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TIPPING THE NUCLEAR DOMINOES | Corin Halloran
SLAUGHTER OF THE OTHER INNOCENTS | Trevor Grunley
THE VOLCANOES ARE ALIVE ... | Joe Allen

ISSUE 208
ColdType
MID-LEVEL WORK HEADLINE • PHOTO MORTUARY ISSUES
July 2020

The Great Purge

The US Presidential Election will be decided in just four months. But the fix is already in, and millions of young, poor, and minorities will be robbed of their votes

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www.coldtype.net
LET'S NOT FALL INTO THE AUSTERITY TRAP | Linda McQuay
PHILIP K. DICK AND ENGLISH MASS MURDERERS! | Trevor Hoyle
CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE, BILLIONAIRE-STYLE! | Sam Platzgutti

ISSUE 207
ColdType
MID-LEVEL WORK HEADLINE • PHOTO MORTUARY ISSUES
June 2020



Facing the Future

Just a few months ago, wearing a mask in a supermarket would have had the police called. Now it's normal. George Wallace | Page 12-16

www.coldtype.net
ABOVE THE LAW? RISE OF THE WARRIOR-COPS | William J. Astor
FORGOTTEN COUP AGAINST THE MOST LOYAL ALLY | John Pflger
REVERSING DOWELL'S MOST FAMOUS ROUTE | Trevor Hoyle

ISSUE 206
ColdType
MID-LEVEL WORK HEADLINE • PHOTO MORTUARY ISSUES
May 2020



NO TRUE FRIENDS IN A RACE WAR

"By the time I arrived in downtown Oakland, California, the protests were peaceful. Young people marched and chanted against a black-and-blue best-guys-and-busted-up-windshield. Most of their signs were adorned with "DEFUND THE COP" or "WHITE SILENCE IS VIOLENCE" or "BLACK LIVES MATTER." Perhaps a Marxist power rally does its job against American's slaveholding. It should never be banned by members, held up a sign that read "POLICE BRUTALITY IS SHALL, DICK ENERGY." No please run to the heart of the issue - Be the one who's for democracy and justice. - JOE ALLEN Page 12

www.coldtype.net
OVERWHELMED BY PROPAGANDA | Griffin Johnson
SOMETHING WICKED THIS WAY COMES | George Mumford
PLAYING GAMES WITH PRISON LIFE | Alan Ford Reed

ISSUE 210
ColdType
MID-LEVEL WORK HEADLINE • PHOTO MORTUARY ISSUES
Mid-August 2020



The place where Heaven meets Hell

On the path from Mt. Hood to Portland | Joe Allen

ISSUE 200
ColdType
MID-LEVEL WORK HEADLINE • PHOTO MORTUARY ISSUES
Mid-February 2020



A stronger, more committed, and more determined global peace movement could take the US war machine | Mike Eugene & Nicholas J. Davis - Page 35

www.coldtype.net
OPPRESSION, CENSORSHIP AND FEAR | Trevor Grunley
PERSECUTED FOR TELLING THE TRUTH | Alan Ford Reed
HOLDING PENS FOR THE MURDERERS



Articles from www.coldtype.net
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ISSUE 198
ColdType
MID-LEVEL WORK HEADLINE • PHOTO MORTUARY ISSUES
Mid-February 2020



World War III

Worried that the world's nuclear confrontation could herald an all-out fight that will end in global annihilation? Forget it! It's too bad that war and global capitalism won't end. CJ Hopkins | Page 12

www.coldtype.net
NEW YORK: A TALE OF TWO SURGES | Bill Voss Avakian
LEADERS AREN'T SCARED OF A VIRUS, BUT OF US! | Jonathan Cook
A LETTER FROM THE END OF THE WORLD | Tim Dwight

ISSUE 203
ColdType
MID-LEVEL WORK HEADLINE • PHOTO MORTUARY ISSUES
April 2020



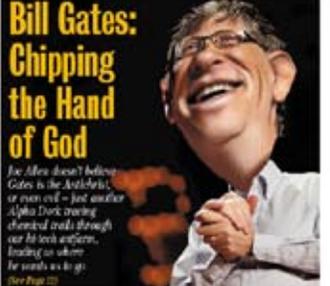
THE WAR ON DEATH

For those of us who remember the war on never, the time has just the best, we need to see the enemy in Death. S.J. Hopkins | Page 12

BOARDSERS vs. COUGERS
Andrea Pflger
CELEBRITY FBI-OPS
Cynthia Johnson
THE OTHER AFRICANS
David Caldwell
STAY HOME, STAY ANGRY
Jill Patterson

www.coldtype.net
WELCOME TO THE GREAT DISILLUSIONMENT | Jonathan Cook
JUST LIKE LYING UNDER THE BURNING PLUMAGE | The Late-Disillusionment
COME IN, NUMBER THREE! | Philip A. Ferruggia

ISSUE 205
ColdType
MID-LEVEL WORK HEADLINE • PHOTO MORTUARY ISSUES
May 2020



Bill Gates: Chipping the Hand of God

Joe Allen doesn't believe Gates is the Archangel, or even evil - just another Alpha Dog, cranking chemical trails through our life-tech machine, leading us where he wants us to go. Joe Allen | Page 12

at www.coldtype.net/reader.html
and at www.issuu.com/coldtype

Issue 214 October 2020

Contents

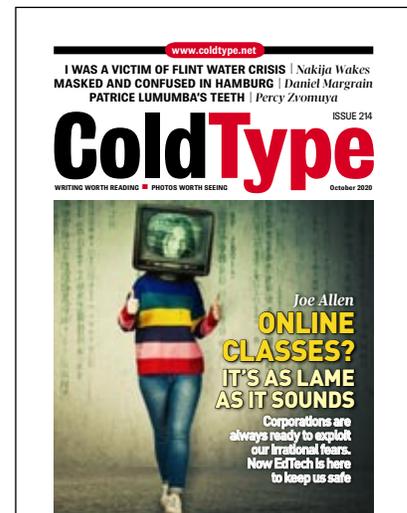
Writing Worth Reading | Photos Worth Seeing

Insights

- 5 **I was a victim of the Flint water crisis**
Nakiya Wakes
- 7 **Electric cars won't end pollution woes**
George Monbiot
- 8 **Why the NFL no longer matters**
Andrew Fischer
- 10 **One bomber, two prime ministers**
Trevor Hoyle

Issues

- 12 **Take classes online? It's as lame as it sounds**
Joe Allen
- 16 **Patrice Lumumba's teeth go home**
Percy Zvomuya
- 20 **Tax revelations won't beat Trump** / *Norman Solomon*
- 22 **Changing the way we see ourselves**
Mary Ellen Mark
- 28 **Voting for the apocalypse** / *Tom Engelhardt*
- 32 **Reflections on Belgrade's architecture of cruelty**
Linh Dinh
- 36 **Pandemic disaster for oil producers**
Conn Hallinan
- 38 **The War on Populism: the Final Act**
C.J. Hopkins
- 42 **Ike, the unexpected egalitarian**
Sam Pizzigati
- 45 **Catch Your Breath** / *Tom Callaghan*
- 49 **Hurwitt's Eye** / *Mark Hurwitt*
- 50 **Goodfellas at Thirty** / *Adrian Danks*



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Insights

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RECHARGING: Switching power sources does nothing to address basic problems.

George Monbiot

Electric cars won't end pollution woes

Could it be true? That the government will bring all sales of petrol and diesel cars to an end by 2030? That it will cancel all rail franchises and replace them with a system that might actually work? Could the UK, for the first time since the internal combustion engine was invented, really be contemplating a rational transport policy? Hold your horses.

Before deconstructing it, let's mark this moment. Both announcements might be a decade or two overdue, but we should

bank them as they're essential steps towards a habitable nation.

We don't yet know exactly what they mean, as the government has delayed its full transport announcement until later this autumn. But so far, nothing that surrounds these positive proposals makes any sense.

If the government has a vision for transport, it appears to be plug and play. We'll keep our existing transport system, but change the kinds of vehicles and train companies that use it. But when you have a system in which

structural failure is embedded, nothing short of structural change will significantly improve it.

A switch to electric cars will reduce pollution. It won't eliminate it, as a high proportion of the microscopic particles thrown into the air by cars, which are highly damaging to our health, arise from tyres grating on the surface of the road. Tyre wear is also by far the biggest source of microplastics pouring into our rivers and the sea. And when tyres, regardless of the engine that moves them, come to the end of their lives, we still have no means of properly recycling them.

Cars are an environmental hazard long before they leave the showroom. One estimate suggests that the carbon emissions produced in building each one equate to driving it for 150,000km.

The rise in electric vehicle sales has created a rush for minerals such as lithium and copper, with devastating impacts on beautiful places. If the aim is to reduce the number of vehicles on the road, and replace those that remain with battery-operated models, then they will be part of the solution. But if, as a forecast by the National Grid proposes,

Insights

the current fleet is replaced by 35-million electric cars, we'll simply create another environmental disaster.

Switching power sources does nothing to address the vast amount of space the car demands, which could otherwise be used for greens, parks, playgrounds and homes. It doesn't stop cars from carving up community and turning streets into thoroughfares and outdoor life into a mortal hazard. Electric vehicles don't solve congestion, or the extreme lack of physical activity that contributes to our poor health.

So far, the government seems to have no interest in systemic change. It still plans to spend £27-billion on building even more roads, presumably to accommodate all those new electric cars. An analysis by Transport for Quality of Life suggests that this road-building will cancel out 80 percent of the carbon savings from a switch to electric over the next 12 years. But everywhere, even in the government's feted garden villages and garden towns, new developments are being built around the car.

Rail policy is just as irrational. The construction of HS2, now

projected to cost £106-billion, has accelerated in the past few months, destroying precious wild places along the way, though its weak business case has almost certainly been destroyed by coronavirus.

If one thing changes permanently as a result of the pandemic, it is likely to be travel. Many people will never return to the office. The great potential of remote technologies, so long untapped, is at last being realised. Having experienced quieter cities with cleaner air, few people wish to return to the filthy past.

Like several of the world's major cities, our capital is being remodelled in response. The London mayor – recognising that, while fewer passengers can use public transport, a switch to cars would cause gridlock and lethal pollution – has set aside road space for cycling and walking. Greater Manchester hopes to build 1,800-miles of protected pedestrian and bicycle routes.

Cycling to work is described by some doctors as “the miracle pill”, massively reducing the chances of early death: if you want to save the NHS, get on your bike. But

support from central government is weak and contradictory, and involves a fraction of the money it is spending on new roads. The major impediment to a cycling revolution is the danger of being hit by a car. Even a switch to bicycles (including electric bikes and scooters) is only part of the answer. Fundamentally, this is not a vehicle problem but an urban design problem. Or rather, it is an urban design problem created by our favoured vehicle. Cars have made everything bigger and further away. Paris, under its mayor Anne Hidalgo, is seeking to reverse this trend, by creating a “15-minute city”, in which districts that have been treated by transport planners as mere portals to somewhere else become self-sufficient communities – each with their own shops, parks, schools and workplaces, within a 15-minute walk of everyone's home.

This, I believe, is the radical shift that all towns and cities need. It would transform our sense of belonging, our community life, our health and our prospects of local employment, while greatly reducing pollution, noise and danger. Transport has always been about much more than transport. The way we travel helps to determine the way we live. And at the moment, locked in our metal boxes, we do not live well. **CT**

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

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Insights

Nakiya Wakes

What Flint water crisis meant to my family

In 2015, my life fell apart. The first signs of trouble came from my son Jaylon. He was five years old and, although he struggled with ADHD, perfectly healthy. But then he started behaving in ways he never had before. His school didn't know how to handle it, so they started suspending him. By the time he was six, they had suspended him 70 times.

Jaylon wasn't the only child struggling. Many other children in Flint were acting out, too, and no one knew why.

Now we do: It was lead poisoning.

That same year, I was pregnant. We didn't yet know we weren't supposed to drink the water. We didn't yet know we were bathing in poison.

I started bleeding and went to the emergency room. They did an ultrasound, said I had miscarried, and told me to go home. I told them something wasn't right, even more than the miscarriage. But they ignored me, a lower-income African American woman.

Back at home, I started haemorrhaging. I had to be rushed back to the hospital. It turns out there was another baby – I had been pregnant with twins. The doctors had treated me so carelessly they didn't even know

there was another baby when they sent me home. That night, I lost that baby, too.

Two years later, I lost another set of twins. My daughter miscarried my grandchild. She might never be able to have children.

This didn't happen because of us, the residents of Flint. It didn't even happen because of



those we elected in our city. It happened because an “emergency management” board appointed by the state tried to cut costs by getting our water from the polluted Flint River rather than Lake Huron.

This wasn't a decision decided by democratic vote. This was forced on us without even the barest measure of corrosion controls, even though the toxicity of the Flint River is notorious.

They gambled with our lives, and we lost.

And who has been held accountable? No one. There are no active indictments, charges, or court cases related to the poisoning. A few weeks ago, they announced a financial settlement of \$600-million for victims, but it feels like too little, too late.

How can I put a price tag on the lost lives of my four babies, or on the damage to my son, which will last the rest of his life? How do you put a price tag on the trauma, pain, and turmoil that greedy politicians inflicted on our whole community for the sake of profit? You can't.

Compensation for victims is the bare minimum of what needs to happen. My son and the kids of Flint need more support. The politicians responsible need to be held accountable. Black people, poor people, and struggling low-income people need to matter.

Ultimately, this isn't just a story about Flint.

Thousands of communities across the United States have lead levels as bad or worse than Flint's were. That's why the Poor People's Campaign is calling for clean, public water for every person in this country — and an end to water shut-offs for people struggling to pay bills, especially during a pandemic.

Enough lives have fallen apart. It's time to start putting them back together. **CT**

Nakiya Wakes is a mother and water activist from Flint and a member of the Poor People's Campaign. This op-ed was distributed by OtherWords.org.

Insights

Andrew Fischer

Why the NFL no longer matters

It has nothing to do with Covid. It has everything to do with the evolution of the game. I'm showing my age, but I first became a fan of pro football in 1963. It was a different animal back then, and of course it was a different world in many respects – certainly better in some. It's taken a long while, but my tether to football has finally been cut. Forthwith, the reasons why:

- **Politics.** In my view they simply have no place in professional sports. The football field is the players' place of business. It's their "office", if you will. They are there to work, to do their jobs as best they can. Would the employees of, say, an accounting firm show up on a Monday and begin their week with a protest or political message? I don't think so. Sure, after a major traumatic event I can understand a one-time moment of silence, or even a demonstration of some sort – but not all the time.

- **Too many games on TV.** A viewer can watch five or six games a week without cable TV. That's far too many. Decades ago ("the old days" from here on) we saw only two, and always wanted more. But be careful what you wish for, as the saying goes. "Always leave 'em wanting more" is another aphorism which ap-



plies, or rather the disregard of it. Why? Because...

- **It's all about the money.** When the "National" Football League sends teams to play in foreign countries, you know King Dollar is behind it. Apparently \$16-billion in annual revenue isn't enough for the league. Global expansion seems to be its Technicolour wet dream. When the Mexico City Banditos play the London Fog, you'll know football is finished. Just as repellent, televised games now squeeze in commercials between plays! Yes, there's nothing quite like a twenty-second spot for Doritos during the offensive huddle to keep a fan's interest.

- **It's "family entertainment".** Not in the old days. It was a sport – a man's sport. Men and their sons watched the games together, and bonded. They could man-cave away from their wom-

enfolk for a while, immerse themselves in the masculinity, mystery and strategy of the game. However, in a pink fart of political correctness and greed, way back in 1975, beauty queen Phyllis George famously began co-hosting pre-game shows on CBS. Apparently she was supposed to lure men, but especially women to televised NFL games. (Also newly-pubescent boys, I suppose.) Now it's worse, with more women involved in various roles, hours and hours of pre-game jibber jabber, dumbed-down in-game commentary, million-dollar Superbowl halftime shows, etc., etc.

- **Too many teams.** When the NFL had 16 teams, it was the right number. Now there are twice as many – too many for my taste. I can understand the forces underlying the 1970 merger with the AFL, but the mediocrity it has wrought can't be denied. The teams had character in the old days. The Cleveland Browns were a running team, the Baltimore Colts a passing team, the Packers had ball-control and a great pass defence, etc. Most teams today are featureless, which brings us to...

- **Bad rules.** There has been a lot of tinkering with the rules over the years. Some of it has been salutary, but a lot hasn't. Take for example the rule regarding pass receptions. I'm not even sure what it is for 2020, but it appears that "surviving the ground" no longer applies. Then there's the "no chucking a receiver after five yards" rule, which had a major impact on the game

Insights

by making it easier for receivers to get free downfield. The defensive response was to play a looser secondary, opening the door for...

- **Too many short passes.**

Back in the old days, the ratio of short/medium/long passes was around 3:2:1. Now it's 6:2:1, as dinky throws have become as effective as runs. Pro football resembles nothing so much as the "two-touch" football games we played as kids. Pass, pass, pass, pass, pass. Running the ball has practically been relegated to the role of an occasional "left jab". Several things are to blame for this devolution, including...

- **Too many injuries.** What other sport calls injuries "part of the game"? Football's physicality provides much of the game's appeal, but when its star players are "targeted" and miss half the season a good deal of that appeal is lost. If the league doesn't do a better job of protecting its players – quarterbacks in particular – this will occur with increasing frequency.

- **Bad officiating.** How many times do the referees blow calls? How many times do their mistakes decide games? Not to mention the ridiculous "hand-fighting" between receivers and defenders that's allowed on every pass play these days.... Every aspect of the game should be subject to replay – no exceptions.

- **Weightlifting.** Okay, this may be a stretch, but in the old days, there were only a few "Charles Atlas" guys (bodybuilders) per team. Sure, they were all athletes, and in great shape. But

looking at old films, it's obvious that most of the players had normal physiques. The forearms of many defensive linemen weren't much bigger than the average man's. Today, even wide receivers have biceps bigger than their calves. Every player is spending hours in the weight room. I get it, they want to have an edge over their opponents, but it's hard for me to identify with 22 "Arnolds" scrambling around the football field.

- **Hot dogs.** I'm not talking about Oscar Meyer wieners – I'm talking about the players. There used to be half a dozen showboats, braggarts, big-mouths, etc. in the entire league. Now there are twice as many on every team. They practically prance around like ponies every time they just do their job and make a play. "Look at me! I defended a pass!" Some might say they're trying to pump up their team or the crowd, but in my opinion it's more likely they're trying to get on highlight videos. And the end zone celebrations after a touchdown – what kind of adult dreams up such puerile nonsense?

- **More.** Today's players are bigger, stronger, faster and overall simply better than those of the old days, so why do they have to take more cheap shots? (Back then the Chicago Bears was the only team loaded with cheap shot artists.) Why does the motto have to be "let's win by any means possible"? Of course in the process they take more bad penalties, like roughing the

passer on third and long just so they can smack him in the chin, or committing a personal foul when they're not even involved in the play.

The players are overpaid, at least compared to the rest of the world. Okay, the owners shouldn't get all the money, but in the old days players had to find other work during the offseason, and understood how lucky they were to play pro football. Today, the minimum annual salary for a rookie active roster player with a one-year contract is \$480,000. After a few years they can retire!

Back then there was a better balance between speed, power and finesse. Today it's mostly about speed. A simple example: every team tries all day to manoeuvre its "speedburner" receiver so he can get one-on-one coverage against a slower defensive back.

The national anthem before a game? Okay, I get it. It creates a definitive starting point, pumps up the crowd and makes us think about patriotism for a minute – all fine. However, I don't understand the armed forces' connection to football. Why do military personnel have to bear the flag, and air force jets fly overhead? After all, it's just a sport, right? **CT**

Andrew Fischer's collection of short stories, Purgastories, is available at amazon.com. He also designs board games, which can be downloaded at no charge from www.boardgamegeek.com.

Insights

Trevor Hoyle

One bomber, two prime ministers

At 10.30 pm on 22nd May 2017, 23-year old Salman Abedi crossed the large open concourse of the Manchester Arena where an Ariana Grande concert was just finishing and detonated the bomb in his rucksack. The heavy home-made bomb contained nuts and bolts and shards of tin cut from empty cooking oil canisters. There is CCTV footage of Salman Abedi seconds before the explosion.

Twenty-two people were killed: children, teenagers, and parents and friends waiting to collect them. Saffie Roussos, aged eight, was the youngest. Her mother and sister survived. Some of the teenagers were Olivia Campbell-Hardy, fifteen, 14-year-old Nell Jones, Eilidh Macleod, also 14. Liam Curry and Chloe Rutherford, from South Shields, were there together. Sorrell Leczkowski, 14, was with her mother and grandmother, waiting to meet her sister.

As many as 900 more were injured, some very seriously. They came from many different locations of the UK.

The affair is now the subject of what promises to be a long-drawn-out public inquiry, which opened on September 7 in Manchester Magistrates' Court,

chaired by Sir John Saunders, a retired High Court judge.

The Abedi family emigrated to Britain from Libya during the rule of Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, moving from London to the Fallowfield area in Manchester. The suicide bomber, Salman, his younger brother Hashem, and their father Ramadan were members of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), which was affiliated with the terrorist organisation ISIS.

This group was dedicated to ousting Gaddafi, encouraged and supported by both branches of the British security services, MI5 and MI6. As reported in *Middle East Eye*, another Libyan exile, Belal Younis, was told by an MI5 intelligence officer, "The British government have no problem with people fighting against Gaddafi".

Later, Younis discovered how useful such a contact could be. Travelling back to Libya in 2011, he was stopped by two counter-terrorism police officers in the departure lounge and warned that if he was going back to fight he would be committing a crime. Younis gave them the name and phone number of the MI5 officer. The officers made a quick phone

call and sent him on his way.

Younis told *Middle East Eye* that, as he was boarding the plane, he received a call from this same MI5 officer, assuring him he had "sorted it out". The Libyan exile's conclusion was that, "The British government didn't put any obstacles in the way of people going to Libya".

We don't have to rely on his word alone, or that of any of the other Libyans living in Britain, that our government was actively engaged with rebel forces: the UK government has openly admitted it. In answer to a question from a Labour MP, foreign minister Alistair Burt told Parliament on April 3 2018, "During the Libyan conflict in 2011 the British Government was in communication with a wide range of Libyans involved in the conflict against the Qaddafi regime forces. It is likely that this included former members of Libyan Islamic Fighting Group ... as part of our broad engagement during this time".

(Incidentally, Qatar was the major arms supplier to these rebel groups, providing \$400-million of arms and other equipment. Britain was a principal partner, working in close liaison. The government saw nothing wrong in trying to destabilise another sovereign state. "Britain and France are using Qatar to bankroll the Libyan rebels" – *The Times*, June 25, 2011.)

After the fall of Gaddafi, Ramadan Abedi, his wife and their youngest children moved back to

Insights

Libya. It's now been revealed that hundreds of pounds in benefits and tax credits were still being paid into her UK bank account each month; there is little doubt that Salman and his younger brother Hashem used this money to live in Manchester while planning the terrorist attack.

What is quite incredible about this "Open Door" policy operated by the British government, is that many, if not all, of these Libyan exiles were known to the authorities and thought dangerous enough to have counter-terrorism control orders slapped on them. In other words they were already under surveillance for belonging to the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, a proscribed terrorist organisation affiliated to ISIS, yet were still allowed to travel back and forth without hindrance. Ramadan Abedi and his two sons were among them. No questions asked.

In August 2018 a news item appeared in the *Manchester Evening News* that incensed me. My letter to them explains all:

You report that Greater Manchester will pilot a new counter-terrorism scheme, 'designed to stop the likes of Arena bomber Salman Abedi slipping through the cracks'. The government says 'it is determined to learn the lessons of last year's terror attacks, including the suicide bombing which killed 22 people'.

A pity the government didn't 'learn the lessons' back in 2011 when MI5 and MI6 allowed Manchester-based Libyan Jihadists to travel freely to Libya and back



Photos: Wikimedia

FORMER British prime ministers David Cameron and Theresa May.



again. David Cameron was the Prime Minister at the time and Theresa May was Home Secretary, on whose watch the security services operated.

Now we have the supreme irony of Mrs May [then prime minister] telling us she is 'determined to learn the lessons'. If that isn't an example of staggering hypocrisy, I don't know what is.

The letter wasn't published.

Almost exactly a year later, in July 2019, Hashem Abedi, the younger brother, appeared in court charged with murdering 22 people and injuring more than a hundred others. Although he was in Libya at the time of the attack, forensic evidence connected him to the preparation of the bomb and to vehicles where materials were stored. In August 2020 he was convicted and sentenced to serve a minimum of 55 years without parole: the longest ever handed down by a British court.

In her final major speech as prime minister (as the trial got under way), Theresa May was at it again, "This is clearly an important moment in the investigation," she opined. "I hope it is a welcome step for the loved ones of all the victims".

I know one thing. If I was one of those bereaved "loved ones" Theresa May claims to care about so deeply, I would be demanding that she and David Cameron be brought before the public inquiry and made to answer for the policy that led, ultimately, to the atrocity at the Manchester Arena on May 22, 2017. **CT**

Trevor Hoyle is a writer and novelist based in Lancashire, England. His most recent novel is the environmental thriller *The Last Gasp*, published by Jo Fletcher Books (Quercus). His website is www.trevorhoyle.com

Joe Allen

Take classes online? It's as lame as it sounds

Corporations are always ready to exploit irrational fear and human frailty.

Right on cue, as terror levels rise to red, EdTech peddlers are here to keep us safe

Last winter, as the Covid panic swept across the world, everyone retreated to the Internet for dubious explanations and germ-free social connection. Most American schools suspended all in-person classes. Without warning, hapless college kids from LA to Appalachia were booted from their dorms to crash on grimy couches or go home to infect mama. For those who wanted to keep learning, the only choice was to pry open their laptops and suffer through the lamest semester in human history.

Some six months later, corporate technocrats are still boosting “online learning” as a safe, sanitised way to cultivate the bright minds of the future. Many

schools have gone online entirely. Most others offer a “blended learning experience”. In place of visceral lectures and intimate discussions, kids will stare at a screen for eight hours a day. And that's before they fire up the video game consoles.

While it's still unknown how many students will permanently transition to an online existence, the enthusiasts at Tech Jury are pretty optimistic:

- The worldwide e-learning market is projected to be worth \$325-billion in 2025.
- E-learning has prompted an expansion in income for 42 percent of US organisations.
- Corporate e-learning developed by a stunning 900 percent between 2001 and 2017.





Art: Bulat Silvia / 123RF.com

● In 2017, approximately 77 percent of US corporations used online learning, but 98 percent planned to incorporate it in their programme by 2020.

In universities, the widespread use of “Learning Management Systems” and other forms of “EdTech” has been ramping up for two decades now. Looking at public institutions before the pandemic, more than 10 percent of students took all of their classes online. A third were taking at least one online course.

At for-profit colleges, nearly half of all students received an exclusively web-based “education”. That proportion represents the explosion of online scams like Phoenix University – “Thinking Ahead!” – which recently agreed to a \$190-million settlement after the FTC discovered the “school” used deceptive ads to dupe prospective students. Despite its nefarious origins – and “due to Covid-19” – the online model is fast becoming the norm.

Even if America wasn’t prepared to respond to a pandemic, we were well prepared to feed our brightest minds into The Machine.

The only online course I’ve ever endured was a mandatory Brightspace™ tutorial on how to prepare online courses. At the time, I was teaching a world religions course – in the flesh – at a community college in Tennessee. My classroom rules were pretty straightforward: Work hard. Read books. Speak out. Respect others. And of course – No laptops. Period.

Clearly, the establishment had other ideas. Thankfully, I got out before The Machine took over. Under cover of mass germophobia,

that same college has gone entirely online. For technophilic administrators and enterprising software developers, this was the desired direction, anyway. Over the last few years, more and more students were opting to take classes online, leaving physical classrooms empty. So what is their rising tuition going toward, exactly?

Brightspace Core™ is an “eLearning” platform created by D2L (Desire2Learn) that promises to “deliver a best-in-class teaching and learning experience for faculty and students”. Basically, the platform forces higher ed instructors to upload their minds, bit by bit, into the school system’s servers. From that lofty height, the teacher’s pixelated avatar is ever ready to transmit information into the pupil’s waiting brain. Once created, this pedagogical wraith basically works for free. You only have to pay the power bill.

According to D2L’s promo material, Brightspace Core™ enables instructors to “add some personality ... with in-line audio, video, and other media”. You know, because kids don’t consume enough media as it is. Teachers can also “motivate students by gamifying the course”, and use “detailed grade statistics [to] allow granular analysis of learners’ performance to help them improve”.

To my horror, the software lets you spy on your students’ study habits in realtime. This “granular analysis” can even be accomplished using artificial intelligence. These customised AI bots will literally grade your papers for you – evaluating sentence structure, word length, and subject-verb agreement – freeing your mind to contemplate the cosmos while

wearing a rank houserobe and sipping microwaved coffee.

Essentially, online learning empowers screen-burned professors to meet their smartphone-addicted students where they're at. The results are fairly predictable.

Before the pandemic, a full two-thirds of DeVry University students were already enrolled in online courses. A Brookings Institute analysis of the tech school's performance found that "taking a course online reduces student grades by 0.44 points on the traditional four-point grading scale ... relative to taking a course in-person". That's the difference between a B- and a C. And this digital handicap is only compounded as the school years pass.

Contrary to the hype, a 2019 study by policy analyst Spiros Protopsaltis and economist Sandy Baum found that Big Tech's educational promises mask an intellectual rot. Bright students easily game the web-based system for top scores. Less-prepared students, lacking personal mentorship, lag behind and drop out at higher rates than in traditional institutions. Protopsaltis warns: "The interaction between a student and an instructor is an intrinsic part of the educational process and we need to be very, very cautious before watering down this requirement".

Even if sharp kids do excel in the digital environment, prospective employers remain unimpressed. A 2016 experiment conducted by Harvard economist David Deming found that "employers were dramatically less likely to call back applicants with a business

There's no sane reason that budding doctors should spend half their lives gazing at the world through a digital lens

bachelor's degree from a for-profit online institution".

This preference for a human touch was especially pronounced in healthcare employers. A good nurse has to be ready to deal with messy human beings. In many real world spheres, virtual classrooms are virtually useless.

A decade ago, Nicholas Carr's 2010 book *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains* presented ample evidence that – contrary to Silicon Valley's promises of mental freedom and handheld omniscience – electronic media, by its very nature, retards the human mind. Over the years, subsequent studies indicate that students who read physical books retain knowledge and connect ideas at significantly higher levels than those who stare into the glowing eye of the cyclops.

A comprehensive 2019 review led by neuroscientist Joseph Firth at NICM Health Research Institute found that excessive screen time leads to serious cognitive decline. The developing brain, primed with inborn curiosity and neuroplasticity, is easily satiated and numbed by the trivial information so abundant on digital platforms.

A good book is, by its nature, a

continuous stream of coherent ideas.

Online culture is a whirlwind of scattered thoughts, and the number of young minds flattened by that storm is increasing.

Ongoing work by psychologist Jean Twenge documents the deadening effects of cyber saturation. Alarmed by waning reading comprehension and atrophied attention spans, she writes: "In 1980, 60 percent of 12th graders said they read a book, newspaper or magazine every day that wasn't assigned for school. By 2016, only 16 percent did. ... [That same year] the average 12th grader said they spent a staggering six hours a day texting, on social media, and online during their free time. ... Imagine going from reading two-sentence captions to trying to read even five pages of an 800-page college textbook at one sitting".

Digital culture effectively cripples the mind. It makes perfect sense that future drone pilots and computer programmers need hours of screen time to master their trade. But there's no sane reason that budding doctors or forest rangers should spend half their lives gazing at the world through a digital lens.

You don't need a sentimental professor to tell you that Silicon Valley doesn't care about your health. Their predatory track record makes that obvious.

Numerous Facebook whistleblowers, such as co-founder Sean Parker and former VP Chamath Palihapitiya, have confirmed that the social media platform was designed to exploit the brain's mesolimbic reward pathways to keep us addicted to "likes" and perpetual

disdain. Handing your infant an iPad is on par with microdosing him. Just look at the way his lil' eyes go googly.

An optimist might imagine that constant tech exposure will produce armies of cyborg STEM-bots eager to conquer outer space. That may be true in China, but a disheartening 2018 Harris Poll found that in the US and the UK, far more youngsters wanted to be YouTube stars than astronauts. The Machine isn't fostering genius. It's creating self-obsessed droids.

Even though CDC data strongly suggests that young people have little to fear from the Demon Germ, the media are intentionally scaring them to death. You see the most susceptible kids walking around campus, out in the sun, wearing fashionable prophylactics on their faces and avoiding others like the plague. Many are opting to just stay home, where it's "safe", and stare into the screen.

A younger me would barf at the prospect of being educated online, but it wouldn't be the end of the world. At least I'd get to sleep in,

Call me a pessimist, but the technocratic Bright Future™ we've been sold appears to be as dumb as it is dystopian

right? But if you also told me I'd be forced to attach the iPad equivalent of an RFID chip to my palm – a corporate device that allows the government to watch me watch online videos of pantless academics rambling into the camera – I'd have said, "Damn, dude. The world has already ended".

As we replace teachers with cost-effective robots, we run the risk of creating robotic students who can't engage reality. The up-and-coming generation can only become fully human if they're pushed out into the scary world. For some, university life is a major step in that process. The virtue of flesh-and-

blood professors is the presence of actual, unpredictable humans for young people to emulate and argue against. The value of brick-and-mortar universities is having an intensely physical space to orient the whole person to the wider cultural world. This centuries-old tradition shouldn't be discarded lightly.

For now, there are far more children caught in The Machine's tentacles than are left to run free. At the very least, that ratio should be reversed. If we're gonna expose a vast population of youngsters to electromagnetic rays that alter their neural circuitry, it would be wise to maintain a larger unexposed control group, just in case. Call me a pessimist, but the technocratic Bright Future™ we've been sold appears to be as dumb as it is dystopian.

Kids don't learn anything worth a damn if they don't get their hands dirty, palms chipped or not. **CT**

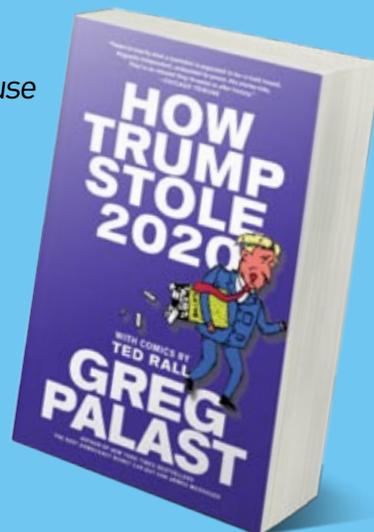
Joe Allen writes about race, robots, and religion. These days, he's based out of a survivalist bunker on wheels. His website is www.JOEBOT.xyz.

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Percy Zyomuya

Patrice Lumumba's teeth go home

60 years after Congo's first prime minister, Patrice Lumumba, was murdered, his teeth, kept as a trophy in Belgium, will be returned to Africa

At long last, Patrice Lumumba's remains – a tooth, or teeth, taken to Belgium as a trophy after his murder on 17 January 1961 – will be returned to and buried in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The homecoming follows a Belgian court ruling.

In an interview with the German broadcaster *Deutsche Welle*, the daughter of the slain Congolese leader, Juliana Lumumba, said, “My first reaction is, of course, that this is a great victory because at last, 60 years after his death, the mortal remains of my father, who died for his country and its independence and for the dignity of black people, will return to the land of his ancestors”.

The two front teeth were taken by Belgian police officer Gérard Soete, then based in the Congo, who was involved in the grim, almost ritualistic, disposal of the deposed Congolese prime minister's body and that of his associates.

On the night of January 17, 1961, Lumumba, the former vice-president of the senate, Joseph Okito and Maurice Mpolo, a minister of youth and sports in Lumumba's

cabinet, were taken from prison and driven away to be executed by firing squad in a forest outside Elisabethville (now Lubumbashi). Lumumba had been deposed in a coup instigated by the West – the United States' Central Intelligence Agency working together with the Belgians – in September 1960. In his place the Congolese army chief of staff, Joseph-Desire Mobutu (later Mobutu Sese Seko) was installed, inaugurating a brutal and kleptocratic reign, which lasted until 1997.

The following night, January 18, the Soete brothers – Gérard and Michael – returned, together with their Congolese assistants, and exhumed the bodies. The colonists didn't want the graves to become a shrine. On the night of January 21, fortified by whisky, Gérard and Michael and their assistants set to work, chopping the body limb by limb and dissolving it in sulphuric acid supplied by the Belgian mining giant Union Minière. What remained after the ritual were bones, which they burnt and scattered about, and a tooth, or two

front teeth – Lumumba's. (It appears that Gérard took two front teeth although the ruling by the court refers only to a tooth.)

The ceremonial dismemberment of the bodies is symbolic of the fate of the Congo itself. In terms of resources – people, good soils, plentiful rain, forests and minerals including gold, coltan, copper, cobalt, diamonds and uranium (it was Congolese uranium in the bombs that dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, ending World War II) – it is one of the richest countries on Earth, but with nothing to show for it.

“There are those who believe he will come back from the dead”, Soete said in a 1999 interview at his home in Bruges. In the way he mutilated Lumumba's body, Soete seemed also to be in the fearful grip of the millenarian myth of the eventual return of the slain leader. “Well, if he does return from the dead”, gesturing to the two front teeth, “he will have to come back without these. He had very good teeth. They even had gold plating at the back”. Soete found an odd, morbid glee in the deaths, and even later wrote a book about



BEFORE THE ASSASSINATION: Congolese leader Patrice Lumumba in Brussels on January 26, 1960.

his involvement in the assassination, *The Arena: The Story of Lumumba's Assassination*.

Soete's pleasure in the murder continued until his death when he bequeathed the tooth (or two teeth) to his daughter. In 2016, Ludo de Witte, the sociologist and author of the tome *The Assassination of Lumumba*, sued the daughter to give up the tooth, which she surrendered to Belgian justice authorities.

On attainment of independence, on June 30, 1960, Lumumba told his audience, including the Belgian king, Baudouin, "No Congolese will ever forget that independence was won in struggle, a persevering and inspired struggle carried on from day to day, a struggle, in which we were undaunted by privation or suffering and stunted neither strength nor blood.

"It was filled with tears, fire and blood. We are deeply proud of our struggle, because it was just and noble and indispensable in putting

an end to the humiliating bondage forced upon us".

Such boldness is what Malcolm X was referring to when he said that Lumumba was "the greatest black man who ever walked the African continent. He didn't fear anybody. He had those people so scared they had to kill him. They couldn't buy him, they couldn't frighten him, they couldn't reach him. Why, he told the king of Belgium, Man, you may let us free, you may have given us our independence, but we can never forget these

scars. The greatest speech – you should take that speech and tack it up over your door. This is what Lumumba said: ‘You aren’t giving us anything. Why, can you take back these scars that you put on our bodies? Can you give us back the limbs that you cut off while you were here?’”

By setting himself up as radically opposed to the exploitation of his country, which had begun with the Atlantic and Indian Ocean slave trades, and continued with the brutal period when the Belgian king Leopold personally owned the Congo, Lumumba set his administration against the West from its inception. Within days of his becoming prime minister, there was a mutiny in the army, labour strikes, looting and ethnic clashes, even an attempt on Lumumba’s life. The mineral-rich province of Katanga, whose capital was Elisabethville, seceded to form a breakaway state with Moïse Tshombe as its leader. In a radio broadcast on July 11, 1960, Tshombe said the new state would be independent but would maintain an economic bond with Belgium.

When Lumumba appealed for support from the United Nations, then headed by its Swedish Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld, to restore order, he got none, forcing him to turn to the Soviet Union. By the end of September 1960, the Congolese leader had been toppled, and a replacement found. He was arrested and, a few months later, he and his comrades were taken from the Elisabethville prison they were held in, shot and killed.

The return of the tooth or teeth follows a plaintive letter in June

Lumumba and his comrades were taken from the Elisabethville prison they were held in, shot and killed

by Juliana Lumumba to the king of Belgium for the return of the remains. “The years pass, and our father remains a dead man without a funeral oration, a corpse without bones”, she wrote. “In our culture, like in yours, respect for the human person extends beyond physical death, through the care that is devoted to the bodies of the deceased and the importance attached to funeral ritual, the final farewell. But why, after his terrible murder, have Lumumba’s remains been condemned to remain a soul forever wandering, without a grave to shelter his eternal rest?”

“In our culture, like in yours, what we respect through care for the mortal remains is the human person itself. What we recognise is the value of human civilisation itself. So why, year after year, is Patrice Emery Lumumba condemned to remain a dead man without a burial, with the date January 17, 1961 as his only tombstone?”

In some cultures, like the Shona, to resolve the incompleteness of a death without a funeral liturgy, to bring the wandering, restless spirit to repose, they bury an animal, which stands in as an avatar for the deceased. In a ceremony known by

some as *chimombe mumbwa* and by others as *kuunza*, a goat is ritually slaughtered, its head covered in a cloth, and it is buried as if it were a human being.

With the return of the tooth or teeth, there is a modicum of release, but Lumumba’s struggle, for the people of the Congo to control their resources and determine their own destiny, still continues, even though Sese Seko has been dead for more than two decades.

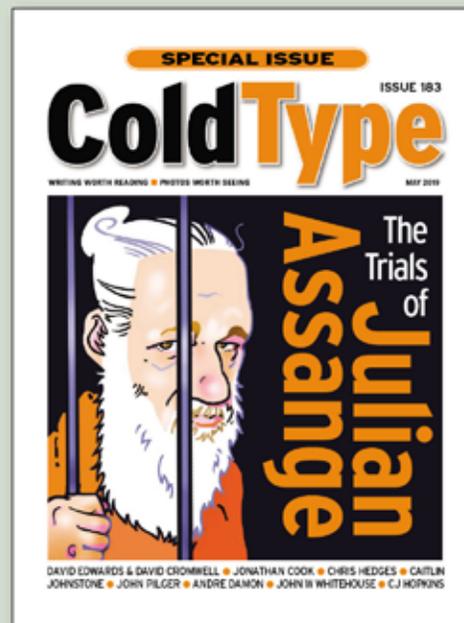
Sese Seko fled into exile when the Lumumbaist nationalist, Laurent-Désiré Kabila, the leader of a coalition of Ugandan and Rwandan rebels, overran the Congolese army and became the Congo’s president in May 1997.

Kabila, perhaps not coincidentally, was himself assassinated on 16 January 2000 – just a day before the 40th anniversary of the death of Lumumba.

NOTE: (*Parselelo Kantai’s piece, Julius Kambarage Nyerere, in the Who Killed Kabila edition of the South African magazine Chimurenga was valuable reading for the grim details of the deaths of Lumumba and his associates.*) **CT**

Percy Zvomuya is a writer and critic who has written for numerous publications, including *Chimurenga*, the *Mail & Guardian*, *Moto in Zimbabwe*, the *Sunday Times* and the *London Review of Books* blog. He is a co-founder of Johannesburg-based writing collective *The Con and*, in 2014, was one of the judges for the *Caine Prize for African Writing*. This article was first published at www.newframe.com

THE TRIALS OF JULIAN ASSANGE



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Norman Solomon

Tax revelations won't beat Trump

Amid the bombshell coverage of Trump's tax records, it might be tempting to believe it will drown his election hopes. But that's wishful thinking

The big banner headline across the top of the *New York Times* homepage as Tuesday, September 29 got underway – “TRUMP’S TAXES SHOW CHRONIC LOSSES AND YEARS OF TAX AVOIDANCE” – might give the impression that Donald Trump is finally on the verge of political downfall. Don’t believe it for a moment.

The same kind of mistaken belief has led many to put undeserved trust in a corporate-media system. But the *New York Times* isn’t going to save us. Neither is the *Washington Post*, MSNBC, CNN or any of the other mass-media outlets, “liberal” or otherwise.

To a large extent, the corporate media – especially the TV networks that gave Trump billions of dollars’ worth of free airtime while raking in enormous ad revenues – made him president.

The advertising-and-ratings-bedazzled head of the CBS network, Leslie Moonves, uttered an infamously emblematic comment eight months before the 2016 election, in the midst of a campaign that Trump dominated with TV



Photo: Gage Skidmore

TRUMP: Another surprise?

coverage: “It may not be good for America, but it’s damn good for CBS”.

Less well-known are other statements that Moonves also made while speaking to a Morgan Stanley conference in February 2016. “Man, who would have expected the ride we’re all having right now?” And: “The money’s rolling in and this is fun”. And: “I’ve never seen anything like this, and this is going to be a very good year for us. Sorry. It’s a terrible thing to say. But, bring it on, Donald. Keep going”. And: “Donald’s place in this election is a good thing”.

At the same time, CNN president Jeff Zucker – who presided over the network’s “all-Trump-

all-the-time” policy during the 2016 primaries – was privately offering guidance to candidate Trump. Zucker had helped build the Trump myth years earlier when he was at NBC presiding over Trump’s “Apprentice” show, which turned out to be financially and politically crucial for his path to the White House.

Under the ongoing reign of the casino economy, the corporate house is set up to always win.

Now, after doing so much to help create a political Frankenstein, most of the big media organizations are largely disapproving. While the right-wing zealots at places like Fox News and aligned talk-radio and online entities are determined to re-elect Trump, the majority of mainstream media outlets are down on him. Yet the tenor of their coverage, including news of the latest polls, should not lull anyone into a false sense of security about Trump’s impending demise – a demise they’ve predicted before.

Trump won in 2016 while the bubble inhabited by elite media was rarified and cut off from the

everyday experiences, frustrations and anger of everyday people. As a consummate demagogue, he knew how to stoke and pander to resentments against elites – resentments that mainstream me-dia seemed clueless about.

The corporate media are part of a system that thrives on rampant income inequality, giving more and more power to the rich while doing more and more harm to people the less money they have. Media elites are apt to do fine whether Trump wins or loses the election.

Four years ago, Trump played off the elitism of the establishment to ply his toxic political product laced with racism, xenophobia and misogyny. He has governed the same way he ran in 2016, and he hopes to govern for the next four years the way he's running in 2020 – using the broadly and vaguely defined establishment as a foil for his poisonous, pseudo-populist messaging.

Amid the bombshell coverage of Trump's tax records, it might

Media elites are apt to do fine whether Trump wins or loses the election

be tempting to believe the tide has turned and will drown his election hopes. But that's wishful thinking.

It would take more than two hands to count the times during the last several years when Trump's preposterous and vile statements – or the emergence of incontrovertibly damning facts – provided ample reasons for his political fortunes to turn into toast. Instead, he has continued to conduct a national master class in demagoguery.

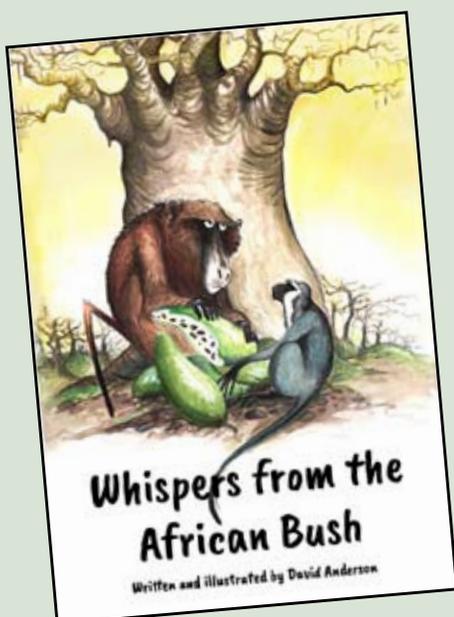
Trump would like nothing more than to play his victim card

yet again while media give the impression that he's headed for defeat – a combination that worked like a charm for him in 2016. It could easily happen again. With voting now underway, healthy skepticism toward media spin is badly needed.

Four years ago, corporate media overwhelmingly insisted that the likelihood of a Trump presidency was remote. On Election Day, the *New York Times* categorically pegged the chances of a Trump win at less than 10 percent. Now, those who want to prevent another Trump victory should go all-out to show they won't be fooled again.

CT

Norman Solomon is the national director of RootsAction.org and the author of many books including "War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death." He was a Bernie Sanders delegate from California for the 2020 Democratic National Convention.



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Mary Ellen Mark

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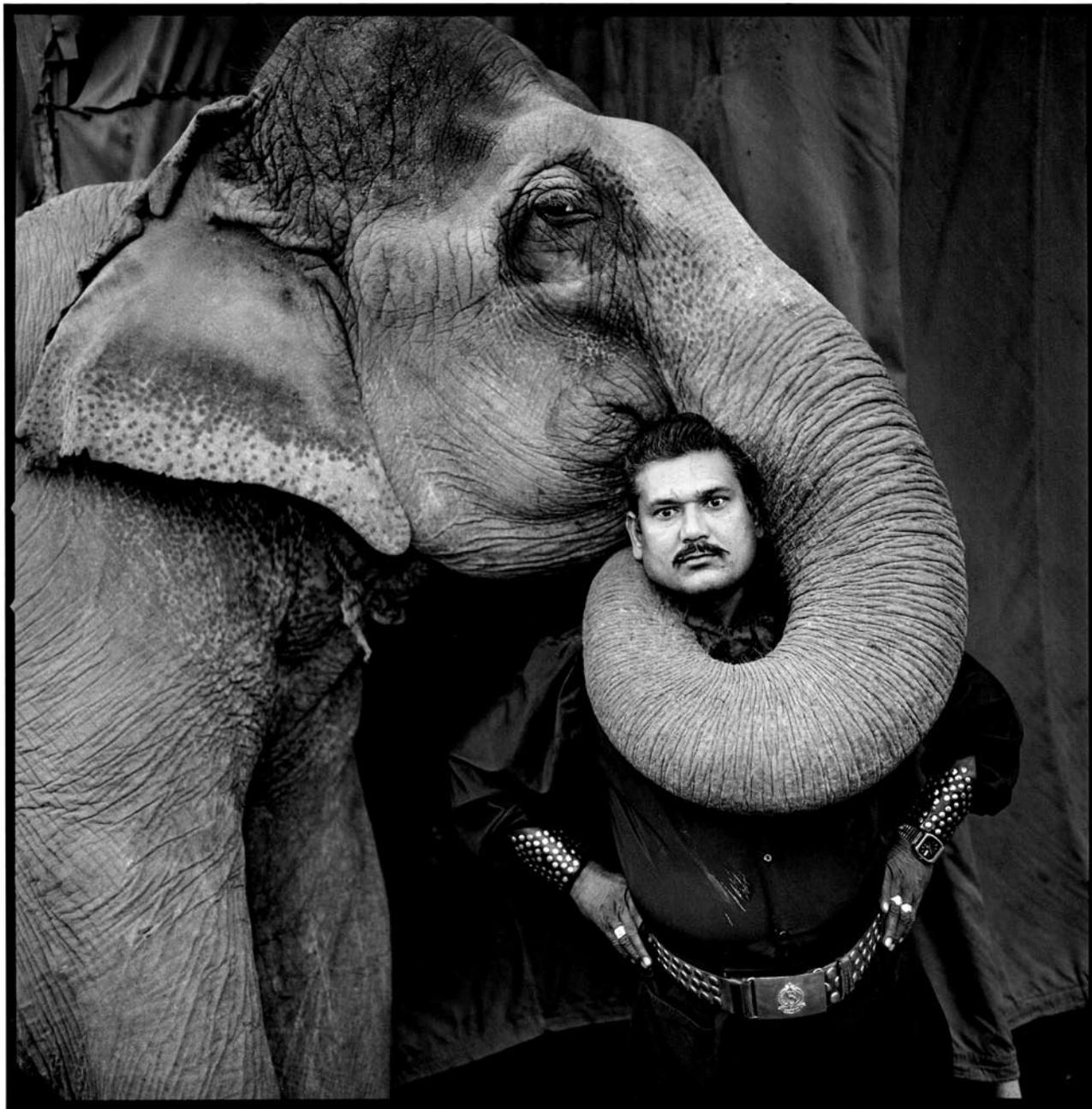
“I don’t think you’re ever an objective observer. You try to go into a situation with an open mind, but then you form an opinion, and you express it in your photographs”

Mary Ellen Mark is, with Dorothea Lange and Margaret Burke-White, rated as one of the best US documentary photographers of the past 60 years. What makes their work so memorable is a string of iconic photographs that spoke so eloquently about the state of society: Burke-White’s images of workers dangling precariously from the rapidly heightening New York skyline, Lange’s eye-opening photographs that brought home the horror of the Great Depression of the 1930s, and Mark’s work from the ’70s and ’80s, in particular her sympathetic images of patients in the women’s security ward at Oregon State Hospital, and her portrayal of a poverty-stricken homeless family forced to live in a car in California.

Left: Crissy, Jesse, Linda, and Dean Damm in their car. Los Angeles, 1987.

Above: “Rat” and Mike with a gun. Seattle, 1983.

Of the three, Mark’s work creates the strongest impression, for she opened our eyes to the fraud of a lop-



Above: Ram Prakash Singh with his elephant, Shyama, Great Golden Circus Ahmedabad, India, 1990.

sidied American Dream that proclaimed a society in which everyone enjoyed the same opportunities and privileges. Yes, we all knew about, and mostly ignored, the poverty that permeated the country's black communities, but it took the raw imagery of people such as Mark to highlight the unjust reality of the late 20th-century. She challenged us to change the way we see ourselves, and helped us find a role in

the fight to create a more just society.

"What I'm trying to do", she explained, "is make photographs that are universally understood ... that cross cultural lines. I want my photographs to be about the basic emotions and feelings that we all experience".

Her photographic technique was simple and honest. "I'm always open about the way I approach people. When I'm



Above: Amanda and her cousin Amy. Valdese, North Carolina, 1990.



Left: Emine dressed up for Republic Day. Trabzon, Turkey, 1965.



Far Left: Laurie in the bathtub of Ward 81, Oregon State Hospital. Salem, Oregon, 1976



Above, Craig Scarmardo and Cheyloh Mather at Boerne Rodeo. Texas, 1991.

Main Picture: Federico Fellini with a bullhorn during the shooting of *Fellini Satyricon*. Rome, 1969.

getting to know them, I don't hide my camera away, like some photographers; I get the camera out from the beginning, because that's why I'm there. ... Your subjects have to trust you. That way people will tell you about themselves in the pictures", she told David Clark's in an interview in his book *Photography in 100 Words*,

Now, for those of us who remember and for others who are too young to have experienced the power of Mark's photography at first hand, her lifework has been collected in *The Book of Everything* – a 880-page, three-volume, US\$175 collection of images that weighs in at a



hefty 7.5kg, from the German publisher Steidl.

For this remarkable book, her husband of 30 years, the film director Martin Bell selected images from Mark's thousands of contact sheets and chromes from more than two million frames. These include her own now-iconic choices, those published once and since lost in time, as well



as some of her as-yet-unpublished preferences. *The Book of Everything* also includes recollections from friends, colleagues and many of those she photographed. Mark's own thoughts reveal doubts and insecurities, her ideas about the individuals and topics she photographed, as well as the challenges of the business of photography.

– *Tony Sutton*



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Tom Engelhardt

Voting for the apocalypse

Donald Trump is our very own firenado. Four more years of him will consign us to a Hell on Earth of a sort still only faintly imaginable today

It was August 2017 and Donald Trump had not yet warmed up to Kim Jong-un, North Korea's portly dictator. In fact, in typical Trumpian fashion, he was pissed at the Korean leader and, no less typically, he lashed out verbally, threatening that country with a literal hell on Earth. As he put it, "They will be met with fire and fury like the world has never seen". And then, just to make his point more personally, he complained about Kim himself, "He has been very threatening beyond a normal state".

Only a year and a half later, our asteroidal president would, of course, say of that same man, "We fell in love". Still, that threat by an American leader to – it was obvious – launch a nuclear strike for the first time since Hiroshima and Nagasaki were nearly obliterated in August 1945 was memorable. The phrase would, in fact, become the title of a 2018 bestselling book, *Fire and Fury: Inside the Trump White House*, by journalist Michael Wolff. Two years later, amid so many other threatening phrases from this president, "fire and fury" has, however, been left

in history's dustbin, largely forgotten by the world.

Too bad, since it seems so much more relevant now that California, Oregon, and Washington, not to speak of a Southwest already officially in a "megadrought", have experienced the sort of apocalyptic fire and fury (and heat and smoke) that has turned daytime skies an eerie nighttime orange (or yellow or even purple, claims a friend of mine living in the San Francisco Bay Area). We're talking about a fire and fury that's forced cars to put on their headlights at noon; destroyed towns (leaving only armed right-wing militants behind amid the flames to await imagined Anti-fa looters); burned millions of acres of land, putting hundreds of thousands of Americans under evacuation orders; turned startling numbers of citizens into refugees under pandemic conditions; and crept toward suburbs and cities, imperilling the world as we've known it.

In the wake of the hottest summer on record in the Northern

Hemisphere, we are, in other words, talking about the sort of apocalyptic conditions that the president undoubtedly had in mind for North Korea back in 2017, but not even faintly for the US of A; we're talking, that is, about a burning season the likes of which no one in the West has ever seen before, a torching linked to the overheating of this planet thanks to the release of fossil-fuel-produced greenhouse gasses in ever greater quantities. In fact, as Washington Governor Jay Inslee pointed out recently, we shouldn't even be talking about "wildfires" anymore, but about "climate fires" whose intensity has already outpaced by years the predictions of most climate scientists. (Or, as Inslee put it, "This is not an act of God. This has happened because we have changed the climate of the state of Washington in dramatic ways".)

Significant hunks of the American West have now been transformed into the natural equivalent of furnaces, with fires even reaching the suburban edges of Portland, Oregon (which, for days, had the worst air quality of any



FIERY FATE: A thick orange haze created by ash and smoke from wildfires hovers above San Francisco on September 9 during record wildfires in California.

major urban area on the planet), and promising a future in which cities will undoubtedly be swept up in such conflagrations, too. Admittedly, Donald Trump didn't threaten to launch "fire and fury like the world has never seen" against Portland (though he did send federal agents there to snatch peaceful protesters off its streets and continues to insult and threaten that city's mayor). If anything, as the fires scorched those states to a crisp, he did his best to avoid the subject of the burning West, as in these years more generally he's largely treated climate change (that "hoax") like ... well, a pandemic that should be ignored while America stayed "open".

And it's not a subject he's been

grilled on much either, not until recently when Western governors began laying into him over his stance on climate change. To offer just one example, as far as I can tell, Bob Woodward, the *Washington Post* editor and court chronicler of presidents who, for months, had unparalleled access to Trump and grilled him on so many subjects, never bothered to ask him about the most important, most dystopian, most apocalyptic future Americans face.

Mainstream Democrats didn't do much better on the subject while those fires were building to a crescendo until Joe Biden finally called the president a "climate arsonist". He added, aptly

enough, "If you give a climate arsonist four more years in the White House, why would anyone be surprised if we have more of America ablaze?"

There's no question that, at the beck and call of the fossil-fuel industry, Donald Trump and his demonic crew have worked without qualms or remorse to ensure that this would be a fiery and furious America. Freeing that industry of restrictions of every sort, withdrawing from the Paris climate accord, opening up yet more areas for oil drilling, wiping out environmental safeguards, and even (at the very moment when the West was burning) appointing a climate-science denier to a top position at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration,

the president and his crew proved themselves to be pyromaniacs of the first order.

Of course, the heating of this planet has been intensifying for decades now. (Don't forget, for instance, that Barack Obama presided over a US fracking boom that left people referring to us as "Saudi America.") Still, this president and his top officials have put remarkable energy (so to speak) into releasing yet more carbon dioxide and methane into the atmosphere. And here's the strange thing: they made it deep into the present apocalyptic moment in the West without – Greta Thunberg and climate change protesters aside – being held faintly accountable for their urge to fuel the greatest danger humanity faces other than nuclear weapons. In fact, as is increasingly obvious from the torching of the West, what we're beginning to experience is a slow-motion version of the nuclear apocalypse that Trump once threatened to loose on North Korea.

In an all-too-literal fashion, The Donald is indeed proving to be history's "fire and fury" president.

And don't for a moment think that there was no warning about the over-the-top burning now underway in this country. After all, in 2019, parts of Australia were singed to a crisp in a way never before seen, killing at least 25 humans and possibly more than a billion animals. And that country, too, was headed by a climate-change denier, a man who once brought a piece of coal to parliament and handed it around while soothingly telling other legislators, "Don't be afraid, don't

Even in 2016, it should have been obvious enough that a vote for Donald Trump was a vote for the apocalypse

be scared". In addition, in recent years, the Arctic (of all places) has been smoking and burning in an unprecedented fashion, heating its permafrost and releasing staggering amounts of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. Oh, and this June, the temperature in a small town in Siberia crossed the 100-degree mark for the first time.

By the way, Russia, too, is run by a leader who until recently was a climate denier. I mean, what is it about the urge of so many of us in such a crisis to support those dedicated to quite literally destroying this planet as a livable place for... well, us? (Hey there, Jair Bolsonaro!)

An almost unimaginable near-half-century ago on a different planet, I lived in San Francisco. I can still remember the fog rolling in daily, even during summer in one of the coolest, breeziest cities around. Not this year, though. On September 6, for instance, the temperature there broke 100 degrees, "crushing" the previous record for that day. In Berkeley, across the Bay, where I also once lived long, long ago, it hit 110. As a heat wave swept the state (and the West), temperatures near Los Angeles soared to a record-break-

ing 121 degrees (almost challenging overheated Baghdad, Iraq, this year), while reaching 130 degrees in the aptly named Death Valley – and that's just to start down a list of soaring temperatures across the West from the Canadian to the Mexican borders.

As those fires filled the skies with smoke and ash, turning day into the eeriest of nights, a smoke cloud the likes of which had never before been seen appeared over the coastal West. Meanwhile, fire-nadoes were spotted and the ash-filled air threatened terrible things for health. As has been true for the last 46 years, I'm thousands of miles away from my old Bay Area haunts. Still, I regularly check in with friends and *Tom-Dispatch* authors on that coast, some aged like me and locked in their homes lest the smoke and ash, the air from hell, do them in. Meanwhile, their cars are packed to go, their evacuation checklists ready.

My heart goes out to them and, really, to all of us (and, above all, to those to whom we oldsters will be leaving such a blazing, tumultuous world).

Sadly, among the endless scandals and horrors of the Trump era, the greatest one by far scandalised all too few for all too long among those who officially matter on this beleaguered planet of ours. Even in 2016, it should have been obvious enough that a vote for Donald Trump was a vote for the apocalypse.

Give him credit, though. He made no secret of that fact or that his presidency would be a fossil-fuelled nightmare. It was obvious even then that he, not climate change, was the "hoax" and that

this planet would suffer in unique ways from his (ad)ministrations.

And in every way imaginable, Donald Trump delivered as promised. He's been uniquely fiery and furious. In his own fashion, he's also been a man of his word. He's already brought "fire and fury" to this country in so many ways and, if he has anything to say about it, he's just gotten started.

Don't doubt for a second that, should he be losing on November 3 (or beyond, given the mail-in vote to come), he'll declare electoral fraud and balk at leaving the White House. Don't doubt for a second that he'd be happy to torch that very building and whatever, at this point, is left of the American system with it before he saw himself "lose".

Since he is, in his own fashion, a parody of everything: a politi-

Think of Donald Trump as the president from hell and here I mean a literal hell

cian, a Republican, an autocrat, even a human being, he sums up in some extreme (if eerily satiric) fashion human efforts to destroy our way of life in these years. In truth, fiery and furiously fuelled, he's a historic cloud of smoke and ash over us all.

By his very nature, to use those 2017 nuclear words of his, he is "threatening beyond a normal state". Think of him as the presi-

dent from hell and here I mean a literal hell. Four more years of him, his crew, and the fossil-fuelled criminals running the major oil, gas, and coal companies who are riding his coattails into profit heaven and planetary misery are the cast of a play, both comedy and tragedy, that none of us should have to sit through. He's our very own firenado and – it's not complicated – four more years of him will consign us to a hell on Earth of a sort still only faintly imaginable today. **CT**

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ART NOUVEAU
BEAUTY:
Belgrade's
Hotel Moskova.
Its architect,
also designed
the Parliament
Building, just a
few blocks away.

Linh Dinh

Reflections on Belgrade's architecture of cruelty

I'd rather dwell in a quaint and quirky hovel than any heroic edifice

There's a brisk wind this morning. Summer is almost done. On Belgrade's Zdravka Čelara, two women are taking their sons to school. Although the boys are old enough to hump their own backpacks, these burdens are slung over their mothers' shoulders. The kids are dressed in cheerful shirts,

pants, socks and shoes, and their moms are similarly colourful, a rebuttal to the grey and beige concrete of nearly all the buildings glowering and glooming over them.

You know you're in Eastern Europe when you see all these monstrous, brutalist blocks that still enclose most citizens. In the US, similar buildings existed to ware-

house welfare blacks, mostly, but nearly all have been torn down. After two miserable decades, the 33-building Pruitt-Igoe in St Louis was dynamited in the 70's. Its architect, Minoru Yamasaki, is best known for the Twin Towers, which were also purposely pulled. What should be his epitaph, I wonder?

On my first visit to NYC in 1979, I

zoomed up to the observation deck of the World Trade Center. It was astonishing to look down on such a thicket of lesser skyscrapers. I felt like Superman. With daily access to such a view, the novelty would wear off, I'm sure, and be overridden by more practical matters, such as the time needed to ride the elevators up and down. Still, a worker there could clock out each evening. How many of us would care to live on, say, the 88th floor of any building?

Towards Midtown, in the hazy distance, were some of the most iconic and enduring NYC buildings, though Alfred Barr, MoMA's first director, felt nothing but contempt for them, "Romanesque, Mayan, Assyrian, Renaissance, Aztec, Gothic and especially Modernistic—everything from the stainless steel gargoyles of the Chrysler Building to the fantastic mooring mast atop the Empire State. No wonder that some of us who have been appalled by this chaos turn with the utmost interest and expectancy to the International Style".

Only unadorned boxes are kosher, and the best ones are the square dicks, sodomising God. Navel gazing centre of the universe, New York had twin cocks.

There should never be an international style of anything, least of all in architecture, for buildings everywhere emerge from the local climate, then are refined and embellished down millennia through habits, traditions and individual quirks, as defined by the natives. Peasants or workers from any village are already distinct, much less internationally, so whenever you hear of a one-size-fit-all, inter-

In summer, you're baked into a Nubian sheen, and in winter an Arctic gale is liable to hurl you into the frozen void

national solution, there's bound to be a strait jacket, if not a gulag, just beyond the red horizon.

On two separate days, I walked for several hours through New Belgrade. A planned development, New Belgrade is a Socialist showcase featuring monumental buildings, vast lawns and wide boulevards, everything made to impress, especially in photos. To live there is another matter.

New Belgrade has few shade-giving trees, for these would obstruct its grand vistas. Its six-laned avenues are made wider by ample trolley track medians, so just crossing is a pain in the Socialist ass. In summer, you're baked into a Nubian sheen halfway, and in winter an Arctic gale is liable to hurl you up into the frozen void, so that you're lost forever, just like Kafka's bucket rider.

Acres of empty lawns surround the massive Palace of the Federation (now renamed Palace of Serbia). Although there are trees, no one relaxes under them, for the landscaping is so standoffish. Fountains gush from a huge rectangular pool, quite pointlessly, really, for no one's looking.

Under an unforgiving sun, a sweating boy pedalled his tricycle over the scorching flagstones. On this afternoon, he and his grandma

were the only ones at this charmless civic plaza. Soon enough, the heat and glare chased them away.

The only crowds I saw in New Belgrade were disembarked bus riders flocking to American styled shopping centres, Delta City and Ušće. You know you've erected a dystopia when soulless malls become cherished oases of pleasure, relaxation and sociability. If that sounds like vast swaths of America also, it's because we're only talking about degrees here. You've been international styled, buddy. Feeling ridiculous, bipeds blunder through dead spaces.

Crossing into Zemun, there's the Hotel Jugoslavija, which looks, I swear, just like the Palace of the Federation. With the International Style, everything must be blocky, flat, unadorned, hard and angular. Vehemently masculine, it's unleavened by any female beauty or softness. Socialism in concrete.

Meant to impress, Hotel Jugoslavija hosted Queen Elizabeth II, Nixon, Carter, Neil Armstrong and Tina Turner, etc., but now, only penny-pinching suckers check in, only to be thoroughly pissed into leaving bitchy reviews on TripAdvisor. It's old, you say, but the Hotel Moskova is even more ancient, yet thanks to its Art Nouveau beauty and sensible location, the latter can still pack them in, at top prices.

With its steep roof, spires, turrets, garlands, statues, reliefs, various sized windows and well-tuned colour scheme of viridian, beige, burnt umber and gold, the Hotel Moskova invites endless admiration. The same architect, Jovan Ilkić, also designed the Parliament Building, a few blocks away. It is solemn, stately and appropriately imposing, because form does fol-

low function, no kidding. Although this is a key dictum of the International Style, it's worse at it than every other architectural tendency in history.

At the Hotel Jugoslavija, I asked if there was a bar onsite, but the only two options were the Intergalactic Diner, a shrine to America with American rhythm and blues and classic rock playing nonstop, and a nondescript tavern outback. Completely empty, it was like an airport pub without the takeoffs, landings or incipient escape to amuse you. Next door, the Caffe Loža had a mural of George Washington resigning his commission. Gravelly Tom Petty blared. Here, too, one could flee an apotheosis of Socialism by ducking into a sham and cartoony America.

In a 2018 *New Yorker* article, Justin McGuirk has an entirely different take, “Strolling the avenues of New Belgrade, with its ranks of concrete tower blocks, it was not the architecture that drew my attention at first. It was my sense of comfort – the prevailing air of normality. In most of the mass-housing projects I have visited, whether in Europe, South America, New York, or Moscow, one is likely to be aware of one of two things: class or neglect (and often both). There were no class distinctions in New Belgrade because this was not social housing; it was just housing”.

Comfort, he says. Comfort! Clearly, we disagree.

McGuirk doesn't just love Brutalism for its “heft and material honesty”, but also for its association with “social democracy”. Not Communism, mind you. Sadly, America never quite embraced

Completely empty, it was like an airport pub without the takeoffs, landings or incipient escape to amuse you

Brutalism. There is time. McGuirk laments, “Many of the heroic housing projects in the West became ghettoised, or were left to deteriorate – some classics have been demolished”.

Concrete apartments suspended in air sure beat kitschy bourgeois dwellings. McGuirk, “I'll always remember the mother of a friend from Sarajevo visiting her daughter in London and being relieved to find her living in a social-housing tower block, and not one of those poky Victorian houses – the exact inverse of London snobbery.”

Yugoslavia's dictator for 35 years had at least 34 residences. Almost none of his villas, castles, palaces, seaside manors and mountainous hunting lodges were in the International Style. A man of taste, elegance and class, Tito wasn't crazy.

From inside the 14 trolley, I can see the three towers of Eastern City Gate jutting on the horizon. There are no other high-rises. Walking towards it, I pass all sorts of housing. None is as imposing as the Eastern City Gate, and for this reason all seem more livable, especially the single houses that pre-date Socialism. To each his own, but I'd rather dwell in a quaint and quirky hovel than any heroic edi-

fice, especially if it's collective.

Since 2013, concrete chunks of up to 130 pounds have hurled themselves from the 23-story Eastern City Gate, but thankfully, these insensate suicides have killed no one on the ground. Though mindless, even concrete has gotten tired of being brutal.

In *Living Machines – Bauhaus Architecture as Sexual Ideology*, E. Michael Jones recounts a 1990 visit to the Projects on the South Side of Chicago, “The doorless, graffiti-covered stairwell exudes menace. The turns are all blind; the ‘chaste’ (a favourite word of the Bauhaus apologists) geometry of the modern building is covered with the palimpsest of underclass rage and despair”.

In *From Bauhaus to Our House*, Tom Wolfe describes the Pruitt-Igoe, “On each floor there were covered walkways, in keeping with Corbu's idea of ‘streets in the air’. Since there was no other place in the project in which to sin in public, whatever might ordinarily have taken place in bars, brothels, social clubs, pool halls, amusement arcades, general stores, corncribs, rutabaga patches, hayricks, barn stalls, now took place in the streets in the air. Corbu's boulevards made Hogarth's Gin Lane look like the oceanside street of dreams in Southampton, New York”.

Entering Eastern CityGate, I encounter graffiti and some vandalism, sure enough, but the hallways are clean, though gloomy. In front of a few doors, there are potted plants. Serbs are making the best of their situations, it's clear.

My friend Novak comments, “Talking to people who live in these high-rises, I do hear complaints regarding construction



NEW BELGRADE: "A Socialist showcase featuring monumental buildings, vast lawns and wide boulevards, everything made to impress, especially in photos. To live there is another matter".

and maintenance, but most have developed a sense of pride, of belonging to Block 45, Block 70 or The Pyramid, etc. Maybe ‘sour grapes’, but when people hear where I live, many will say, ‘I could never live there’, then they’ll rattle off some reasons (air and noise pollution, no parking...), while conveniently forgetting their small room size, low ceiling height and quality of construction...”

Novak’s address must be one of the most desirable in all of Belgrade. Republic Square is visible from his front door. Most of the city’s best restaurants and bars are a quick stroll away. Drunk, Novak can fall down and practically land on his own bed. Most importantly, Novak is cradled within the richest part of his hometown, historically,

culturally and artistically. Having lived many places, including in New York and Paris, he’s chosen to come back here.

The 20th-century gave us world wars, atomic bombs, gulags, political correctness, napalm, canned music, Barbara Streisand, laugh tracks, American cheese, Israel and the absolutely shittiest, most inhumane architecture ever, and for this, we can thank Walter Gropius, above all.

During World War I, a beautiful traditional building collapsed on Gropius the soldier, but the man survived to take his revenge on architecture, civilisation and mankind. We’re just one brick away from deliverance, but alas, concrete happens.

Abutting New Belgrade is Ze-

mun, a charming town with a relatively intact historical centre. There are modest yet dignified Orthodox and Catholic churches, plus a monastery. Its pedestrian centre is always festive. Although absorbed into the capital in 1934, Zemun retains its distinctiveness, and that’s why proud locals insist they’re from Zemun, and not Belgrade, and especially, God forbid, New Belgrade.

Walking from one to the other is like re-entering the sensual, female and home. It’s high time we all go home. **CT**

Linh Dinh's latest book is Postcards from the End of America. He maintains a photoblog at www.linhdinhphotos.blogspot.com.

Conn Hallinan

Pandemic disaster for oil producers

The neo-liberal model of low taxes, privatisation, and reliance on the free market has shown its incompetence in the face of a natural disaster

During the reign of Emperor Justinian I (527-565 AD), a mysterious plague spread out of the Nile Valley to Constantinople and finished off the Roman Empire. Appearing first in China and North India, the “Black Death” (*Yersinia pestis*) radiated throughout the Mediterranean and into Northern Europe, killing as many as half the world’s then population of 50-million people.

Covid-19 is not the Black Death, but its impact may be civilisational, weakening the mighty, raising up the modest, and rearranging axes of power across the globe.

The Middle East is a case in point. Since the end of World War II, the wealth of the Persian Gulf monarchies – Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Kuwait and Qatar – has overturned the traditional centres of power that dominated the region for millennia: Turkey, Egypt and Persia. While those civilisations were built on agriculture, industry and trade, the monarchs were fabulously wealthy simply because they sat on a sea of oil.

The monarchies – Saudi Ara-

bia in particular – have used that wealth to overthrow governments, silence internal dissent, and sponsor a version of Islam that has spawned terrorists from the Caucasus to the Philippines.

Now they are in trouble.

The Saudi owned oil company, Aramco, just saw its quarterly earnings fall from \$24.7-billion to \$6.6-billion, a more than 73 percent drop from a year ago.

Not all the slump is due to the pandemic recession. Over the past eight years, Arab oil producers have seen annual revenues decline from \$1-trillion to \$300-billion, reflecting a shift away from hydrocarbons toward renewable energy. But Covid-19 has accelerated that trend.

For countries like Saudi Arabia, this is an existential problem. The country has a growing population, much of it unemployed and young – 70 percent of Saudis are under 30. So far, the royalty has kept a lid on things by handing out cash and make-work jobs, but the drop in revenues is making that more difficult. The Kingdom – as well as the UAE – has hefty financial

reserves, but that money will not last forever.

In the Saudi case, a series of economic and political blunders have worsened the crisis. Riyadh is locked into an expensive military stalemate in Yemen, while also trying to diversify the country’s economy. Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman, is pushing a \$500-billion Red Sea mega project to build a new city, Neom, that will supposedly attract industry, technology and investment.

However, the plan has drawn little outside money, because investors are spooked by the Crown Prince’s aggressive foreign policy and the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi. The Saudis are borrowing up to \$12-billion just to pay Aramco dividends of \$75-billion a year.

The oil crisis has spread to Middle Eastern countries that rely on the monarchs for investments, aid and jobs for their young. Cairo sends 2.5-million Egyptians to work in the Gulf states, and countries like Lebanon provide financial services and consumer goods.

Lebanon is now imploding, Egypt is piling up massive debts, and Iraq can’t pay its bills because

oil is stuck at around \$46 a barrel. Saudi Arabia needs a price of at least \$95 a barrel to meet its budgetary needs and to feed the appetites of its royals.

When the pandemic ends, oil prices will rise, but are unlikely to reach the levels they did in the early 2000s when they averaged \$100 a barrel. Oil prices have been low ever since Saudi Arabia's ill-conceived attempt to drive out smaller competitors and re-take its former market share.

In 2014, Riyadh deliberately drove down the price of oil to hurt smaller competitors and throttle expensive Arctic drilling projects. But when China's economy slowed, demand for oil fell, and the price has never recovered.

Of the top 10 oil producers in the world, five are in the Middle East: Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran, the UAE and Kuwait. All are in dire straits, although in Iran's case this is exacerbated by US sanctions. With the exception of Iraq – where massive demonstrations have shaken the country's leadership – most of those countries have been politically quiet. In the case of the monarchies, of course, it is hard to judge the level of dissatisfaction because they do not tolerate dissent.

But how long will the royals be able to keep the lid on? "It is a transformation that has speeded up by the corona virus cataclysm", says Middle East expert Patrick Cockburn, "and will radically change the politics of the Middle East".

There is no region untouched by the current crisis. With the exception of the presidents of Brazil and the US, most world leaders have concluded that climate change is a reality and that hydrocarbons are the major culprit. Even when the

Of the top 10 oil producers in the world, five are in the Middle East. All of them are in dire straits

pandemic eases, oil use will continue to decline.

The virus has exposed the fault lines among the mighty. The US has the largest economy in the world and is the greatest military power on the globe, yet it collapsed in the face of Covid-19. With 4 percent of the world's population the United States accounts for 22 percent of the pandemic's fatalities.

The US is not alone. The United Kingdom has more than 40,000 dead, and its economy has plummeted 9 percent. In contrast, Bangladesh, the world's most crowded country, with twice Great Britain's population, has around 4,000 deaths and its economy has contracted by only 1.9 percent.

Turkey, Vietnam, Cuba and Nigeria all have far better records fighting the virus than Great Britain and the European Union. Partly this is because Europe's population is older. While Europe's average age is 43, Africa's is 19. Young people infected with corona virus generally have better outcomes than older people, but age doesn't fully explain the differences.

While Turkey developed sophisticated tracking methods to monitor measles, and Nigeria did the same for Ebola, the US and

United Kingdom were systematically starving or dismantling public health programmes. Instead of stockpiling supplies to deal with a pandemic, Europe and the US relied on countries like China to quickly supply things like personal protection equipment on an "as needed" basis, because it was cheaper than producing their own or paying for storage and maintenance. But "need" doesn't work during a worldwide pandemic. China had its own health crisis to deal with. The lag time between the appearance of the virus and obtaining the tools to fight it is directly responsible for the wave of deaths among medical workers and first responders. And while the Chinese economy has re-bounded – enough to tick the price of oil slightly upwards – the US, Great Britain and the EU are mired in what promises to be a painful recession.

The neo-liberal model of low taxes, privatisation of public resources and reliance on the free market has demonstrated its incompetence in the face of a natural disaster. The relationship between wealth and favourable outcomes only works when that wealth is invested in the many, not the few.

The Plague of Justinian destroyed the Roman Empire. The pandemic is not likely to do that to the United States. But it has exposed the fault lines and structural weaknesses that wealth papers over – until something like Covid-19 comes along to shake the glitter off the system. **CT**

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

C.J. Hopkins

The war on Populism: The Final Act

Grab your popcorn, or your AR-15, and your mask, or full-body anti-virus bubble suit, and sit back and enjoy the show!

So, it appears the War on Populism is building toward an exciting climax. All the proper pieces are in place for a Class-A GloboCap colour revolution, and maybe even civil war. You got your unauthorised Putin-Nazi president, your imaginary apocalyptic pandemic, your violent identitarian civil unrest, your heavily-armed politically-polarised populace, your ominous rumblings from military quarters ... you couldn't really ask for much more.

OK, the plot is pretty obvious by now (as it is in all big-budget action spectacles, which is essentially what colour revolutions are), but that won't spoil our viewing experience. The fun isn't in guessing what is going to happen. Everybody knows what's going to happen. The fun is in watching Bruce, or Sigourney, or "the moderate rebels", or the GloboCap "Resistance", take down the monster, or the terrorists, or Hitler, and save the world,

or democracy, or whatever.

The show-runners at GloboCap understand this, and they are sticking to the classic Act III formula (ie, the one they teach in all those scriptwriting seminars, which, full disclosure, I teach a few of those). They've been running the War on Populism by the numbers since the very beginning. I'm going to break that down in just a moment, act by act, plot point by plot point, but, first, let's quickly cover the basics.

The first thing every big Hollywood action picture (or GloboCap colour revolution) needs is a solid logline to build the plot around. The logline shows us: 1) our protagonist, 2) what our protagonist is trying to do, and 3) our antagonist or antagonistic force.

For example, here's one everyone will recognise: "A computer hacker learns from mysterious rebels about the true nature of his reality and his role in the war against its controllers".



In our case, the logline writes itself: "After America is taken over by a Russian-backed Hitlerian dictator, the forces of democracy unite to depose the tyrant and save the free world".

Donald Trump is our antagonist, of course. And what an antagonist he has been! As the

deep-state spooks and the corporate media have been relentlessly repeating for the last four years, the man is both a Russian-backed traitor and literally the resurrection of Hitler! In terms of bad-

dies, it doesn't get any better.

It goes without saying that our protagonist is GloboCap (ie, the global capitalist empire), or "democracy", as it is known in the entertainment business.

Now, we're in the middle of Act III already, and, as in every big-budget action movie, our protagonist suffered a series of mounting losses all throughout Act II, and the baddie was mostly driving the action. Now it's time for the Final Push, but, before all the action gets underway, here's a quick recap of those previous acts.

Ready? All right, here we go ...

Act I

(status quo/inciting incident)

There democracy (ie, GloboCap) was, peacefully operating its de facto global capitalist empire like a normal global hegemon (ie, destabilising, restructuring, and privatising everything it hadn't already destabilised and privatised, and OK, occasionally murdering, torturing, and otherwise mercilessly oppressing people), when out of nowhere it was viciously attacked by Donald Trump and his Putin-Nazi "populists", who stole the 2016 election from Clinton with those insidious Facebook ads. (For you writers, this was the Inciting Incident.)

(new situation/predicament/lock-in)

GloboCap did not take this well. The deep state and the corporate media started shrieking about a coming "Age of Darkness", "The death of

globalisation at the hands of white supremacy", "racial Orwellianism", "Zionist antisemitism", the "Bottomless Pit of Fascism", and so on. Liberals festooned themselves with safety pins and went out looking for minorities to hide in their attics throughout the occupation. According to GloboCap, every "populist" that voted for Trump (or just refused to vote for Clinton) was a genocidal white supremacist undeserving of either empathy or mercy. Somewhere in there, the "Resistance" was born. (This is the plot point known as the Lock-In, where the protagonist commits to the struggle ahead.)

Act II (a)

(progress/obstacles)

As is traditional at the opening of Act II, things were looking promising for GloboCap. The "Resistance" staged those pink pussyhat protests, and the corporate media were pumping out Russia and Hitler propaganda like a Goebbelsian piano. Yes, there were obstacles, but the "Resistance" was growing. And then, in May of 2017, special counsel Robert Mueller was appointed, and "Russiagate" was officially launched. It appeared that Donald Trump's days were numbered!

(rising action/first culmination)

But, no, it was never going to be that easy. (If it was, feature films would be less than an hour long, not to mention incredibly boring.) There was plenty of action (and an endless series of "bombshells") throughout the ensuing two years, but by the end of March 2019, "Russiagate" had blown up in GloboCap's face. "Populism" was still on the rise! It was time for GloboCap to get

Art: Ruslan Romanchik / 123RF.com

serious. (This was the classic first culmination, sometimes known as The Point of No Return.)

Act II (b)

*(complications/subplots/
higher stakes)*

In the aftermath of the “Rus-siagate” fiasco, the GloboCap “Resistance” flailed around for a while. An assortment of ridiculous subplots unfolded ... Obstruction-gate, Ukrainegate, Pornstargate (and I’m probably forgetting some “gates”), white-supremacist non-terrorist terrorism, brain-devouring Russian-Cubano crickets, Russian spy whales, and other such nonsense. Meanwhile, the forces of “populism” were running amok all across the planet. The *gilets jaunes* were on the verge of taking down Macron in France, and gangs of neo-nationalist boneheads had launched a series of frontal assaults on Portlandia, GloboCap Anti-Fascist HQ, which Antifa was barely holding off.

*(second culmination/major
setback)*

All wasn’t totally lost, however. GloboCap sprang back into action, successfully Hitlerising Jeremy Corbyn, the leader of leftist “populism”, and thus preventing the mass exodus of Jews from Great Britain. And the US elections were on the horizon. Trump was still Russian-agent Hitler, after all, so he wasn’t going to be too hard to beat. All that GloboCap had to do was put forth a viable Democratic candidate, then let the corporate media do their thing. OK, first, they had to do Bernie Sanders (because he was another “populist” figure-head, and the point of the entire

GloboCap Hitlerised Jeremy Corbyn, thus preventing the mass exodus of Jews from Great Britain

War on Populism has been to crush the “populist” resistance to global capitalism from both the Left and the Right), but the DNC made short work of that.

So, everything was looking hunky-dory until – and you screenwriters saw this coming, didn’t you? – the pivotal plot-point at the end of Act II, The Major Setback, or The Dark Night of the Soul, when all seems lost for our protagonist.

Yes, implausible as it probably still seems, the Democratic Party nominated Joe Biden, a clearly cognitively-compromised person who literally sucked his wife’s fingers on camera and who can’t get through a two-minute speech without totally losing his train of thought and babbling non-sequitural gibberish.

Exactly why they did this will be debated forever, but, obviously, Biden was not GloboCap’s first choice. The man is as inspiring as a head of lettuce. (There is an actual campaign group called “Settle for Biden!”) GloboCap was now staring down the barrel of certain swing-voter death. And as if things weren’t already dire enough, the “populists” rolled out a catchy new slogan ... “TRUMP 2020, BECAUSE FUCK YOU AGAIN!”

Act III

So, all right, this is part where Neo orders up “guns ... lots of guns”. Which is exactly what our friends at GloboCap did. The time for playing grab-ass was over. Faced with four more years of Trump and this “populist” rebellion against global capitalism and its increasingly insufferable woke ideology, the entire global capitalist machine went full-totalitarian all at once. Suddenly, a rather undeadly virus (as far as deadly pestilences go) became the excuse for GloboCap to lock down most of humanity for months, destroy the economy, unleash the goon squads, terrorise everyone with hysterical propaganda, and otherwise remake society into a global totalitarian police state.

And that wasn’t all ... no, far from it. GloboCap was just getting started. Having terrorised the masses into a state of anus-puckering paranoia over an imaginary apocalyptic plague and forced everyone to perform a variety of humiliating ideological-compliance rituals, they unleashed the identitarian civil unrest. Because what would a colour revolution be without rioting, looting, wanton destruction, clouds of tear gas, robocops, and GloboCap-sponsored “moderate rebels” and “pro-regime forces” shooting each other down in the streets on television? (In an homage to Orwell’s Ministry of Truth, the corporate media, with totally straight faces, have been describing this rioting as “mostly peaceful.”)

That brings us up to speed, I

think. The rest of Act III should be pretty exciting, despite the fact that the outcome is certain. One way or another, Trump is history. Or do you seriously believe that GloboCap is going to allow him to serve another four years? Not that Trump is an actual threat to them. As I have said repeatedly over the past four years, Donald Trump is not a populist. Donald Trump is a narcissistic ass clown who is playing president to feed his ego. He is not a threat to global capitalism, but the people who elected him president are. In order to teach these people a lesson, GloboCap needs to make an example of Trump. Odds are, it's not going to be pretty.

See, they have him between a rock and a hard place. As CNN's Fareed Zakaria explains, on election night, Trump will appear to have won (because the Democrats will all be mailing in their votes due to the apocalyptic plague), but later, once the mail-in votes are all counted, which may take weeks or even months, it will turn out that Biden really won. But, by then, it won't matter who really won, because one of two scenarios will have already played out.

In Scenario Number One, Trump declares victory before the mail-in votes have been tallied and is "removed from office" for "attempting a coup". In Scenario Number Two, he doesn't declare victory, and the country enters a state of limbo, which the Democrats will prolong as long as possible. Either way, rioting breaks out. Serious rioting ... not "peaceful" rioting. Rioting that

Does it sound like GloboCap is bluffing? Because it doesn't sound like that to me

makes the "BLM protests" we have witnessed so far look like a game of touch football.

And this is where the US military (or the military-industrial complex) comes in. I'll leave you with just a few of the many ominous headlines that GloboCap has been generating:

"This Election Has Become Dangerous for the US Military" – *Foreign Policy*.

"Al Gore suggests military will remove Trump from office if he won't concede on election night" – Fox News

"Former ambassador warns of election violence" – the *Guardian*.

"All Enemies, Foreign and Domestic": An Open Letter to Gen. Milley ("If the commander in chief attempts to ignore the election's results, you will face a choice.)" – *Defense One*.

"Is Trump Planning a Coup d'État?" – the *Nation*.

"Trump could refuse to concede" – *Washington Post*.

"What happens if Trump loses but refuses to concede?" – *Financial Times*.

"White Supremacists, Domestic Terrorists Pose Biggest Threat Of 'Lethal Violence' This Election, DHS Assessment Finds" – *Forbes*.

"Trump's Attacks Put Military In Presidential Campaign

Minefield" – NPR.

"Trump's Election Delay Threat Is a Coup in the Making" – *Common Dreams*.

"What If Trump Won't Leave?" – the *Intercept*.

"How to Plan a Coup" – *Bill Moyers on Democracy*.

"It can happen here: A Trump election coup?" – *Wall Street International Magazine*.

"Whose America Is It?" – the *New York Times*

Does it sound like GloboCap is bluffing? Because it doesn't sound like that to me. I could be totally wrong, of course, and just letting my imagination run away with itself, but if I were back home in the USA, instead of here in Berlin, I wouldn't bet on it.

In any event, whatever is coming, whether this is the end of the War on Populism or just the beginning of a new, more dramatic phase of it, the next two months are going to be exciting. So, go grab your popcorn, or your AR-15, and your mask, or full-body anti-virus bubble suit (which you might want to have retrofitted with Kevlar), and sit back and enjoy the show! **CT**

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Sam Pizzigati

Ike, the unexpected egalitarian

Former US president Dwight Eisenhower deserves his new memorial. And we deserve the greater economic equality he worked to help achieve

In normal times, the dedication of a new presidential memorial right in the heart of Washington, DC would be much more than fairly big news. Pundits the nation over would find the dedication an irresistible opportunity for pontification about the legacy of the newly honoured national leader.

But we don't live in normal times, and last month's dedication of famed architect Frank Gehry's tribute to Dwight Eisenhower, America's 34th president, is receiving about as much attention as the month's top exposé of Trump administration misbehaviour. In other words, not much attention at all.

A shame. Dwight Eisenhower didn't much bring much flash to the White House. But his eight years in office – starting in January 1953 – played a pivotal role in modern American history. The Republican Eisenhower could have killed the egalitarian gains of the New Deal. Instead, he built upon them.

Try to visualise the lay of America's political land as "Ike" was taking in office early in 1953.

The nation hadn't had a Republican in the White House for 20 years. An entire generation had grown up under presidents Roosevelt and Truman.

Over those years, American life had changed dramatically. Average Americans had made history. Their Depression-era struggles for justice has created the first nation on Earth where the majority of people did not live in poverty, a society where average people could buy their groceries, keep a roof over their heads, and still have income – appreciable income – left over. That had never happened before. Anyplace.

In this new America, the label "middle class" would no longer evoke a narrow professional and small business strata that rested uneasily between the rich above and the poor masses below. The middle class would now be tens of millions of Americans enjoying a security – and a status – that would have been, just a few decades earlier, unimaginable.

"Even in the smallest towns and most isolated areas," *Time* magazine would rhapsodise in 1953, "the US is wearing

a very prosperous, middle-class suit of clothes, and an attitude of relaxation and confidence. People are not growing wealthy, but more of them than ever before are getting along."

US households held \$27-billion in "discretionary" spending power in 1940. In 1953, researchers at the J. Walter Thompson advertising agency would calculate, they had five times as much, \$13-billion for spending on goods and services beyond the necessities of life.

American society was clearly progressing toward ever greater equality. Would that progress continue under Eisenhower? Would his administration accept the basic outlines of the New Deal fiscal state, the high taxes on the incomes of corporations and the wealthy that gave the federal government the wherewithal to fund the programmes that eased working Americans into the emerging new middle class?

No one knew for sure what to expect from the former five-star general, and Eisenhower's entry



TRIBUTE: The new Frank Gehry-designed Dwight W. Eisenhower Memorial , unveiled in Washington, DC, on September 17.

into office would at first give America's stiffly taxed rich reason to be hopefully optimistic. Ike filled his new administration with men of substantial means. The first Eisenhower cabinet, commentators would chuckle, featured "nine millionaires and a plumber" – with the latter the new secretary of labour, a union leader Ike had plucked from the plumbers' union.

But Eisenhower would soon disappoint those wealthy taxpayers eagerly awaiting tax relief from the new Republican president. His first state of the union address would promise only "clarification and simplification" of the tax code, nothing about rate reduction. Eisenhower would continue to give top-bracket tax cuts the cold shoulder throughout his eight years as commander in chief. The federal tax rate on income over \$400,000 remained at 91 percent throughout Ike's two terms in office.

Any cuts in the tax rates on high incomes, Eisenhower believed, would be fiscally irresponsible. The United States had an expensive Cold War to wage. Ike no doubt also had politics on his mind. Harry Truman had won reelection in 1948 railing against the rich and the Republican lawmakers who cut their taxes. Why cut taxes on high incomes and give Democrats another opportunity to make political hay?

But much more than fiscal prudence and political calculation lay behind Ike's determination to keep tax rates on America's wealthiest at New Deal levels. Eisenhower had lived through the social horror of the Great Depression. In 1932, he had watched as jobless veterans amassed in Washington. He had been part of the military operation that evicted those veterans, burned their camp, and ended their Bonus

March protest. The general who directed that operation, Douglas MacArthur, would see the eviction as a triumph over the red hordes. Eisenhower would see only a hard-to-stomach, disgraceful spectacle.

How to avoid that disgrace in the future? Ike would subscribe to the same basic egalitarian world view that so many other thoughtful movers and shakers took from their experience of depression and war. Americans must never again let wealth concentrate and destabilise the nation. And wealth would not start reconcentrating during the Eisenhower years.

In the middle 1950s, as Ike later noted in an autobiography, "the bottom income groups were becoming richer, the rich were paying record taxes, and many from both groups were joining the 'middle class'".

America, Ike would proudly declare, was both levelling up and levelling down.

“We still had our impoverished and our wealthy, but the new prosperity was reducing the relative size of both groups”, Eisenhower explained. “The middle class, as sociologists were pointing out, was becoming the widening band around the country”.

And Ike liked things that way, as he would explain in a 1960 valedictory delivered to the magnates of the US auto industry. We have evolved in the United States, the president would tell his business audience, a socially conscious type of private enterprise that “strives to benefit all the people”.

This emphasis of benefiting all our people, Ike would go on, “was not always so”. But we Americans now rightfully recognise the contribution “public enterprise” can make. In an ever more complex world, we have come to understand that government needs to help the people do “what the people cannot do for themselves”.

With that understanding, Ike would pronounce, has come the historic rise of the great American middle class.

“Other peoples find it hard to believe that an American working man can own his own comfortable home and a car and send his children to well-equipped elementary and high schools and to colleges as well”, Eisenhower told the assembled auto industry leaders. “They fail to realise that he is not the downtrodden, impoverished vassal of whom Karl Marx wrote. He is a self-sustaining, thriving individual, living in dignity and in freedom”.

Unfortunately, Ike would continue, other nations have not yet

America’s mid-century politicians felt little awe for the men of fantastic means in their midst

learned the lessons that Americans have so wisely taken to heart.

“In many countries of the free world private enterprise is greatly different from what we know here”, Eisenhower would explain. “In some, a few families are fabulously wealthy, contribute far less than they should in taxes, and are indifferent to the poverty of the great masses of the people”.

“A country in this situation is fraught with continual instability”, Eisenhower would warn. “It is ripe for revolution”.

Any society that tolerates a “fabulously wealthy”, he would conclude, is asking for trouble.

“Since time began”, Ike reminded his comfortable corporate listeners, “opulence has too often paved for a nation the way to depravity and ultimate destruction”.

That depravity, Eisenhower’s remarks suggested, could also destroy us – if we foolishly chose to let the rich “contribute far less than they should in taxes”.

That would not happen on Ike’s watch. He would not lift a finger to lower the steeply graduated tax rates on high incomes that the New Deal had bequeathed to him. Let the rich grumble. He would not be moved.

America’s mid-century politicians could read the zeitgeist of their age. They felt little awe for the men of fantastic means in their midst. To some, like Dwight Eisenhower, America’s super rich would come across as politically pitiful. In 1954, in a letter to his brother Edgar, Ike candidly shared his assessment of the super rich working to turn his Republican Party into a battering ram against the New Deal legacy.

“Should any political party attempt to abolish social security, unemployment insurance, and eliminate labour laws and farm programs, you would not hear of that party again in our political history”, Ike wrote. “There is a tiny splinter group, of course, that believes you can do these things. Among them are H.L. Hunt (you possibly know his background), a few other Texas oil millionaires, and an occasional politician or business man from other areas. Their number is negligible and they are stupid”.

The deep pockets in that “tiny splinter group” would, in the years after Eisenhower left office, gain awesome influence over America’s political and economic life. Ike would not have approved of the staggeringly unequal nation they ended up creating. None of us should either. **CT**

Sam Pizzigati co-edits *Inequality.org*. Parts of this column have been adopted from his 2012 book, *The Rich Don’t Always Win: The Forgotten Triumph over Plutocracy that Created the American Middle Class, 1900-1970*. Follow him at @Too_Much_Online.

I arrived at the scarred wooden table we call reception, and stared at the woman standing there, arms folded as if she had a shoulder holster under each breast and was about to practice her speed-draw

Catch Your Breath

An Akyl Borubaev story by **Tom Callaghan**



Art: David Anderson /
dandersonillustration.com

Akyl Borubaev, the hard-bitten Inspector of the Bishkek Murder Squad attempts to police the mysterious, unstable, corrupt state of Kyrgyzstan, where everyone lies and no one can be trusted. *A Killing Winter*, the first in the Akyl Borubaev series of crime novels, was called "storytelling of the highest quality" by the *Daily Mail*, and was voted one of the top 40 crime novels of the past five years by the *London Sunday Times*. All four of Tom Callaghan's Borubaev novels are available as eBooks or paperbacks from Amazon – https://www.amazon.co.uk/Tom-Callaghan/e/B00JNEI40C/ref=dp_byline_cont_pop_book_1

"My *babulya's* been murdered".
Not words you ever want to hear, especially when you've put your jacket on, decided to walk home though the park, anything to avoid wearing your mask.

The duty officer called me down to "sort out some woman says her grannie's been done in". Murdered.

That magic word which always brings me down the crumbling concrete stairs from my office. My knees complain about the Bishkek murder rate, but I look on it as necessary exercise. Not to mention the lift having died two years ago. Maybe it had been murdered as well.

I arrived at the scarred wooden table we call reception, and stared at the woman standing there, arms folded as if she had a shoulder holster under each breast and was about to practice her speed-draw. The look on her face made me very relieved she didn't.

She was well worth staring at. Out of my league and my bank account. Long straight black hair, tall and slender, eyes the deep emerald of the finest Chinese jade. An elegant jacket and trousers that murmured Italian fashion house, not Osh bazaar. I was willing to bet there was a latest-model BMW parked outside and the keys were in the designer leather bag hanging from her shoulder.

All of which always spells trouble. A businessman's

The woman stared at me, unblinking. ... “My grandmother has been murdered. And I know who did it”

trophy wife, or a politician’s high-maintenance mistress. Someone with access to the movers and shakers, ministers, perhaps even the president. I might be a senior cop, a Murder Squad Inspector, but that doesn’t mean I’m not little people as far as women like her are concerned. A pout of annoyance and an angry complaint to the right person, and a posting to somewhere remote could be my future.

I nodded to the duty officer, clearly more than happy to let me face the woman’s wrath single-handed.

“*Dobry vecher*. I’m Inspector Borubaev, Murder Squad. What seems to be the trouble?”

The woman stared at me, unblinking. Clearly, civility and titles didn’t impress her.

“My grandmother has been murdered. And I know who did it.”

She’d have had more passion in her voice if someone had lifted her mobile.

“ID please?”

A sigh of impatience, a scrabble through her bag, a smart leather folder with an embossed Prada logo. The photo obviously professionally taken, maybe even retouched to emphasise her cheekbones. Shermatova, Daruna, twenty-three.

“*Spasibo*, Miss Shermatova. Officers are already at the scene?”

“*Myrki*? No, I want someone with experience to make an arrest and make it stick. Not some halfwit peasant.”

Scorn smeared all over her voice. *Myrki* is what we Bishkek sophisticates call people from the villages, innocents who stare at buildings over three storeys high and who’ve never seen a car without scratches, dents or cracked windscreens.

“So the body is where you found it?”

“*Da*.”

I waited. Blood from a stone. Better than blood from a body, I suppose.

“Which is where, exactly?”

I was right about the car being a BMW – sometimes I think I should have been a detective. I opened the passenger door, saw the paper mat for my feet, wondered if she’d have my seat steam-cleaned later. Her fingers tapped the steering wheel with impatience as I made myself comfortable, reclined the seat, adjusted

the belt. I knew we’d get on famously.

She drove with the expected amount of arrogance, plenty of horn, last-second braking, racing car acceleration. No quarter given, not even to *marshrutki* buses, whose drivers practice auditioning for *Death Race 2020: The Movie*.

The car’s ripe new leather scent was overlaid with a hint of nicotine, and I debated lighting a cigarette. She glanced over at my pack, shrugged.

“Smoke if you want, I’m changing cars next week anyway.”

“The ashtray’s full?”

I’ve always thought old jokes get better with repetition, but perhaps I’m wrong. Her glare forced the pack back into my pocket.

We were halfway down Logvinyenko when she slammed on the brakes, spun the wheel, skidded to a halt outside the maternity hospital.

“Your grandmother died here?”

She didn’t reply, got out of the car, started to cross the street without waiting for me. I took out the mask in my pocket, put it on, followed her in.

I’ve been in Soviet-era hospitals before, and if the food doesn’t kill you, depression will. Narrow badly-lit corridors with scuffed floors and grim walls painted a bilious green. The odour of overboiled food, carbolic soap and ancient sweat ingrained into the walls and lingering by iron-grated windows. Imagine one of the asylums where the Kremlin sent its dissidents, and you get the picture.

Finally, we reached a set of double doors. Above them, a hand-lettered banner said ‘RED ZONE’. I pushed one of the doors open and we found ourselves in what had once been a large hall but was now a waiting room for hell.

Three dozen simple iron frame beds filled every available space, so close together the men and women occupying them could reach out and hold hands. A single doctor and two nurses moved from bed to bed, checking temperatures, holding paper cups of water for hands that shook with fever. A few of the luckier patients were connected to ventilators to help regulate their breathing.

I looked over at Daruna Shermatova. As far as I could tell, the room was full of bodies on their final journey to becoming corpses

The noise was overwhelming; staccato coughing, hoarse wheezing that tore lungs apart, the mechanical whirr of machinery, and lying above it all, weeping, curses and prayers.

Puzzled, I looked over at Daruna Shermatova. As far as I could tell, the room was full of bodies on their final journey to becoming corpses.

“Why are we here, Miss Shermatova?”

We threaded our way through the maze of beds, until she reached one, halfway along the far wall. I looked down at the middle-aged man lying there, eyes closed, his chest rising and falling spasmodically, mainly with the help of a ventilator. The rattle of his breathing was weak, irregular, as if about to stop at any moment.

“This was her bed, this was where she was murdered. And they didn’t even have the decency to let her body grow cold here.”

I heard no evidence of sorrow in her voice, only cold anger and the rage of entitlement thwarted.

“I want you to arrest the bitch who killed her.”

I beckoned to the solitary doctor who was helping a patient four beds along. She stared at Shermatova, made her way towards us. Middle-aged, round-faced, with cropped hair greying at the roots. Deep lines of fatigue and stress carved her face into blocks, but her eyes remained alive, alert. A metal badge on her white coat told me her name was Doctor Sultanova.

“You were asked to leave, then escorted out”, the doctor said. “So now you’ve come back with this paid thug. You have no shame, no respect for the sick all around us?”

I showed my ID, held my hands up, the way a referee separates two boxers.

“Doctor, this lady came to the station with a complaint, and I have to investigate it. I’m sure we can settle this very quickly if we all remain calm”.

Clearly, remaining calm wasn’t in Daruna Shermatova’s vocabulary.

“What have you done with her body, *suka*?”

She ignored the finger I pushed in her face, as she and the doctor glared at each other. I adopted the calm, dispassionate voice I use to intimidate people

when I’m questioning them.

“This is a hospital. Be quiet or I’ll arrest you myself, and you can enjoy our no-star hotel for the night.”

“I had your grandmother’s body removed to one of the smaller side wards. If you hadn’t noticed, there’s an emergency and we needed the bed.”

“But her breathing was improving with the ventilator and the drugs I brought”, Shermatova said, her voice growing louder, “You said so yourself. That there was no cause for concern, and to go home”.

The doctor shrugged, drew her hand across her face as if wiping away a deep weariness.

“Nine of my patients have died in the last twenty-four hours. Your grandmother was old, vulnerable. Her condition suddenly deteriorated, her breathing worsened and we were unable to prevent her death”.

I turned to Shermatova, saw tears in her eyes. I couldn’t tell whether they were from sorrow or frustration.

“I can send a pathologist to examine your grandmother’s body”, I said, keeping my voice quiet, “But I really see no evidence to suggest she was murdered”.

Then it was Shermatova’s turn to jab her finger in my face. She pulled her mask away from her mouth.

“So where are the drugs I bought for her? The dexamethasone? The ventilator? Do you have any idea how much they cost? What strings I had to tug in order to find them?”

She was shouting now, flecks of spittle landing on my mask, and I took a step back. Probably pointless if she had the virus, but I’m more comfortable with enemies I can see.

“And the ventilator?”

She pointed at the unconscious figure in the bed as he struggled to breathe.

“I paid for it; so how does he end up with it?”

The doctor stared at her, with something like contempt in her eyes.

“You want it back? With people all around you here who are dying, and whose life it could save?”

I took Daruna Shermatova’s arm, tried to turn her back to the way we entered. But then the clipboard at the foot of the bed caught my eye. I picked it up and

I bundled a protesting Daruna Shermatova out of the ward, along endless bleak corridors and out into the evening

looked at the information on the chart.

“Doctor Sultanova, can you tell me anything about this patient? Why this man in particular is here?”

She paused, looked at me, her gaze unflinching.

“He has the virus As you can see. Like thousands of other people. Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Dungan. And this is a hospital. This is where we treat them, try to save them”.

I put the clipboard back on the bed frame.

“I’m not interested in his ethnicity, doctor, more in his family name”.

She said nothing, continued to give nothing away.

“Vladimir Sultanov”, I said, “Could he possibly be a relative, a brother perhaps, or an uncle?”

Silence.

“It’s very easy for me to find out, you know”, I said, “He’ll have an ID card, papers, an address, relatives who are worried about him. A couple of hours, that’s all it takes for me to find out”.

“My brother”.

“My sympathy”, I said. “He’s very lucky to have a sister who can take care of him”.

I pointed towards the ventilator. “And is that helping him?”

‘He’s stable.’

“And medication? Injections? Dexamethasone?”

The doctor reluctantly nodded. I held out my hand. She reached into her pocket, took out a plastic bag. I opened it, saw plastic vials in a couple of blister packs, handed them back.

I turned to Daruna Shermatova. I could see the anger building in her face, put my finger to my lips to silence her.

“Doctor Sultanova, as I’m sure you realise, I’m going to have to start an investigation into the death of one of your patients, and the immediate transfer of privately-owned equipment and medicine to a member of your family”.

“Put the bitch in handcuffs and drag her out of here”.

I ignored the outburst.

“I’ll want you to make yourself available at an appropriate time, but until then, please carry on with the excellent work you’re doing here”.

I watched as one of the nurses called her over and she turned away. I bundled a protesting Daruna Shermatova out of the ward, along endless bleak corridors and out into the evening.

“You should have arrested her. You don’t realise the shit you’re in. You don’t know who I am”.

I took her handbag, took out the mobile. Top of the range, latest model, designer case. I handed it to her, took her arm as we crossed the road towards her car.

“Go on, call him, whoever he is. Minister? Lawyer? Police chief? I really don’t give a fuck”.

She glared at me, dialled a number.

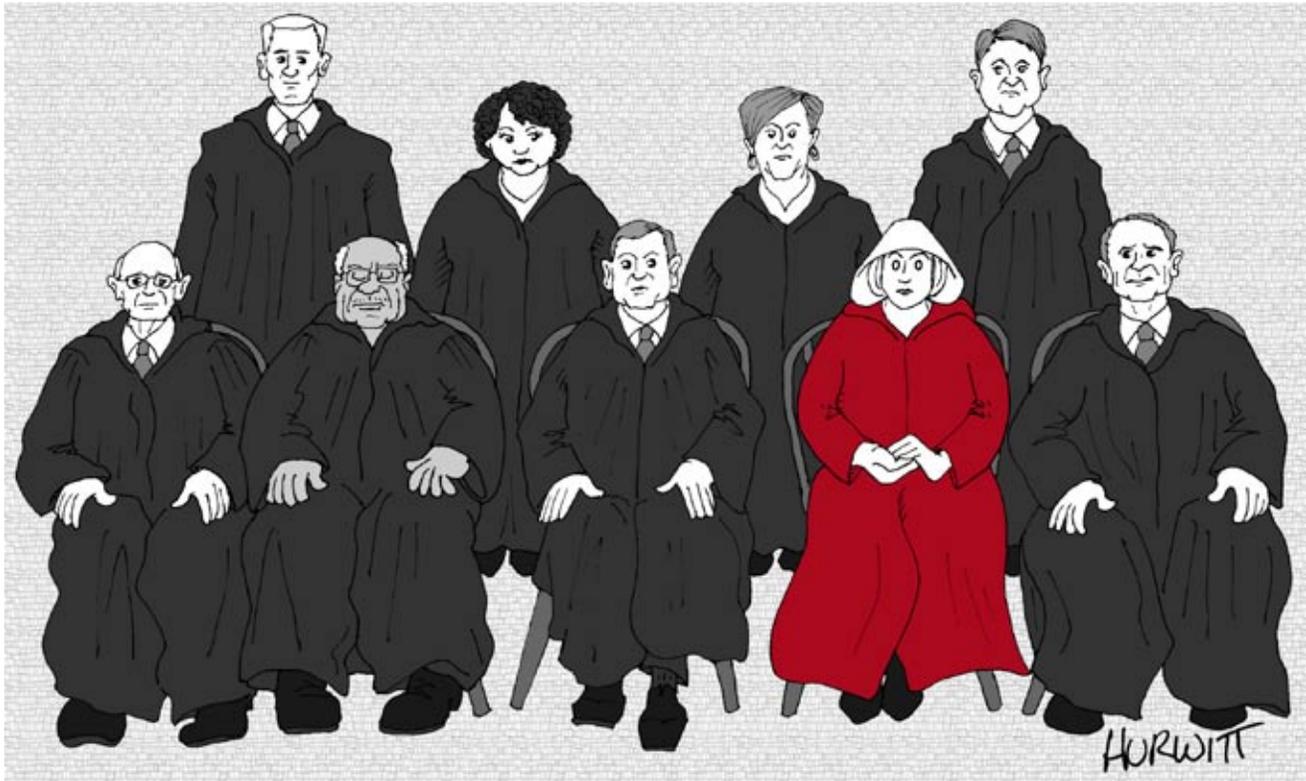
“But remember, I could always arrest you for wasting police time. And it’s easy for someone important to get a new girlfriend who doesn’t cause him problems”.

She scowled at me, listening to the ringtone. No answer. Under the streetlight, she looked older, suddenly vulnerable.

I left her standing there, started to walk towards Panfilov Park. I took off my mask, shoved it in my jacket pocket. I was hoping to breath clean, uninfected air. Maybe I’d celebrate the end of the day with a cigarette. **CT**

Tom Callaghan was born in the North of England, and now lives in Kyrgyzstan, where his Akyl Borubaev novels are set. Read more of his work at www.tomcallaghanwriter.com

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Adrian Danks

Goodfellas at thirty

Re-evaluating Martin Scorsese's massively influential
virtuoso gangster film

It's hard to imagine that Martin Scorsese's *GoodFellas* is 30 years old. A massive influence on contemporary filmmakers ranging from Quentin Tarantino and Fernando Morales to David O. Russell and Paul Thomas Anderson, it remains one of the peaks of Hollywood genre filmmaking.

GoodFellas is a movie defined by an extraordinary, almost anthropological attention to experiential and procedural detail, a stylistic virtuosity that ranges across freeze-frames, majestic subjective tracking shots, overlapping and sometimes improvised dialogue, propulsive editing, dual voice-overs, a breathless pop-rock soundtrack, and an insider's knowledge of the life of organised crime.

Documenting the 25-year story arc of a foot soldier on the fringes of the Mob, the film is both brilliantly designed and executed and a bravura mash-up of tones, styles and sensibilities, influenced by movies such as Truffaut's *Jules et Jim*.

As an example, who can forget the wonderfully staged scene between Henry (Ray Liotta), Jimmy (Robert De Niro), Tommy (Joe Pesci) and his mother (played by

Catherine Scorsese, the director's own mother) as the boys drop in on their way to completing the murder of a "made man" they have bundled up into the boot of their car?

Despite the palpable tension – and this is not a movie for those suffering from any kind of anxiety disorder – this scene is remarkable for its equally humorous, affectionate, conversational and even sweet-natured tone, as well as the wonderful physicality of the performances. Even when we hear Tommy mischievously ask his mother if he can borrow a large carving knife, the spell is not completely broken. As in *GoodFellas*' greatest disciple, *The Sopranos*, we are hitching a ride with these characters until the very end, living each moment with them.

This overwhelming feeling for the material realities and pleasures of the film's chosen, often garish, milieu helps draw us into a largely masculine, chauvinist world defined by easy corruption, hair-trigger violence, moral ambivalence and imperiousness.

GoodFellas builds up a minutely rendered environment we both ob-

serve and are deceptively drawn into. As in many Scorsese films, we latch onto the story of an outsider inculcated into a highly ritualised, semiotic world. Unlike that found in many other period films, this world appears truly lived in with, as Scorsese suggests, every frame "packed with motion and detail".

In the process, a sense of abundance is communicated that is often overwhelming. Although key collaborators such as editor Thelma Schoonmaker and cinematographer Michael Ballhaus have often and rightly been singled out for their contributions, the production design by Kristi Zea truly brings this "cloistered" and insular world to life.

For example, the tacky, expensive but just-right domestic interiors are richly suggestive and immersive. From the moment the film opens mid-story – the harsh red taillights under-lighting Henry's face as he proclaims, "As far back as I can remember, I always wanted to be a gangster" – we're well and truly hooked.

Scorsese's movies are often difficult to pin down and describe. They regularly take their lead from a snatch of music, the riff from a par-



GOODFELLAS: From Left, Ray Liotta, Robert De Niro, Paul Sorvino, and Joe Pesci.

ticular song, or the rapid-fire transition from one track to another. This use of music feeds into their angular, sometimes abrupt, almost jazz-like rhythms and tones.

For example, the extraordinary, manic, cocaine-fuelled final day of Karen (Lorraine Bracco) and Michael's freedom in the last stages of the film is scored by a head-spinning, needle-jumping combination of tracks by Harry Nilsson, Muddy Waters, the Rolling Stones, and many others. Although the use of the compilation soundtrack has become a cliché, Scorsese's choice of particular tracks and musical moments still seems remarkably fresh (Donovan's *Atlantis*, anyone?).

The use of Derek and the Dominos' keening, soaring "coda" from *Layla* to score the carefully arranged images of corpses discovered in the aftermath of Jimmy's killing spree still takes your breath away.

It is also the close connection forged between music and performance that makes it difficult to imagine a particular moment, gesture or action scored by a different track.

GoodFellas sits somewhere near the mid-point of Scorsese's career and was a significant return to peak form after his more disparate work of the 1980s. The movie ushers in a period of extraordinary productivity in the first half of the 1990s that takes in such key works as *The Age of Innocence*, his documentary *A Personal Journey with Martin Scorsese through American Movies*, and *GoodFellas*' "evil twin", *Casino*.

In many ways, *GoodFellas* is an uneasy love letter to the gangster film replete with characteristic references to much-cherished earlier influences such as *The Roaring*

Twenties. Following a conventional rise and fall narrative arc, and based on the nonfiction source *Wise Guy* by screenwriter Nicholas Pileggi, it is, perhaps, the defining work of Scorsese's career. But it is also dangerously seductive.

Casino revisits many of the same tropes and features some of the same actors, but its abundance of information is exhausting, and the world of crime just isn't much fun anymore. When Pesci's Tommy appears one final time to shoot straight at the camera in *GoodFellas*, scored by Sid Vicious' version of *My Way*, you know where you'd rather be. **CT**

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