reuters that Russia proposed direct talks with the United States to call a ceasefire along the current front lines of the war.

After Russia’s March 2022 peace agreement with Ukraine was vetoed by the US, this time Russia approached the United States directly before involving Ukraine. There was a meeting of intermediaries in Turkey, and a meeting between Secretary of State Blinken, CIA Director Burns and National Security Adviser Sullivan in Washington, but the result was a message from Sullivan that the US was willing to discuss other aspects of US-Russian relations, but not peace in Ukraine.

And so the war grinds on. Russia is still firing 10,000 artillery shells per day along the front line, while Ukraine can only fire 2,000. In a

microcosm of the larger war, some Ukrainian gunners told reporters they were only allowed to fire three shells per night. As Sam Cranny-Evans of the UK’s RUSI military think-tank told the *Guardian*, “What that means is that Ukrainians can’t suppress Russian artillery any more, and if the Ukrainians can’t fire back, all they can do is try to survive.”

A March 2023 European initiative to produce a million shells for Ukraine in a year fell far short, only producing about 600,000. US monthly shell production in October 2023 was 28,000 shells, with a target of 37,000 per month by April 2024. The United States plans to increase production to 100,000 shells per month, but that will take until October 2025.

Meanwhile, Russia is already producing 4.5-million artillery shells per year. After spending less than one tenth of the Pentagon budget over the past 20 years, how is Russia able to produce five times more artillery shells than the United States and its NATO allies combined?

RUSI’s Richard Connolly explai-

ned to the *Guardian* that, while Western countries privatised their weapons production and dismantled “surplus” productive capacity after the end of the Cold War in the interest of corporate profits, “The Russians have been... subsidising the defense industry, and many would have said wasting money for the event that one day they need to be able to scale it up. So it was economically inefficient until 2022, and then suddenly it looks like a very shrewd bit of planning.”

President Biden has been anxious to send more money to Ukraine – a whopping \$61-billion – but disagreements in the US Congress between bipartisan Ukraine supporters and a Republican faction opposed to US involvement have held up the funds. But even if Ukraine had endless infusions of Western weapons, it has a more serious problem: Many of the troops it recruited to fight this war in 2022 have been killed, wounded or captured, and its recruitment system has been plagued by corruption and a lack of enthusiasm for the war among most of its people.

In August 2023, the government fired the heads of military recruitment in all 24 regions of the country after it became widely known that they were systematically soliciting bribes to allow men to avoid recruitment and gain safe passage out of the country. The Open Ukraine Telegram channel reported, “The military registration and enlistment offices have never seen such money before, and the revenues are being evenly distributed vertically to the top.”

The Ukrainian parliament is debating a new conscription law, with an online registration system that includes people living abroad and with penalties for failure to register or enlist. Parliament already voted down a previous bill that

members found too draconian, and many fear that forced conscription will lead to more widespread draft resistance, or even bring down the government.

Oleksiy Arestovych, President Zelensky’s former spokesman, told the *Unherd* website that the root of Ukraine’s recruitment problem is that only 20 percent of Ukrainians believe in the anti-Russian Ukrainian nationalism that has controlled Ukrainian governments since the overthrow of the Yanukovich government in 2014. “What about the remaining 80 percent?” the interviewer asked.

Ukraine's parliament is debating a new conscription law that includes people living abroad and with penalties for failure to register or enlist

“I think for most of them, their idea is of a multinational and poly-cultural country,” Arestovych replied. “And when Zelensky came into power in 2019, they voted for this idea. He did not articulate it specifically but it was what he meant when he said, ‘I don’t see a difference in the Ukrainian-Russian language conflict, we are all Ukrainians even if we speak different languages.’”

“And you know,” Arestovych continued, “my great criticism of what has happened in Ukraine over the last years, during the emotional trauma of the war, is this idea of Ukrainian nationalism which has divided Ukraine into different people: the Ukrainian speakers and Russian speakers as a second class of people. It’s the main dangerous idea and a worse danger than Russian military aggression, because nobody from this 80 percent of peo-

ple wants to die for a system in which they are people of a second class.”

If Ukrainians are reluctant to fight, imagine how Americans would resist being shipped off to fight in Ukraine. A 2023 US Army War College study of “Lessons from Ukraine” found that the US ground war with Russia that the United States is preparing to fight would involve an estimated 3,600 US casualties per day, killing and maiming as many US troops every two weeks as the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq did in twenty years.

Echoing Ukraine’s military recruitment crisis, the authors concluded, “Large-scale combat operations troop requirements may well require a reconceptualisation of the 1970s and 1980s volunteer force and a move toward partial conscription.”

US war policy in Ukraine is predicated on just such a gradual escalation from proxy war to full-scale war between Russia and the United States, which is unavoidably overshadowed by the risk of nuclear war. This has not changed in two years, and it will not change unless and until our leaders take a radically different approach. That would involve serious diplomacy to end the war on terms on which Russia and Ukraine can agree, as they did on the March 2022 neutrality agreement. **CT**

Medea Benjamin is cofounder of CODEPINK for Peace, and the author of several books, including Inside Iran: The Real History and Politics of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Nicolas J. S. Davies is an independent journalist, a researcher for CODEPINK and the author of Blood on Our Hands: The American Invasion and Destruction of Iraq. They are the authors of War in Ukraine: Making Sense of a Senseless Conflict, published by OR Books.

WE ARE ALL FRIED 



IN MEMORIAM
ALEXEI NAVALNY
1976 - 2024



IN FORGETIAM
JULIAN ASSANGE
1971 - NGAF

FRIED  28/2/24

Greg Koenderman

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Above:
Confrontation
between
picketing miners
and squad at
Cortonwood
Colliery, South
Yorkshire, 1985.

► MICHAEL KERSTGENS

Fighting for the future

Historic photos recall Thatcher's victory over striking British miners, the first step in the creation of a deeply divided nation



Above: Branch meeting at the Mitchell & Darfield Social Club, Wombwell, 1085.
Below: Chip's turn to look after baby. Wombwell, 1985.



On March 6th 1984, miners at Cortonwood Colliery in Yorkshire went on strike. Six days later, NUM President Arthur Scargill made the strike official across Britain, and so began the UK's biggest strike since the General Strike of 1928. It ran for almost a year until March 1985 – a year of bitter conflict between the miners and Margaret Thatcher and her Tory government – that marked the end of an era of rising social and financial

equality in Britain.

24-year-old Michael Kerstgens was studying photography in Germany at the time. But he had strong links with South Wales, having been born in Llanelli and spending his early years there. His father had spent 12 years working in South Wales for an engineering company involved with the mining industry and, as a 16-year-old, Kerstgens had had a summer job at the company's Swansea office.



Above and Right: Children's Christmas party, Llanelli, South Wales, 1984.
Below: New Year's Eve with neighbours and friends, Wombwell, 1984.



When he heard about the strike, Kerstgens went to South Wales to find out what was happening and start on what would be his first major photography project.

In the introduction to the resulting book, *The Enemy Within: The Miners' Strike 1984/1985*, from Dewi Lewis Publishers, Kerstgens writes, "A childhood friend Uwe Gramann was then serving in the Llanelli police force. He lent me his VW dormobile to drive to Barnsley in

South Yorkshire.

"It was Boxing Day when I arrived, the weather bitterly cold, and I spent the first night in the van. The next morning, I stood outside the locked doors of the NUM office. Several hours later, the door swung open to reveal Stuart Marshall – small, stocky, and covered in tattoos. Call me 'Spud,' he said.

"Having listened to my story, he invited me back to stay with his family. Spud and his wife, Marsha, her son,



Mark, daughter, Jill, and Jill's boyfriend, Tony 'Clip' Carlton, lived in a row of small terraced houses on Rimmington Road, in Wombwell, near Barnsley. From the window, you could see the strikebound Darfield Main Colliery. Clip was a steel-worker and had come out on strike in sympathy with the miners. So it was that I landed right in the middle of one of the most bitter industrial conflicts that the UK has ever seen.

"It was agreed I could stay for as long as I liked, ac-

company them wherever they went, and, most important of all, take photographs.

"That was how I came to meet the NUM leader, Arthur Scargill, for whom Spud sometimes acted as a bodyguard and driver.

"While the men were the spearhead of the strike movement, the group Women Against Pit Closures formed its heart. Contrary to popular belief, the women weren't restricted to working in the soup kitchens. In



fact, I saw lots of miners doing duties in the makeshift kitchens, while their womenfolk were busy elsewhere, organising rallies and giving firebrand speeches. Some of the women travelled around the world, collecting support and donations. It was this radicalism that impressed me more than anything.

“Unlike the political radicalism of Scargill, who would remain a lifelong supporter of the Communist Party, the radicalism I experienced here was deeply rooted with-

in the traditions of the mining industry and the mining community. People here knew where they came from, and they were proud of it.

“The strike marked the end of the mining era in Britain, and it ended in bitter defeat for the miners. Entire communities disappeared from the map – and, with them, a tradition of coal mining that had spanned generations.

“There was huge pressure within the mining com-



Above: Coal picker on a spoil heap in Elsecar, South Yorkshire, 1984.

Left: Miner watches a TV interview with NUM President Arthur Scargill, Wombwell, 1984.



THE ENEMY WITHIN: The Miners' Strike 1984/85

By Michael Kerstgens / Published by Dewi Lewis Publishing www.dewilewis.com / £35.00 hardback

munities to continue strike action, but more and more proved unequal to the challenge, and the solidarity on the picket line began to crumble. At the end of 12 months, the strike collapsed.

“All in all, 70,000 miners would lose their jobs.”

In the 40 years since the miners' strike, Britain has seen a precipitous drop in equality. The Thatcher government – followed by Tony Blair's New Labour – used the

defeat of the miners as a bludgeon to introduce neoliberal policies that saw the crushing of unions, a fire-sale of council houses and nationalised industries, and a massive rise in wage inequality that still persists, despite a recent resurgence in union activism. **CT**

Michael Kerstgens became Professor of Documentary Photography at Darmstadt University of Applied Sciences in 2007. He has published three previous books.

2024 is the new 1984

Big Brother and the rise of the Security Industrial Complex

“Big Brother is Watching You.”
– George Orwell,
1984

Forty years past the time that George Orwell envisioned the stomping boot of Big Brother, the police state is about to pass off the baton to the surveillance state.

Fuelled by a melding of government and corporate power – the rise of the security industrial complex – this watershed moment sounds a death knell for our privacy rights.

An unofficial fourth branch of government, the Surveillance State came into being without any electoral mandate or constitutional referendum, and yet it possesses superpowers, above and beyond those of any other government agency save the military.

It operates beyond the reach of the president, Congress and the courts, and it marches in lockstep with the corporate elite who really call the shots in Washington, DC.

This is the new face of tyranny in America: all-knowing, all-seeing and all-powerful.

Empowered by advances in surveillance technology and emboldened by rapidly expanding public-private partnerships between law enforcement, the intelligence community, and the private sector, the Surveillance State is making the fictional world of 1984, Orwell’s

dystopian nightmare, our looming reality.

1984 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. 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.”

Indeed, in our present age of ubiquitous surveillance, there are no private lives. Everything is increasingly public.

What we are witnessing, in the so-called name of security and efficiency, is the creation of a new class system comprised of the watched (average Americans such as you and me) and the watchers (government bureaucrats, technicians and private corporations).

We now find ourselves monitored, managed and controlled by our technology, which answers not to us but to our government and corporate rulers.

This is the fact-is-stranger-than-

fiction lesson that is being pounded into us on a daily basis.

In this way, *1984*, which depicted the ominous rise of ubiquitous technology, fascism and totalitarianism, has become an operation manual for the omnipresent, modern-day surveillance state.

There are roughly one billion surveillance cameras worldwide and that number continues to grow, thanks to their wholehearted adoption by governments (especially law enforcement and military agencies), businesses, and individual consumers.

Surveillance cameras mounted on utility poles, traffic lights, businesses, and homes. Ring doorbells. GPS devices. Dash cameras. Drones. Store security cameras. Geofencing and geotracking. FitBits. Alexa. Internet-connected devices.

Stingray devices, facial recognition technology, body cameras, automated license plate readers, gunshot detection, predictive policing software, AI-enhanced video analytics, real-time crime centres, fusion centres: all of these technologies and surveillance programs rely on public-private partnerships that together create a sticky spiderweb from which there is no escape.

With every new surveillance device we welcome into our lives, the government gains yet another toe-hold into our private worlds.

As the cost of these technolo-



Photo: James Offer, via Flickr

ticularly adept at sidestepping the Fourth Amendment, empowered by advances in surveillance technology and emboldened by rapidly expanding public-private partnerships between law enforcement, the Intelligence Community, and the private sector.

Over the past 50-plus years, surveillance has brought about a series of revolutions in how governments govern and populations are policed to the detriment of us all.

Cybersecurity expert Adam Scott Wandt has identified three such revolutions.

— The first surveillance revolution came about as a result of government video cameras being installed in public areas. There were a reported 51-million surveillance cameras blanketing the United States in 2022. It's estimated that Americans are caught on camera an average of 238 times every week (160 times per week while driving; 40 times per week at work; 24 times per week while out running errands and shopping; and 14 times per week through various other channels and activities). That doesn't even touch on the coverage by surveillance drones, which remain a relatively covert part of police spying operations.

— The second revolution occurred when law enforcement agencies started forging public-private partnerships with commercial establishments like banks and drug stores and parking lots in order to gain access to their live surveillance feeds. The use of automatic license plate readers (manufactured and distributed by the likes of Flock Safety), once deployed exclusively by police and now spreading to home owners associations and gated communities, extends the reach of the surveillance state that much

Big Brother street art by d*base in London, perhaps the most surveilled city on earth.

gies becomes more affordable for the average consumer, an effort underwritten by the tech industry and encouraged by law enforcement agencies and local governing boards, which in turn benefit from access to surveillance they don't need to include in their budgets, big cities, small towns, urban, suburban and rural communities alike are adding themselves to the surveillance state's interconnected grid.

What this adds up to for government agencies (that is, FBI, NSA,

DHS agents, etc, as well as local police) is a surveillance map that allows them to track someone's movements over time and space, hopscotching from doorbell camera feeds and business security cameras to public cameras on utility poles, license plate readers, traffic cameras, drones, etc.

It has all but eliminated the notion of privacy enshrined in the Fourth Amendment and radically re-drawn the line of demarcation between our public and private selves.

The police state has become par-

further afield. It's a win-win for police budgets and local legislatures when they can persuade businesses and residential communities to shoulder the costs of the equipment and share the footage, and they can conscript the citizenry to spy on each other through crowdsourced surveillance.

— The third revolution was ushered in with the growing popularity of doorbell cameras such as Ring, Amazon's video surveillance doorbell, and Google's Nest Cam.

Amazon has been particularly aggressive in its pursuit of a relationship with police, enlisting them in its marketing efforts, and going so far as to hosting parties for police, providing free Ring doorbells and deep discounts, sharing "active camera" maps of Ring owners, allowing access to the Law Enforcement Neighborhood Portal, which enables police to directly contact owners for access to their footage, and coaching police on how to obtain footage without a warrant.

Ring currently partners with upwards of 2,161 law enforcement agencies and 455 fire departments, and that number grows exponentially every year. As *Vice* reports, "Ring has also heavily pursued city discount programs and private alliances with neighbourhood watch groups. When cities provide free or discounted Ring cameras, they sometimes create camera registries, and police sometimes order people to aim Ring cameras at their neighbours, or only give cameras to people surveilled by neighbourhood watches."

In November 2022, San Francisco police gained access to the live footage of privately owned internet cameras as opposed to merely being able to access recorded footage. No longer do police even have to request permission of homeowners for such access: increasingly,

"A common recipe for smear is half or quarter truth, conflation, misrepresentation, a pinch of sneer and a dollop of guilt-by-association. Stir briskly"

corporations have given police access to footage as part of their so-called criminal investigations with or without court orders.

A fourth revolutionary shift may well be the use of facial recognition software and artificial intelligence-powered programs that can track people by their biometrics, clothing, behaviour and car, thereby synthesizing the many strands of surveillance video footage into one cohesive narrative, which privacy advocates refer to as 360 degree surveillance.

While the guarantee of safety afforded by these surveillance nerve centres remains dubious, at best, there is no disguising their contribution in effecting a sea change towards outright authoritarianism.

For instance, as an in-depth investigative report by the Associated Press concludes, the same mass surveillance technologies that were supposedly so necessary to fight the spread of COVID-19 are now being used to stifle dissent, persecute activists, harass marginalised communities, and link people's health information to other surveillance and law enforcement tools.

As the AP reports, federal officials have also been looking into how to add "identifiable patient data,' such as mental health, substance use and behavioural health information from group homes, shelters, jails,

detox facilities and schools," to its surveillance toolkit.

These cameras – and the public-private eyes peering at us through them – are re-engineering a society structured around the aesthetic of fear and, in the process, empowering "people to not just watch their neighbourhood, but to organise as watchers," creating not just digital neighbourhood watches but digital gated communities.

Finally, there is a repressive, suppressive effect to surveillance that not only acts as a potentially small deterrent on crime but serves to monitor and chill lawful First Amendment activity.

As Matthew Feeney warns in the *New York Times*, "In the past, Communists, civil rights leaders, feminists, Quakers, folk singers, war protesters and others have been on the receiving end of law enforcement surveillance. No one knows who the next target will be."

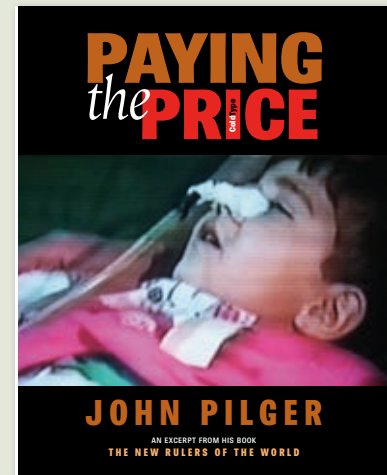
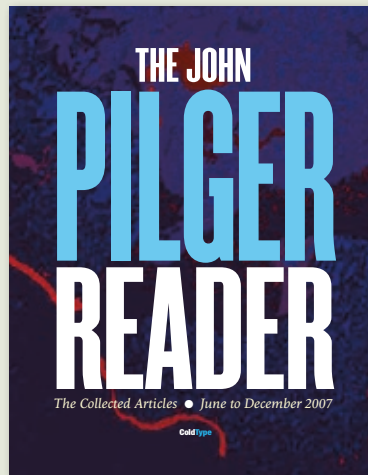
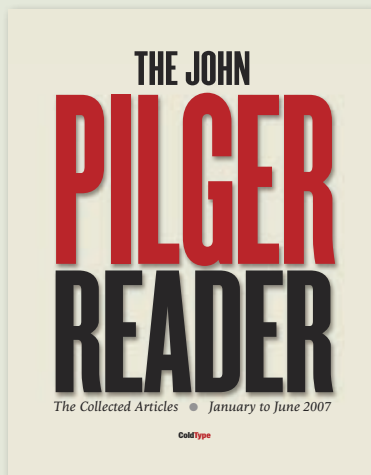
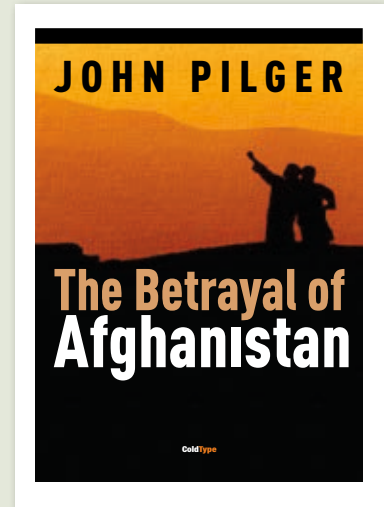
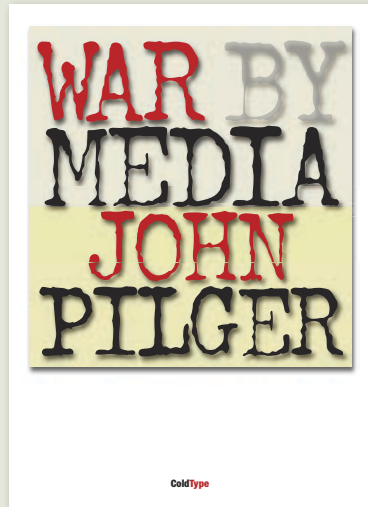
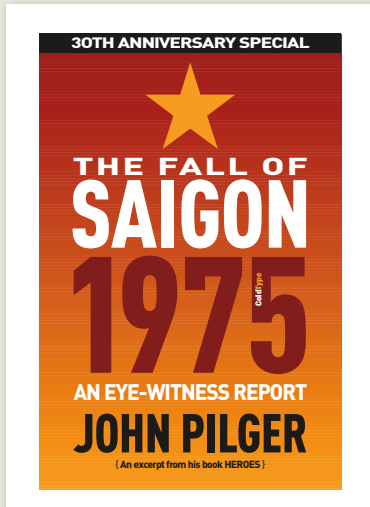
No one knows, but it's a pretty good bet that the surveillance state will be keeping a close watch on anyone seen as a threat to the government's chokehold on power.

After all, as I make clear in my book *Battlefield America: The War on the American People* and in its fictional counterpart *The Erik Blair Diaries*, the Surveillance State never sleeps. **CT**

John W. Whitehead, a constitutional lawyer and author, is founder and president of *The Rutherford Institute*. His book *Battlefield America: The War on the American People* (SelectBooks, 2015) is available online at www.amazon.com. Whitehead can be contacted at john@rutherford.org.

Nisha Whitehead is the Executive Director of *The Rutherford Institute*. Information about *The Rutherford Institute* is available at www.rutherford.org.

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► JONATHAN COOK

The fates of Julian Assange and Gaza are sealed together

Were they being properly reported, two critical court hearings in London and The Hague, would expose the US 'rules-based order' as a hollow sham

Two legal cases posing globe-spanning threats to our most basic freedoms unfolded separately in Britain and the Netherlands last month. Neither received more than perfunctory coverage in western establishment media like the BBC.

One was the last-ditch appeal of Wikileaks founder Julian Assange in London against efforts by the United States to extradite him so he can be locked away for the rest of his life.

Assange's crime, according to the Biden administration, is that he published leaks exposing the systematic war crimes signed off on by the US and British establishments in Iraq and Afghanistan. The British government, perhaps not surprisingly, has assented to his extradition.

The other case was heard by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague. Weeks after the World Court judges deemed it plau-

sible that Israel was carrying out genocide against Palestinians in Gaza, the US client state was back in the dock on a separate matter.

The judges have been asked by the United Nations General Assembly to provide an advisory opinion on whether Israel's now-permanent occupation and colonisation of the Palestinian territories amounts to an illegal annexation of territory where it has established an apartheid regime.

Separately, Israel also has to report back on whether it has adhered to the court's earlier ruling that it cease activities that might amount to genocide.

While the cases of Assange and Israel might appear to share little in common, they are, in fact, intimately connected – and in ways that have underscored the degree to which the West's so-called "rules-based order"



is being exposed as a hollow sham.

One telling similarity is the limited media coverage each case has attracted despite the gravity of what is at stake. The BBC's main evening news dedicated mere seconds to the first day of the Assange hearing, and near the end of its running order.

If the US gets its way, the courts would effectively hand the White House the power to seize any publisher who shines a light on US state crimes, and then disappear them into its draconian incarceration system.

The purpose of reclassifying investigative journalism as espionage is to further chill critical reporting and free speech. Any journalist contemplating taking on the US national security state would remember Assange's cruel fate.

But in truth, much of the estab-



lishment media appears to need no such threats, as confirmed by the many years of obedient, near-non-existent reporting on Assange's mistreatment by British and US authorities.

Meanwhile, if The Hague rules in its favour, Israel would be emboldened to accelerate its theft and colonisation of Palestinian land. The ethnic cleansing and oppression of Palestinians would deepen, with the risk that current regional tensions could further escalate into a wider war.

A win for Israel would rip up the legal framework written after the horrors of the Second World War and the Holocaust, stripping the weak and vulnerable of the protections supposed to be afforded to them by international humanitarian law. Conversely, it would signal to the strongest and most belliger-

ent that they can do as they please.

The legal clock would be set back eight decades or more.

Yet strangely, both of these momentous cases – critical to the preservation of a modern liberal democratic order and the rule of law – have received barely a fraction of the interest and media attention dedicated to the death of Alexei Navalny, a critic of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

In flaunting their concerns about Navalny, the western media have

The purpose of reclassifying investigative journalism as espionage is to further chill critical reporting and free speech

once again echoed rather than tackled the all-too-obvious hypocrisies of western governments.

Last month US President Joe Biden announced sanctions against Moscow for the targeting of the Russian political dissident. That is the very same Biden seeking, at the same time, to lock a dissident Australian journalist, Assange, out of sight for up to 175 years for bringing to light US war crimes.

For years, the western media have paraded their horror over Navalny's treatment and various attempts on his life, which they always ascribe to the Kremlin. But there has been barely an eyebrow raised over reported discussions by the CIA in 2017 plotting potential ways to abduct and assassinate Assange.

Few have highlighted the fact that Assange has already suffered a stroke amid his persecution and

the 15-year confinement imposed on him by US and UK authorities. He was too unwell to attend last month's court hearings or even to watch the proceedings via a digital link from the court.

The former UN special rapporteur on torture, Nils Melzer, has long warned that Assange is being slowly "crushed" through isolation and psychological torture, with grave consequences for his health.

Assange's lawyers warned the High Court in London that there was a serious danger the US would add more charges once Assange was extradited, including ones warranting the death penalty. This threat to the life of a western journalist fell under the media radar.

According to medical experts, and accepted by the first judge to hear the extradition case, Assange is in danger of committing suicide should he end up in the strict isolation of a US super-max prison.

The media's tears for Navalny sting with their hypocrisy.

Another revealing similarity between the Assange and Israel cases is that both are in front of the courts only because Washington has dug in its heels and refused to resolve the legal issues, despite their deeply ominous implications.

Were the US to withdraw its extradition request, Assange could be set free immediately. The oppressive cloud hanging over the future of a free society, one that has the right and ability to hold its officials to account for wrongdoing, would instantly lift.

Basic freedoms, such as those enshrined in the First Amendment of the US Constitution, are being shredded only because a consensus reigns among the US political class – from Democrats to Republicans – to snuff out such rights.

Similarly, were the US to insist that the mass slaughter of children in Gaza stop – more than 12,000

It is the US and its allies providing the military aid and diplomatic cover that allow Israel to act as an attack dog in the oil-rich Middle East

have died so far – Israel's guns would fall silent immediately.

Were it to demand that Israel bring to an end its occupation of the Palestinian territories and 17-year siege of Gaza, and were the US to take a genuinely even-handed approach to peace talks, the World Court could set aside its hearings against Israel. Its opinion would be superfluous.

Washington, whatever its protestations, has such power. It is the US and its allies supplying Israel with bombs and ammunition. It is the US and its allies providing the military aid and diplomatic cover that allows Israel to act as an attack dog in the oil-rich Middle East.

Israel's intransigence, its hunger for others' land, its dehumanisation of the Palestinian people, and its constant resort to military options would have to be abandoned, however unwillingly, were it not being written a blank cheque by the US.

Instead, the US cast a veto at the Security Council, blocking efforts to impose a ceasefire to end the genocide. The UK abstained.

Also last month, US officials told the World Court's judges they should not call for Israel to end its occupation anytime soon. In Orwellian fashion, decades of violent oppression by Israel and the illegal settlement of Palestinian land were characterised by the US as "Israel's very real security needs."

The cases are connected in yet another way.

In the Assange case, the US demands an absolute global legal jurisdiction to hound critics, those who wish to pull away the veil of secrecy that shields western officials from accountability for their crimes.

It wishes to silence those who would expose its lies, deceptions and hypocrisies. It hopes to be able to disappear into its prison system those seeking to enforce the West's self-professed commitment to a democratic order and lawful behaviour.

In parallel, and for similar reasons, Washington demands the opposite for itself and client states such as Israel. It insists on absolute global legal immunity, whatever they do.

Its veto at the Security Council is wielded to that effect, and so is its campaign of intimidation against judicial authorities who entertain the fanciful notion that the same international law used to rein in enemies might constrain Washington and its allies.

When the ICJ's sister court at The Hague, the International Criminal Court, sought to properly investigate the US for war crimes in Afghanistan, and Israel for atrocities in the occupied Palestinian territories, Washington went on a rampage.

It placed financial sanctions on leading figures of the ICC and blocked entry to its investigators so they could not carry out their duties. Israel has similarly barred a series of UN special rapporteurs from entering the occupied Palestinian territories to report on human rights abuses there.

Just as the persecution of Assange is meant to terrorise other journalists from considering holding US officials to account for their crimes, the bullying of the highest legal au-

thorities on the planet is intended to send a clear message to national court systems. Certainly, that message appears to have been loudly received in London.

Another connection is perhaps the most significant. Assange once observed: “Nearly every war that has started in the past 50 years has been a result of media lies.”

It is only because of a void of real information – whether omitted by journalists for fear of upsetting powerful actors, or shielded from view by those same powerful actors’ self-serving secrecy policies – that states can persuade their publics to get behind wars and violent resource grabs.

The only people to gain from these wars are a tiny, wealthy elite at the top of society. All too often it is ordinary people who pay the price: either with their lives or through damage to the parts of the economy on which the public depends.

The continuing proxy war in Ukraine – a Nato-funded and armed war with Russia, using Ukraine as the battlefield – is a perfect illustration. It is ordinary Ukrainians and Russians who are dying.

Despite the West spurring on the

It is the job of the media to connect the dots for western publics by serving as a watchdog on power. But once again, they have failed

bloodshed, European economies have been wrecked and further deindustrialised, while as a direct result of the fighting, yet another surge in consumer prices has hit the most vulnerable.

But a few – including major energy corporations and arms manufacturers, as well as their shareholders – have reaped a large windfall from the war. It has been precisely the same game plan in Gaza.

It is the job of the media to connect the dots for western publics by serving as a watchdog on power. But once again, they have failed in this, their most important professional and moral duty. The villains have yet again got away with their crimes.

It is the war criminals and genocide enablers in Washington who are free, while Assange is locked up

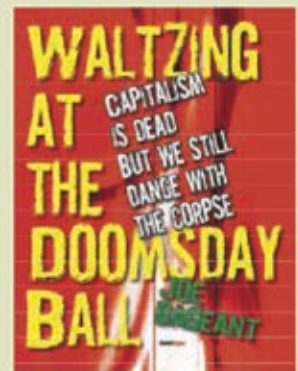
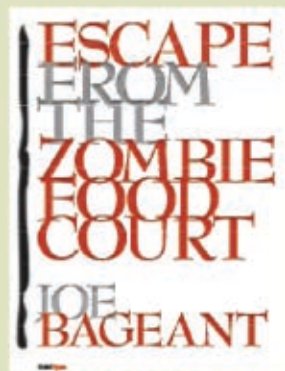
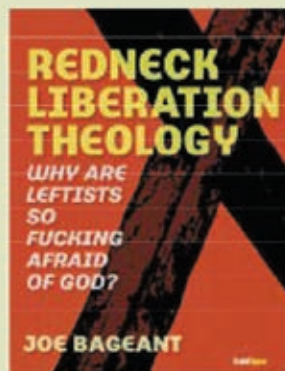
in a dungeon and the people of Gaza are slowly being starved to death.

Assange’s project was designed to reverse all that. It was about bringing the war criminals in western capitals to book through truth-telling and transparency. It was about pulling back the veil.

Were Assange free, and were the whistleblowers and people of conscience in the corridors of power emboldened rather than terrorised by his treatment, we might live in a society where our leaders dared not arm a genocide; and dared not conspire in the starvation of two-million people.

This is why the fates of the people of Gaza and Julian Assange are so tightly sealed together. **CT**

Jonathan Cook is an award-winning British journalist, who was based in Nazareth, Israel, for 20 years before returning to the UK in 2021. The author of three books on the Israel-Palestine conflict, Cook won the Martha Gelhorn Special Prize for Journalism in 2011. He previously worked for Britain’s Guardian and Observer newspapers. His website is www.jonathan-cook.net.



READ THE BEST OF JOE BAGEANT

www.coldtype.net/joe.html

Almost heaven

How corporations took over a beautiful and formerly independent area of the US and turned it into the nation's most unhealthy state

West Virginia is the most unhealthy state in America. That's according to a survey released earlier this year by *Forbes*.

The stats confirm it. West Virginia has the highest percentage of adults who smoke (21 percent), the highest percentage of obese adults (41 percent), and the second shortest life expectancy (73.9 years).

West Virginia also ranks second worst in disease risk factors and prevalence, including the highest percentage of adults with high cholesterol (41 percent) and the highest diabetes mortality rate (41.7 deaths per 100,000 state residents).

Out of all 50 states, West Virginia also had the highest drug overdose death rate (75.03 per 100,000 state residents), more than 50 percent higher than the second-worst state (Delaware).

How did we get here? The corporate takeover of this beautiful and formerly independent mountain state. It's a long and sordid story – but here's the nutshell.

Let's start with the Whiskey Rebellion of 1791. The Scots-Irish who settled into the hollers in West Virginia were self-reliant, independent and didn't need a state to tell them how to live. They raised their own crops, hunted down their meat, fished their fish, and made their own rye whiskey.

The federal government said – to hell with that – and sought to im-

pose a tax. And thus the rebellion.

"The Whiskey Tax proposed to do something that Alexander Hamilton once called impossible," writes Fordham University Professor Steven Stoll in his book *Ramp Hollow: The Ordeal of Appalachia* (Hill and Wang, 2017). "It reached into the relationship between mountain farmers and their land by requiring that they convert one very important product of their labor into money."

Fast forward a century "and we can see that the industrialization of the mountains extended and deepened this very process," Stoll writes.

"But coal and lumber companies did not want to monetize only a portion of the value highland folk created," he writes. "They sought to separate them from land altogether, compelling them to turn all their labor into money."

"Mountain people became enmeshed in the national economy and the global division of labor," Stoll adds. "Hamilton did not have this in mind when he marched an army into Fayette County. But like the corporations that followed, he believed that moving people from rye and beans to coins and currency furthered capital, the power of the United States and historical progress."

(And progress there was with the thousands of workers killed in the mines, tens of thousands dying from black lung disease, and rampant devastation to the economy and to the environment. Just sayin')

The same game played out right here in Morgan County, West Virginia where our family has lived for more than 35 years now.

Morgan County's own Joe Bag-eant went on to become a world-renowned literary figure for his best-selling book on the rightward shift of the white underclass in Winchester, Virginia and beyond. He titled it *Deer Hunting with Jesus: Dispatches from America's Class War* (Random House, 2007).

But more fundamental is Bag-eant's later and largely ignored book – *Rainbow Pie: A Redneck Memoir* (Scribe Australia, 2010) – documenting the transformation of Morgan County over three generations in the 20th-century from a self-sufficient farming and hunting community, where each family spent on average no more than \$100 in cash, to one where most everything consumed was purchased in a marketplace dominated by credit cards, dollar stores, fast-food outlets and multinational grocery chains.

The only major grocery store in Morgan County today is Food Lion, which is owned by the US subsidiary of the Netherlands-based global retailer Ahold Delhaize, a company that operates more than 2,000 grocery stores in the eastern United States, which include, in addition to Food Lion, Stop & Shop, Giant Food, Giant/Martin's and Hannaford.

Before the corporate takeover, cooperation between neighbours was a bedrock of the community.

"Neighbors along Shanghai Road

banded together to make lard and apple butter, put up feed corn, bale hay, thresh wheat, pick apples and plow snow off the roads,” Bageant writes in *Rainbow Pie*. “One neighbor cut hair, another mended shoes. From birth to grave, you needed neighbors and they needed you. I was very lucky to have seen that culture, which showed me that a real community of shared labor toward the shared good is possible – or was at one time in my country.”

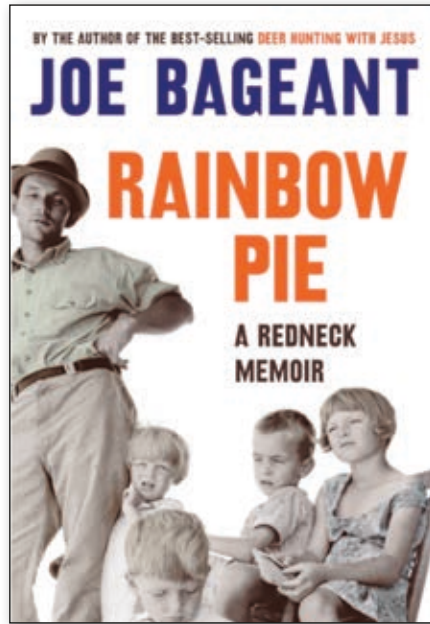
Many of Bageant’s relatives lived well into their eighties.

“Maybe it was the healthy exercise – a citified word if ever there was one,” Bageant writes. “Farm folks back then were trying to avoid getting so damned much of it. To express relaxation and a let-up of toil, they’d say – ‘Oh, I’m doing pretty good – I’m staying off my feet.’”

And when it came to eating?

“The very scale of our meals would be considered obscene and hedonistic today,” he writes. “Maw’s cooking was so good it would make you get down and pound the floor for joy. Everyone on the farm – which meant a bunch of us, because married aunts and uncles lived there half the time – ate meals together at a table about seven feet long and four feet wide. Often as not at breakfast, there would be a whole shoulder or a side of middlin’ meat, along with three dozen biscuits, a couple of dozen eggs, half a gallon of sweet milk gravy, with three kinds of jam plus molasses on the side.

“Vegetables were fresh in season and canned for the winter – simple fare, such as green beans and tomato pickles. If you handed Maw a head of broccoli, she wouldn’t have known whether to put it in a vase or a pan.” (Bageant calls his grandparents Maw and Paw.)



“Meals were the heart of daily life, a rowdy family sacrament linking everyone. Childhood on this farm, and especially at the table, is the rootstock of my imagination. It is to this table and the faces around it that my mind returns to touch something near perfect.”

While some old timers in Morgan County might still know the Bageant family name (a quick check found no more Bageants on the voter rolls), few if anyone around here knows of Joe Bageant or his books.

In recent years, the corporate takeover of Bageant’s home state has accelerated in pace. So in early 2011, I wanted to reintroduce the county to Bageant and his writings.

He was living just down the road in Winchester, Virginia, at the time. I dialled him. His wife answered. She said he wasn’t feeling well, but she’d give him the message. He died a few weeks later.

Morgan County, with its 18,000 residents, is now home to four dollar stores, with more on the way. And on the whole, the population here wants more dollar stores – Bageant’s life in a self-reliant communi-

ty be damned.

Appearing on Glenn Greenwald’s show in December 2023, Tucker Carlson, seemingly out of the blue, began ripping into the corporate takeover of middle America, Joe Bageant style.

“A smarter way to assess an economic system is by its results,” Carlson said. “You need to ask – does this economic system produce a lot of dollar stores? And if it does, it’s not a system that you want, because it degrades people. And it makes their lives worse, and it increases exponentially the amount of ugliness in your society. And anything that increases ugliness is evil.

“So if it’s such a good system, why do we have all these dollar stores? Dollar store is not the only ugly thing being created in United States but it’s the one of the most common and it’s certainly the most obvious. If you have a dollar store, you’re degraded. And any town that has a dollar store does not get better, it gets worse. The people who live there lead lives that are worse.

“The counter argument, to the extent that there is one, is well – they buy cheaper stuff. Great. But they become more unhappy. And the dollar store itself is a is a sort of symbol of the total lack of control over where you live and over the imposition of aggressively in your face ugly structures that send one message to you – which is you mean nothing. You were a consumer – not a human being or a citizen.”

No more rainbow pie for Joe Bageant’s West Virginia.

Or for Tucker Carlson.

Or for you or me.

CT

Russell Mokhiber is the editor of the Capitol Hill Citizen. This interview was included in the latest issue of the newspaper, which is available from www.capitolhillcitizen.com.

● **Read a chapter from *Rainbow Pie* at www.coldtype.net/joe.html**

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Isn't it time for Americans to put away their toy soldiers
(along with their illusions)?

Like many American boys of the baby-boomer generation, I played “war” with those old, olive-drab, plastic toy soldiers meant to evoke our great victory over the Nazis and “the Japs” during World War II. At age 10, I also kept a scrapbook of the 1973 Yom Kippur War between Israel and its various Arab enemies in the Middle East. It was, I suppose, an early sign that I would

make both the military and the study of history into careers.

I recall rooting for the Israelis, advertised then as crucial American allies, against Egypt, Syria, and other regional enemies at least ostensibly allied with the Soviet Union in that Cold War era. I bought the prevailing narrative of a David-versus-Goliath struggle. I even got a book on the Yom Kippur War that captivated me by displaying all the weap-

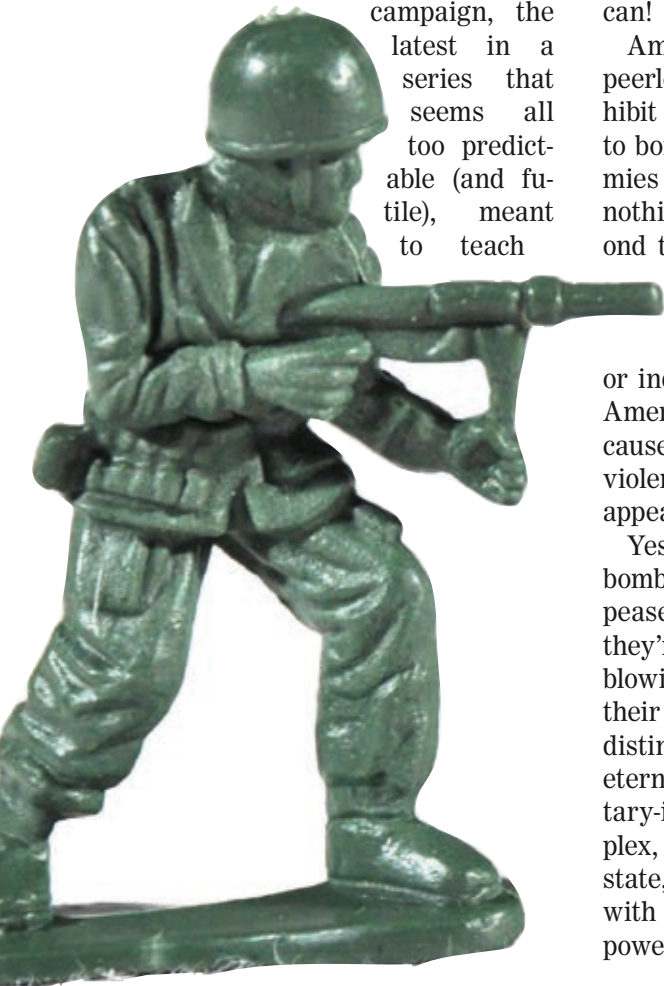
only the US military had rushed to Israel to turn the tide there, including F-4 Phantom jets and M-60 main battle tanks. (David’s high-tech slingshots, if you will.)

Little did I know that, in the next 50 years of my life, I would witness increasingly destructive US military attacks in the Middle East, especially after the oil cartel OPEC (largely Middle Eastern then) hit back hard with an embargo in 1973

that sent our petroleum-based economy into a tailspin.

As one jokester quipped: Who put America's oil under the sands of all those ungrateful Muslim countries in the Middle East? With declarations like the Carter Doctrine in 1980, the US was obviously ready to show the world just how eagerly it would defend its "vital interests" (meaning fossil fuels, of course) in that region. And even today, as we watch the latest round in this country's painfully consistent record of attempting to pound various countries and entities there into submission, mainly via repetitive air strikes, we should never forget the importance of oil, and lots of it, to keep the engines of industry and war churning along in a devastating fashion.

Right now, of course, the world is witnessing yet another US bombing campaign, the latest in a series that seems all too predictable (and futile), meant to teach



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the restless rebels of Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and possibly even Iran a lesson when it comes to messing with the United States of America. As the recently deceased country singer Toby Keith put it: Mess with this country and "We'll put a boot (think: bomb) in your ass." You kill three soldiers of ours and we'll kill scores, if not hundreds, if not thousands of yours (and it doesn't really matter if they're soldiers or not), because... well, because we damn well can!

America's leaders, possessing a peerless Air Force, regularly exhibit a visceral willingness to use it to bomb and missile perceived enemies into submission or, if need be, nothingness. And don't for a second think that they're going to be stopped by international law, humanitarian concerns, well-meaning protesters, or indeed any force on this planet. America bombs because it can, because it believes in the efficacy of violence, and because it's run by appeasers.

Yes, America's presidents, its bombers-in-chief, are indeed appeasers. Of course, they think they're being strong when they're blowing distant people to bits, but their actions invariably showcase a distinctive kind of weakness. They eternally seek to appease the military-industrial-congressional complex, aka the national (in)security state, a complex state-within-a-state with an unappeasable hunger for power, profit, and ever more de-

struction. They fail and fail and fail again in the Middle East, yet they're incapable of not ordering more bombing, more droning, more killing there. Think of them as being possessed by a monomania for war akin to my urge to play with toy soldiers. The key difference? When I played at war, I was a wet-behind-the-ears 10 year old.

No technology may be more all-American than bombs and bombers and no military doctrine more American than the urge to attain "peace" through massive firepower. In World War II and subsequent wars, the essential US approach could be summarised in five words: mass production enabling mass destruction.

No other country in the world has dedicated such vast resources as mine has to mass destruction through air power. Think of the full-scale bombing of cities in Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan in World War II, ending in the atomic destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Think of the flattening of North Korea during the Korean War of the early 1950s or the staggering bombing campaigns in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia in the 1960s and early 1970s. Or consider the massive use of air power in Desert Shield against Iraq in the early 1990s followed by the air campaigns that accompanied the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq in 2003 (and never quite seemed to stop thereafter). The butcher's bill for such bombing has indeed been high, quite literally millions of non-combatants killed by America's self-styled "arsenal of democracy."

And indeed, as you read this, another country is now faithfully following America's example. Israel is systematically destroying Gaza, rendering it essentially uninhabitable for those Palestinians who

survive the ongoing rampage. In fact, early in its war of annihilation, Israeli leaders cited the Allied destruction of the German city of Dresden in 1945 in support of their own atrocious air and ground campaign against the Palestinians.

Looking at this dispassionately as a military historian, the Dresden reference makes a certain twisted sense. In World War II, the Americans and their British allies in their “combined bomber offensive” destroyed German cities indiscriminately, seeing all Germans as essentially Nazis, complicit in the crimes of their government, and so legitimate targets. Something similar is true of the right-wing Israeli government today. It sees all Palestinians as essentially members of Hamas and thus complicit in last year’s brutal October 7th attacks on Israel, making them legitimate targets of war, Israeli- (and American-) style. Just like the United States, Israel claims to be “defending democracy” whatever it does. Little wonder, then, that Washington has been so willing to send bombs and bullets to its protégé as it seeks “peace” through massive firepower and genocidal destruction.

Indeed, of late, there has been considerable debate about whether Israel is engaged in acts of genocide, with the International Court of Justice ruling that the present government should strive to prevent just such acts in Gaza. Putting that issue aside, it’s undeniable that Israel has been using indiscriminate bombing attacks and a devastating invasion in a near-total war against Palestinians living on that 25-mile-long strip of land, an approach that calls to mind the harrowing catchphrase “Exterminate all the brutes!” from Joseph Conrad’s novel *Heart of Darkness*.

In a sense, there’s nothing new un-

900 US troops still occupy part of Syria (where that country produces most of its oil) and 2,500 remain in Iraq, even though that government would like them to depart

der the sun. Certainly, the Old Testament itself provides examples of exterminatory campaigns (cited by Bibi Netanyahu as Israel first moved against the Palestinians in Gaza). He might as well have cited a catchphrase heard during America’s war in Vietnam, but rooted in the medieval crusades: “Kill them all and let God sort them out.”

In the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, President George W. Bush got into trouble almost instantly when he referred to the “war on terror” he had launched as a “crusade.” Yet, as impolitic as that word might have seemed, how better to explain US actions in the Middle East and Afghanistan? Just consider our faith in the goodness and efficacy of “our” military and that all-American urge to bring “democracy” to the world, despite the destruction visited upon Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen over the last several decades. Or go back to 1953 and the role the CIA played in the overthrow of Iran’s legitimate democratic ruler and his replacement by the brutally repressive regime of the Shah.

Try to imagine such events from the perspective of a historian writing in the year 2200. Might that future scribe not refer to repeated US invasions of, incursions into, and bombing campaigns across the Middle East as a bloody crusade, launched under the (false) banner of democracy with righteous vengeance, if not godly purpose, in mind? Might that historian not sug-

gest that such a “crusade” was ultimately more about power and profit, domination and control than (as advertised) “freedom”? And might that historian not be impressed (if not depressed) by the remarkable way the US brought seemingly unending chaos and death to the region over such a broad span of time?

Consider these facts. More than 22 years after the 9/11 attacks, the US still has at least 30,000 troops scattered across the Middle East. At least one Navy carrier strike group, and often two, dominate the regional waters, while striking numbers of military bases (“Little Americas”) are still sprinkled across countries ranging from Kuwait to Bahrain, from Qatar to the United Arab Emirates and beyond. So many years later, about 900 US troops still illegally occupy part of Syria (not coincidentally, where that country produces most of its oil) and 2,500 more remain in Iraq, even though the government there would like them to depart.

Meanwhile, American military aid, mostly in the form of deadly weaponry, flows not only to Israel but to other countries in the region like Egypt and Jordan. Direct US military support facilitated Saudi Arabia’s long, destructive, and unsuccessful war against the Houthis in Yemen, a conflict Washington is now conducting on its own with repeated air strikes. And of course, the entire region has, for more than two decades now, been under constant US military pressure in that war on terror, which all too quickly became a war of terror (and of torture).

Recall that the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 led to the death of roughly a million Iraqis and the displacement of millions more as refugees. How could that not be considered part of a “crusade,” even if a fitful and failing one? Yet, here’s the rub: just as those Catholic crusades of the Mid-

dle Ages weren't entirely or even primarily about religion, so today's American version isn't motivated primarily by an anti-Muslim animus. Of course, there is indeed an inescapably religious aspect to such never-ending American war-making, but what drives those wars is largely naked greed, vengeance, and an all-American urge both to appease and amplify the military-industrial-congressional complex.

Of course, as was true in the years after 9/11 and is still true today, Americans are generally encouraged to see their country's imperial and crusading acts as purely defensive in nature, the righteous responses of freedom-bringers. Admittedly, it's a strange kind of freedom this country brings at the tip of a sword – or on the nosecone of a Hellfire missile. Even so, in such an otherwise thoroughly contentious Congress, it should be striking how few members have challenged the latest bombing version of this country's enduring war in the Middle East.

Forget the Constitution. No Congressional declaration of war is believed necessary for any of this, nor has it mattered much (so far) that the American public has grown increas-

Americans are generally encouraged to see their country's imperial and crusading acts as purely defensive in nature, the righteous responses of freedom-bringers

ingly sceptical of those wars and the acts of destruction that go with them. As it happens, the crusade, such as it is, has proven remarkably sustainable without much public crusading zeal. For most Americans, those acts remain distinctly off-stage and largely out of mind, except at moments like the present one where the deaths of three American soldiers give the administration all the excuse it needs for repetitive acts of retaliation.

No, we the people exercise remarkably little control over the war-making that the military-industrial-congressional complex has engaged in for decades or the costs that go with them. Indeed, the dollar costs are largely deferred to future generations as America's national debt climbs even faster than the Pentagon war budget.

America, so we were told by President George W. Bush, is hated for its freedoms. Yet the "freedoms" we're allegedly hated for aren't those de-

lineated in the Constitution and its Bill of Rights. Rather, it's America's "freedom" to build military bases across the globe and bomb everywhere, a "freedom" to sell such bellicose activity as lawful and even admirable, a "freedom" to engage in a hyperviolent style of play, treating "our" troops and so many foreigners as toy soldiers and expendable props for Washington's games.

It's something I captured unintentionally five decades ago with those toy soldiers of mine from an imagined glorious military past. But after a time (too long, perhaps) I learned to recognise them as the childish things they were and put them away. They're now long gone, lost to time and maturity, as is the illusion that my country pursues freedom and democracy in the Middle East through ceaseless acts of extreme violence, which just seem to drone on and on and on. **CT**

William J. Astore, a retired lieutenant colonel (USAF) and professor of history, is a senior fellow at the Eisenhower Media Network (EMN), an organization of critical veteran military and national security professionals. His website is www.bracingviews.substack.com. This article was first published at www.tomdispatch.com.

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► ROGER D. HARRIS

Why the US is reimposing sanctions on Venezuela

Even US mainstream media has nearly universally concluded that sanctions “don’t work”

Even the US business magazine *Forbes* expressed surprise at the recent reimposition of US sanctions on Venezuela’s gold sales and its threat to do the same with oil. The oil sanctions especially, if reinstated, would precipitate higher gas prices and further debilitate the Venezuelan economy, forcing more people to leave the country out of economic necessity.

The Venezuelan government, for its part, has not been contrite. Vice President Delcy Rodríguez protested “the wrong step of intensifying economic aggression against Venezuela.” She warned that if Washington takes the threatened measures,

Venezuela will cancel repatriation flights returning Venezuelan immigrants back from the US.

Is Biden shooting himself in the foot in an election year with major vulnerabilities from inflation and unpopular immigration? The *New Times* describes these weaknesses as a “major crisis” for the incumbent US president. Adding to the Democrats’ woes, many Venezuelans in the US – driven there by sanctions – support Republicans.

The State Department accused the Venezuelan government of actions that are “inconsistent” with Barbados

agreement, negotiated last October. This accord arranged a prisoner exchange with the US and the issuance of licenses allowing Venezuela to sell some of its own oil and gold. The agreement promised temporary and partial sanctions relief for Venezuela, although major coercive economic provisions were still left in place.

Even with limited sanctions relief, Venezuela anticipated a 27 percent increase in revenues for its state-run oil company. Experts predicted a “moderate economic expansion” after having experienced the greatest economic contraction in peacetime of any country in the modern era. Venezuela was on the road to recovery.

Then on January 30, the US rescinded the license for gold sales and threatened to allow the oil license to expire on April 18, which could cost \$1.6-billion in lost revenue. The ostensible reason for the flip in US policy was the failure of the Venezuelan supreme court to overturn previous prohibitions on Maria Corina Machado and some other opposition politicians from running for public office.

The Barbados agreement was predicated on “electoral guarantees.” But there was no mention of specific individuals who had been legally barred from running for office due to past offences. In fact, these cases were well known. Venezuelan officials had repeatedly insisted that those disqualified would continue to be ineligible. According to Héctor Rodríguez, a member of the Venezuelan government’s delegation to Barbados, forgiveness for crimes was never on the negotiating agenda.

Machado’s treatment by the Venezuelan government has arguably erred more on the side of leniency than severity. In most other countries, a person with her rap sheet would be behind bars.

Back in 2002, Machado signed the Carmona Decree, establishing a coup government. Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez had been deposed in a military coup backed by the US. The constitution was suspended, the legislature dismissed, and the supreme court shuttered.

Fortunately for democracy in Venezuela, the coup lasted less than three days. The people spontaneously took to the streets and restored their elected government. Machado, who now incredulously claims she signed the coup government’s founding decree mistakenly, was afforded amnesty.

Machado signed the Carmona Decree, establishing a short-lived government after Hugo Chávez had been deposed in a coup backed by the US

Machado was subsequently banned from running from public office after she served as the diplomatic representative for Panama in order to testify against her own country. She was also implicated in tax evasion and fraud along with coup attempts. In addition, the hard-rightist had called for a military intervention by the US and for harsh economic coercive measures.

Machado had adamantly refused to contest her electoral ineligibility before the Venezuelan supreme court. But when Washington instructed her to go before the tribunal, she obediently complied. That Machado’s appeal would be denied was “obvious” even to Luis Vicente León, president of the pro-opposition Venezuelan polling company Datanalisis. He explained: “If we are honest, the US government knew full well this was going to happen.”

The *New York Times* described the supreme court’s decision to uphold her ban as “a crippling blow to prospects for credible elections ... in exchange for the lifting of crippling US economic sanctions.” In other words, the Venezuelans did not bow to blackmail and allow a criminal to run for public office.

Under-reported is how Machado became the unofficially designated opposition candidate according to the corporate press. Normally in Venezuela opposition presidential primaries are run by the national election authorities, as they are in the US. Machado, however, engineered the primary election to be

run privately.

The primaries were riddled with irregularities, and other opposition leaders are livid with Machado. Not only did her political alliance (Plataforma Unitaria) omit some opposition parties from the primaries, but voting records were destroyed after the election. This prevented any accounting when some members of her own coalition claimed fraud. Further, the administration of the opposition primary involved Súmate. Machado was the founder and first president of this private non-governmental organisation, a recipient of NED funds.

The opposition has lost credibility with even conservative political commentators in the US such as Ariel Cohen, associated with the Atlantic Council and the Heritage Foundation. He describes the US seizure of the Venezuelan-owned oil subsidiary Citgo as part of its “asphyxiation tactics.” Handed over to the opposition, they ran Citgo to the ground and used their country’s assets for personal gain.

Washington has a problem. Geoff Ramsey with the Atlantic Council revealingly laments: “How do you threaten a regime that’s endured years of crippling sanctions, multiple coup attempts and a failed mercenary invasion?” The unfortunate Yankee solution is more of what *Forbes* calls “Washington DC’s heavy-handed response” knowingly causing “enormous” human suffering.

As a recent US Congressional Research Service report admitted, the US sanctions “failed” in their implicit goal of regime change but have exacerbated an economic crisis that “has prompted 7.7-million Venezuelans to flee.” *The Hill* ran an opinion piece stating that “sanctions are still hurting everyday Venezuelans – and fuelling migration.”

Some Congressional Democrats have called for ending US sanctions. Domestic corporations, such as Chevron, have been clamouring to reopen the Venezuelan market. The UN has roundly condemned sanctions, which they call “unilateral coercive economic measures.” Mexico insists that Biden address the root causes of migration. Other governments in Latin America and beyond are pressuring the US to lift sanctions. Meanwhile, experts in international human rights law censure Washington for illegal collective punishment.

Arguably, the US economy would benefit more by promoting commerce with some 40 sanctioned countries than from restricting trade. And the surest remedy for the immigration crisis on the country’s southern border is to end the sanctions, which are producing conditions that have compelled so many to leave their homes. Even US mainstream media has nearly universal

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ly concluded that sanctions “don’t work.”

If sanctions “don’t work,” if they are economically counterproductive, and if they cause so much suffering and ill will, why impose them? The regrettable answer is that sanctions do “work” for the purposes of the US empire.

In 2015 President Obama declared a “national emergency.” Venezuela, he claimed, posed an “unusual and extraordinary threat” to the national

security of the US. That was not fake news. The imperial hegemon recognises the “threat of a good example” posed by a country such as Venezuela. As Ricardo Vaz of *Venezuelan-Analysis* observed, Venezuela is “a beacon of hope for the Global South, and Latin America in particular, an affront to US hegemony in its own ‘backyard.’”

The US’s self-proclaimed “rules-based order” is threatened, especially with the emergence of China as a major world economic power. In the imperial worldview, it is better to have failed states like Libya and Afghanistan than the anathema of a sovereign and socialist Venezuela. The US-imposed misery on Venezuela is used by Washington as a cautionary warning of the consequences for a sovereign project in defiance of Yankee domination. **CT**

Roger D. Harris is with the human rights organisation Task Force on the Americas, founded in 1985.

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