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## 'A GREAT OUTPOURING OF RAGE'

The *Observer*, the Great Peace March – and Nord Stream

David Edwards & David Cromwell [ PAGES 14-18 ]

Issue 243

# ColdType

WRITING WORTH READING ■ PHOTOS WORTH SEEING

March 2023

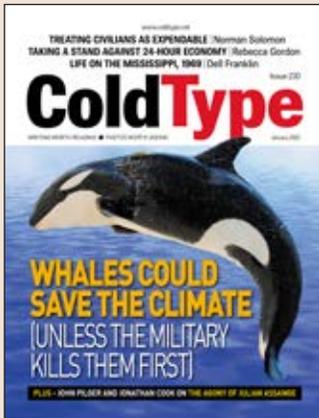


## Why the media is so afraid of Assange

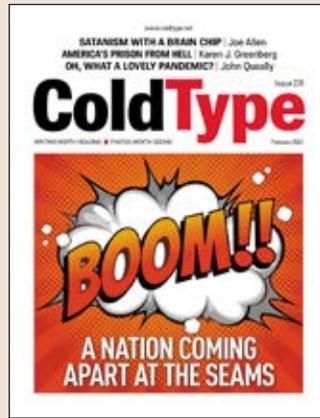
In threatening to bring democratic accountability to the media and the security services, Wikileaks showed how sham our democracies truly are, says **Jonathan Cook** [ PAGES 20-23 ]

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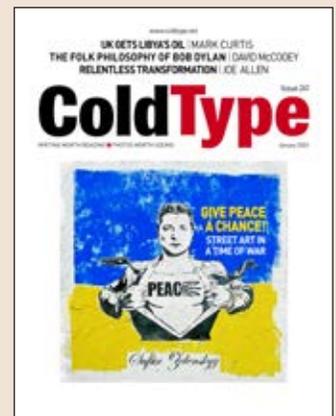
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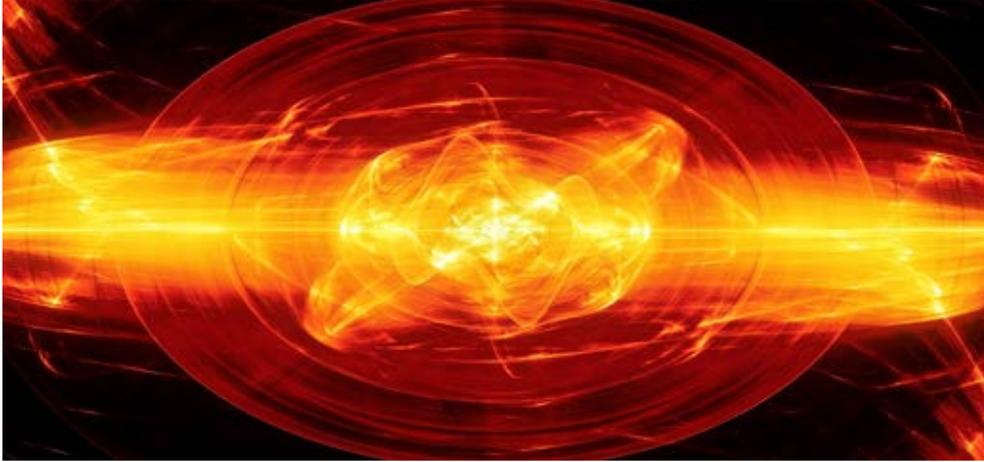


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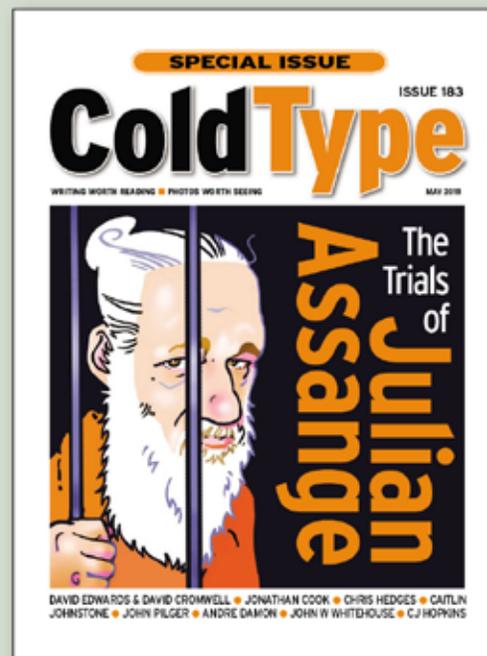
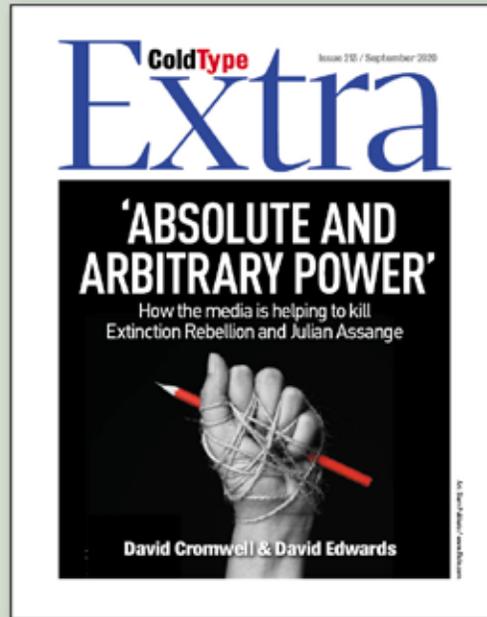
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NEWS | VIEWS | OPINIONS

# INSIGHTS

Greg Koenderman



**Y**ou know, everyone’s always talking about how the US military is only ever used to kill foreigners for resource control and generate profits for the military-industrial complex, but that’s not entirely true. Turns out the US military is also used for shooting down party balloons.

In an article titled “Object downed by US missile may have been amateur hobbyists’ \$12 balloon”, the *Guardian*’s Richard

CAITLIN JOHNSTONE

## When the bubble bursts

Luscombe reports the following: “The Northern Illinois Bottlecap Balloon Brigade says one of its hobby craft went “missing in action” over Alaska on 11 February, the same day a US F-22 jet downed an unidentified airborne entity not far away above Canada’s Yukon territory.

“In a blogpost, the group did not link the two events. But the trajectory of the pico balloon before its last recorded electronic check-in at 12.48am that day

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suggests a connection – as well as a fiery demise at the hands of a sidewinder missile on the 124th day of its journey, three days before it was set to complete its seventh circumnavigation.

“If that is what happened, it would mean the US military expended a missile costing \$439,000 (£365,000) to fell an innocuous hobby balloon worth about \$12 (£10)”.

“The descriptions of all three unidentified objects shot down Feb. 10-12 match the shapes, altitudes and payloads of the small pico balloons, which can usually be purchased for \$12-180 each, depending on the type,” writes Steve Trimble for *Aviation Week*, who first broke the Bottlecap Balloon Brigade story.

This information would put a bit of a wobble on Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer’s comments to ABC’s *This Week* on February 12 that all three of the balloons shot down through the weekend were Chinese surveillance devices, saying “the Chinese were humiliated” by the US catching them in their sinister espionage plot.

If the US air force did in fact just spent millions of dollars shooting down American party balloons, it wouldn’t be the Chinese who are humiliated.

And it looks like that is indeed what happened. On February 14, the National Security Council’s John Kirby said the “leading explanation” for the three unidentified flying objects that were shot down is that they were “balloons tied to some commercial or benign purpose.” One day later, President Biden told the press that “The intelligence community’s

current assessment is that these three objects were most likely balloons tied to private companies, recreation, or research institutions studying weather or conducting other scientific research”.

US and Canadian authorities have reportedly given up searching for debris from two of the objects that were shot down, which would make sense given that one wouldn’t expect to find much debris from a small balloon that was exploded by an air-to-air missile designed to take out fighter planes.

And this all comes out after US officials told the *Washington Post* that the “Chinese spy balloon” which started this historically unprecedented multi-day frenzy of aerial kinetic warfare over North America was probably never intended for surveillance of the United States at all.

Experts assess that the balloon was blown over the continent entirely by accident, trying to reconcile that narrative with the contradictory US government claims of intentional Chinese espionage by suggesting that perhaps the Chinese had intended for the balloon to be used for spying on US military forces in the Pacific or something.

So to recap, the US air force shot down a Chinese balloon which US officials have subsequently admitted was only blown over the US by accident, then went on a spree of shooting things out of the sky which it turns out were probably civilian party balloons.

The entire American political/media class has been spending the month of February furiously demanding more militarism and more cold war escalations over what is in all probability four

harmless balloons.

And what’s really crazy is that they’re probably going to get those increases in militarism and cold war escalations they’ve been calling for, despite the entire ordeal originating primarily in the overactive imaginations of the drivers of the US empire.

The shrieking hysterical panic about “Chinese spy balloons” has dwarfed the coverage of the revelations contradicting that narrative, and China hawks have been using the occasion to argue for increases in military spending. The Atlantic’s Richard Fontaine got all excited and wrote a whole article about how the threat of Chinese spy balloons can be used “to rally public concern and build international solidarity” against China.

These are the people who rule our world. They are not wise. They are not insightful. They are not even particularly intelligent. The US empire is a Yosemite Sam cartoon character who at any time can just flip out and start firing Sidewinder missiles at random pieces of junk in the sky, screaming “I’ll blast yer head off ya varmint!” If the US war machine was a civilian human, their family would be quietly talking amongst themselves about the possibility of conservatorship.

These are the last people in the world who should be running things, and they are the last people in the world who should be armed with nuclear weapons. But that’s exactly where we find ourselves in this bizarre slice of spacetime. God help us all. **CT**

*Caitlin Johnstone is an Australian blogger. Her website is [www.caitlinjohnstone.com](http://www.caitlinjohnstone.com).*

# INSIGHTS

LINDA MCQUAIG

## Time to take a close look at health care funding

**F**ighting over health care privatisation is a familiar Canadian sport, but Ontario Premier Doug Ford's current privatisation push feels different.

It's more ambitious and forthright. And, in a new twist, commentators seem to be piling on his bandwagon, insisting that we gotta do things differently, ridiculing the Canadian reverence for public health care, even suggesting that it amounts to some sort of cult.

Our public health-care system is struggling, and we're told that the only way to fix it is to boldly, innovatively expand the role of the private sector.

Another possibility is that our public health care system is struggling because the Ford government is starving it of funds, and the way to fix it is for Ford to inject those funds.

Ontario is one of the richest provinces in Canada, but it spends less per person on health care than any other province. Please explain why, Mr Premier. If Ontario just spent the average of what the other provinces have spent on health care per capita over the past five years, we'd be spending an additional \$7.2-billion this year – more than enough to properly pay our beleaguered nurses, lure thousands more nurses to Ontario and bring back into use countless hospital operating rooms all over the province idled by years of budget cuts.



Wikimedia

Ontario Premier Doug Ford.

Why opt for new private surgical clinics when we've got ample surgical facilities sitting empty in our hospitals?

Instead, Ford bizarrely insists on capping nurses' pay increases at a punitive 1 per cent, denying reasonable compensation to people who hold the key to reviving the system.

Ontario is in relatively good financial shape and could easily invest more in health care, says Sheila Block, a senior economist with the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

Instead, Ford squanders money on tax breaks, giving up \$8.2-billion in revenue annually from tax changes since 2018. And, when he gets additional health care funds

from Ottawa in the upcoming federal-provincial deal, he could use those funds for further tax cutting, unless strings are firmly attached, Block notes.

Allowing more private health care won't solve this underfunding. It will simply mean more health services are carried out by profit-seeking entities that will pocket a share of the public money.

We know about the profit motive – it permeates the business world, driving corporate managers to slash costs in evermore innovative ways so they can deliver ever-larger profits to shareholders.

Presumably we can expect a softer, gentler version of the profit motive in the health care field – right?

Oh, but wait, no!

It turns out Ontario has carried out what amounts to a real-life experiment on the impact of the profit motive in health care – in the case of long-term care homes, where private equity and other innovative forms of cutthroat capitalism have had free rein.

This real-life lab reveals that the profit motive operates pretty much the same in health care as in the corporate world: it has transformed nursing homes into lucrative businesses and, during the pandemic, into killing fields.

Indeed, given that COVID death rates were four times higher in profit-making long-term care homes, it's odd that commentators aren't crying: "we gotta do something different!".

Public health care has a deep intrinsic value; it isn't just one possible option, to be considered along with private health care.

Rather, public health care is the goal – just as public education is the goal when it comes to education – because these two public systems

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organise vital parts of our lives around the profoundly important principle of equality and accessibility for all.

It's that commitment to equality – utterly lacking in the marketplace that increasingly dominates our lives – that elevates these public systems to places of honour in our society, that makes them sources of inspiration of what we can achieve together as a nation.

Instead of protecting our precious public health-care system, Ford

wants to let the profit motive rip through it. We don't so much have a health care crisis as a Doug Ford crisis. **CT**

*Linda McQuaig is a Toronto-based freelance contributing columnist for the Toronto Star, where this article was first published. Her most recent book is *The Sport and Prey of Capitalists: How the Rich Are Stealing Canada's Public Wealth*. Her website is [www.lindamcquaig.com](http://www.lindamcquaig.com).*

entity invaded a more autocratic one?

5. Was Biden's standing truly damaged by that messy exit from Afghanistan? Or was America's standing truly damaged by persisting in an unwinnable war for 20 years?

6. If NATO suffers a blow to its prestige due to Ukraine's fall, that will be the US and NATO's fault. There was and remains no formal alliance between NATO and Ukraine. Recall that Ukraine was a Soviet republic and that Ukraine is far more closely linked to Russia historically than it is to Europe, let alone the USA.

7. To answer my own question at (3), the US is not a democracy. It's an authoritarian oligarchy controlled by Wall Street, the military-industrial complex, and other big financial and corporate interests. Choosing between Corporate Stooze 1 (D) and Corporate Stooze 2 (R) every two or four years is not democracy.

I was further fascinated by how the NYT's summary began:

"President Biden used his State of the Union speech to portray the US as a country in recovery, and he is right that there has been a lot of good news lately.

"Price increases have slowed. Covid deaths are down about 80 percent compared with a year ago. Ukraine is holding off Russia's invasion. Congress passed legislation addressing climate change, infrastructure and gun violence, and some of it was bipartisan".

That Ukraine "is holding off Russia's invasion" is a sign of "recovery" for the United States!

If that's not a tacit admission of proxy war, I don't know what is.

It's nice to know Ukrainians are fighting and dying so that the NYT

W.J. ASTORE

## My daily helping of propaganda

On the morning of February 8. I read the *New York Times*' coverage of Joe Biden's "State of the Union" address and found this gem of a paragraph on the Russia-Ukraine War:

"Ukraine has defied expectations so far, and could continue doing so. But if Ukraine falls, it would signal to the world that autocrats can get away with invading democratic countries. It would suggest the Western alliance isn't as powerful as it once was – shifting global power away from democracies like the US and members of the EU and toward authoritarian powers like Russia and China. And for Biden, it could damage his standing domestically and globally, much as America's messy exit from Afghanistan did".

A few comments on this:



1. Note how negotiations aren't mentioned. Cease fire? Forget it.

2. If Ukraine were to fall, would that truly be a signal to autocrats everywhere that democratic countries were ripe for the plucking? Which autocrats and which democratic countries?

3. Was Ukraine a democracy? Is the USA a democracy?

4. What about invasions and occupations of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya by the US and its allies? Were those costly and disastrous wars OK because a so-called democratic

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can brag of the US as being “in recovery”.

A nod of thanks to the NYT for my daily helping of propaganda.

(Also, please detail any important legislation that seriously addresses climate change and gun violence; climate change continues apace, as does gun violence in the US. Finally, Covid deaths are down mainly because of a less virulent strain and increased immunity due to infec-

tions, not because of any decisive action taken by the Biden administration.) **CT**

**William J. Astore**, a retired lieutenant colonel (USAF) and professor of history, is a senior fellow at the Eisenhower Media Network (EMN), an organisation of critical veteran military and national security professionals. He blogs at [www.bracingviews.com](http://www.bracingviews.com).

ric and action surrounding the Pacific theatre heightens by the day.

The general’s memo leaves no doubt regarding his sense of what is to come in the near future. From training orders emphasising “unrepentant lethality matters most”, to explicit preparation directions, Minihan assumes the worst lies ahead.

“I hope I am wrong...My gut tells me we will fight in 2025. Xi secured his third term and set his war council in October 2022. Taiwan’s presidential elections are in 2024 and will offer Xi a reason. United States’ presidential elections are in 2024 and will offer Xi a distracted America. Xi’s team, reason, and opportunity are all aligned for 2025”, Minihan wrote.



Air Force Gen. Michael A. Minihan, head of Air Mobility Command.

DIAGO RAMOS

## General predicts war with China by 2005

**A**im for the head”. This is the message blasted out by four star Air Force general and Air Mobility Command head General Michael A. Minihan about the preparation needed for a potential war between the US and China in two years.

Gen. Minihan’s rhetoric is reminiscent of his keynote speech at the Air & Space Forces Associa-

tion’s Air Space & Cyber Conference in September. In that address, Minihan expresses his aggressive mentality stating, “Lethality matters most... When you can kill your enemy, every part of your life is better. Your food tastes better. Your marriage is stronger”.

A memo obtained by NBC News spells out the general’s ambitions for the coming months as the rheto-

**A**ccording to the NBC News report, Minihan has also begun setting deadlines for preparation efforts. “The signed memo is addressed to all air wing commanders in Air Mobility Command and other Air Force operational commanders, and orders them to report all major efforts to prepare for the China fight to Minihan by Feb. 28”, the report reads.

A *Washington Post* report confirms the authenticity of the memo, dated Feb. 1, after its circulation online. Maj. Hope Cronin, an Air Force spokeswoman, writes in a statement that Minihan’s order “builds on last year’s foundational efforts by Air Mobility Command to ready the Air Mobility Forces for future conflict, should deterrence fail”.

Both reports also mention that an anonymous US defense official declared that Minihan’s remarks “are not representative of the department’s view on China”.

Despite asserting this, recent US foreign policy decisions point

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towards Minihan's prediction of escalation, the biggest being former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in August – called “utterly reckless” by *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman – and new House Speaker Kevin McCarthy's planned follow up trip.

*ScheerPost*'s Patrick Lawrence detailed developments in Japan, with their increased defense spending and closeness to Washington: “It could not be clearer that Tokyo has just elected to stand with Washington in the latter's campaign of hostility and provocation against the Chinese People's Republic”.

The *Post*'s report states, “In light of its concerns about China, the Pentagon has sought to expand military partnerships with willing partners throughout the Pacific. This month, the US and Japanese governments disclosed that a Marine Corps unit on the Japanese island of Okinawa will be refashioned into a force capable of hopping islands in the region and directing

long-range missiles at adversaries.”

The House's new Select Committee on China's chairman Mike Gallagher issued a statement reading, “It is time to push back against the Chinese Communist Party's aggression in bipartisan fashion.”

Gallagher also pushes the arming of Taiwan and echoes Minihan's predictions of a hot war in the near future.

In Minihan's speech, he alluded to the preparation he deems necessary for a fight with China: “Everybody's role is critical, but Air Mobility Command is the manoeuvre for the joint force. If we don't have our act together, nobody wins. Nobody's lethal. Nobody's in position.”

He goes on in his speech saying, “I'm untethered as of now...I do have something to say. I can't see the clock, I'm going to go 'till I go. I'm finally that rank”. **CT**

**Diago Ramos** wrote this article for [www.scheerpost.com](http://www.scheerpost.com)

Already, 60 percent of the mammals on Earth by weight are livestock. Humans account for 36 percent, wild mammals for just 4 percent. Of birds, poultry make up 71 percent, wild species only 29 percent. While the human population is growing at 1 percent a year, the livestock population is growing at 2.4 percent. Global average meat consumption per person is 43kg a year, but swiftly heading towards the UK level of 82kg. The reason is Bennett's Law: as people become richer, they eat more protein and fat, especially the flesh and secretions of animals.

So, if you don't like the new technologies, what solution do you propose? I keep asking, and the response is either furious or evasive. “It's the wrong question!” “Who's paying you?” “Do you want us to eat slime?” So far, only one of the people I've asked has answered it directly: the food campaigner Vandana Shiva. “You blindly echo the myth that as people get richer they eat more meat. Indians continue to be vegetarians even when they become rich. Food cultures are shaped by cultural and ecological values”. But meat-eating in India is rising rapidly, though many people do it secretly. In other words, despite religious proscriptions, enforced with vigilantism and, in some cases, murder, Bennett's Law still applies.

It's as if we were urging people to burn less fossil fuel without offering a replacement: no solar, wind, geothermal or nuclear power. This issue is just as urgent, arguably even more so, as livestock farming attacks every Earth system. It's the primary agent of habitat destruc-

GEORGE MONBIOT

## Love, hate and animal-free meat

**D**o you hate the idea of animal-free meat? Many people do. Unsurprisingly, livestock farmers are often furiously opposed. More surprisingly, so are some vegans: “Why can't people eat tofu and lentils, like me?” Well, the new products – plant-based, microbial and cell-cultured meat and dairy – are not aimed at

vegans, but at the far greater number who like the taste and texture of animals. Many others instinctively recoil from the idea of food that seems familiar, but isn't.

So here's a question for all the sceptics. What do you intend to do about the soaring global demand for animal products, and its devastating impacts?

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tion and wildlife loss. It's causing rivercide and dead zones at sea. It generates more greenhouse gas emissions than all the world's transport. It sprawls across vast tracts of the planet, inflicting massive carbon and ecological opportunity costs. Both historically and currently, livestock farming is probably the world's most powerful agent of colonial land grabbing and the displacement of Indigenous people. Meat is consuming the planet.

Substitutes for animal products can greatly reduce this damage. They can allow vast areas to be returned to dispossessed people and the ecosystems they defended.

The first cell-cultured meat recently gained regulatory approval in the United States. At the same time, the taste and texture of plant-based alternatives has greatly improved. I've recently eaten three products that are almost indistinguishable from the originals: a steak made by a Slovenian company called Juicy Marbles, a "lamb" fillet from the Israeli company Redefine Meat, and sushi and tempura "seafood" at the London restaurant 123V.

In response, Big Meat has ramped up its campaign of demonisation. That's understandable. Less so is the support the animal industry receives from people who claim to be green, but happily recite its misleading propaganda.

The professor of food and agricultural policy Robert Paarlberg compares this alliance to the inadvertent coalition of Baptists and bootleggers in the US a century ago. By lobbying successfully for the prohibition of alcohol, the Southern Baptists opened the door to gangsters trading in stronger and more dangerous drink. True environmentalists have a duty to break this ultra-conservative



**Livestock farming generates more greenhouse gas emissions than all the world's transport.**

consensus.

Adoption of the new technologies is likely to follow an S-curve: slow, then sudden. At first, uptake will be low and will suffer repeated setbacks. But as scale rises and prices fall, market penetration is likely to reach 10 percent or more. That's the point at which linear growth suddenly switches to exponential growth. It's a trend we've seen in dozens of technologies, from refrigerators to smartphones.

The biggest hurdles will be political. As governments are pressurised by Big Meat, they will raise the kind of obstacles that, in the UK and US, have delayed the rollout of renewable electricity. The UK government, for example, is reported to be considering a ban on calling plant-based products "milk" and "butter". What it will do about coconut milk and peanut butter is anyone's guess. No VAT is charged on meat and milk here, but most plant-based alternatives must pay 20 percent.

The regulators that might approve the new products are often overwhelmed. Brexit has dumped a massive workload on the UK's Food Standards Agency and its budget falls far short of what it needs. At the same time, it has been flooded with applications for CBD (cannabidiol) products: it could be years before it can assess alternative proteins.

None of these questions should be left to industry and government. Environmental campaigners should be working not to destroy the green alternatives but to ensure they are regulated properly and, through effective anti-trust laws, do not become as concentrated in the hands of a few corporations as the meat trade is. As always, this will be a political struggle as much as a technological one. And we need to decide which team we are on. **CT**

**George Monbiot's latest book is *Regeneration: Feeding the World Without Devouring the Planet*. Read more of his work at [www.monbiot.com](http://www.monbiot.com).**

# INSIGHTS

BRETT WILKINS

## Super Bowl hijacks the Pat Tillman story

Advocates of peace, truth, and basic human decency excoriated the National Football League’s “white-washing” of former Arizona Cardinal and Army Ranger Pat Tillman’s death in Afghanistan by so-called “friendly fire” and the military’s subsequent cover-up – critical details omitted from a glowingly patriotic Super Bowl salute on February 12.

As a group of four Pat Tillman Foundation scholars chosen as honorary coin-toss captains at Super Bowl LVII in Glendale, Arizona were introduced via a video segment narrated by actor Kevin Costner, TV viewers were told how Tillman “gave up his NFL career to join the Army Rangers and ultimately lost his life in the line of duty”.

The video did not say how Tillman died, what he thought about the Iraq war, or how the military lied to his family and the nation about his death. This outraged many viewers.

“Obviously the army killing Pat Tillman and covering it up afterwards is the worst thing the US military did to him, but the years they’ve spent rolling out his portrait backed by some inspirational music as

a recruiting tool is a surprisingly close second”, tweeted writer Jay Willis.

“Pat Tillman called the Iraq invasion and occupation ‘fucking illegal’ and was killed by friendly fire in an incident the military covered up and tried to hide from his family,” tweeted *Washington Post* investigative reporter Evan Hill.



The Pat Tillman Memorial at the University of Phoenix Stadium

“I’m writing a book for FIRST GRADERS on Pat Tillman that contains more truth about his life and death than the NFL just provided at the Super Bowl”, wrote author Andrew Maraniss.

“Another year of hijacking the Pat Tillman story and not telling that he hated the Iraq War and was killed by the military”, said one Twitter user.

Tillman, 25 years old at the time, turned down a \$3.6-million contract with the Cardinals to enlist in the U. Army in May 2002 after the 9/11 attacks on the United States. He expected to be deployed to Afghanistan. Instead, he was sent to invade Iraq – a country that had no ties to 9/11. Tillman quickly came to deplore the “fucking illegal” war, and even made “loose plans” to meet with anti-war intellectual Noam Chomsky, according to *The Intercept*’s Ryan Devereaux.

As Tillman’s brother Kevin sardonically wrote: “Somehow we were sent to invade a nation because it was a direct threat to the American people, or to the world, or harbored terrorists, or was involved in the September 11 attacks, or received weapons-grade uranium from Niger, or had mobile weapons labs, or WMD, or had a need to be liberated, or we needed to establish a democracy, or stop an insurgency, or stop a civil war we created that can’t be called a civil war even though it is. Something like that”.

Pat and Kevin were sent to

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Afghanistan on April 8, 2004. Stationed at a forward operating base in Khost province, Pat was killed on April 22, 2004 by what the army said was “enemy fire” during a fire-fight. However, the army knew in the days immediately following Tillman’s death that he had been shot three times in the head from less than 30 feet away by so-called “friendly fire”, and that US troops had burned his uniform and body armour in a bid to conceal their fatal error.

“The deception surrounding this case was an insult to the family, but more importantly, its primary purpose was to deceive a whole nation”, Kevin Tillman testified before Congress in 2007. “We say these things

with disappointment and sadness for our country. Once again, we have been used as props in a Pentagon public relations exercise”.

Tillman’s father, Patrick Tillman Sr., told the *Washington Post* in 2005 that after his son was killed, “all the people in positions of authority went out of their way to script this. They purposely interfered with the investigation, they covered it up”.

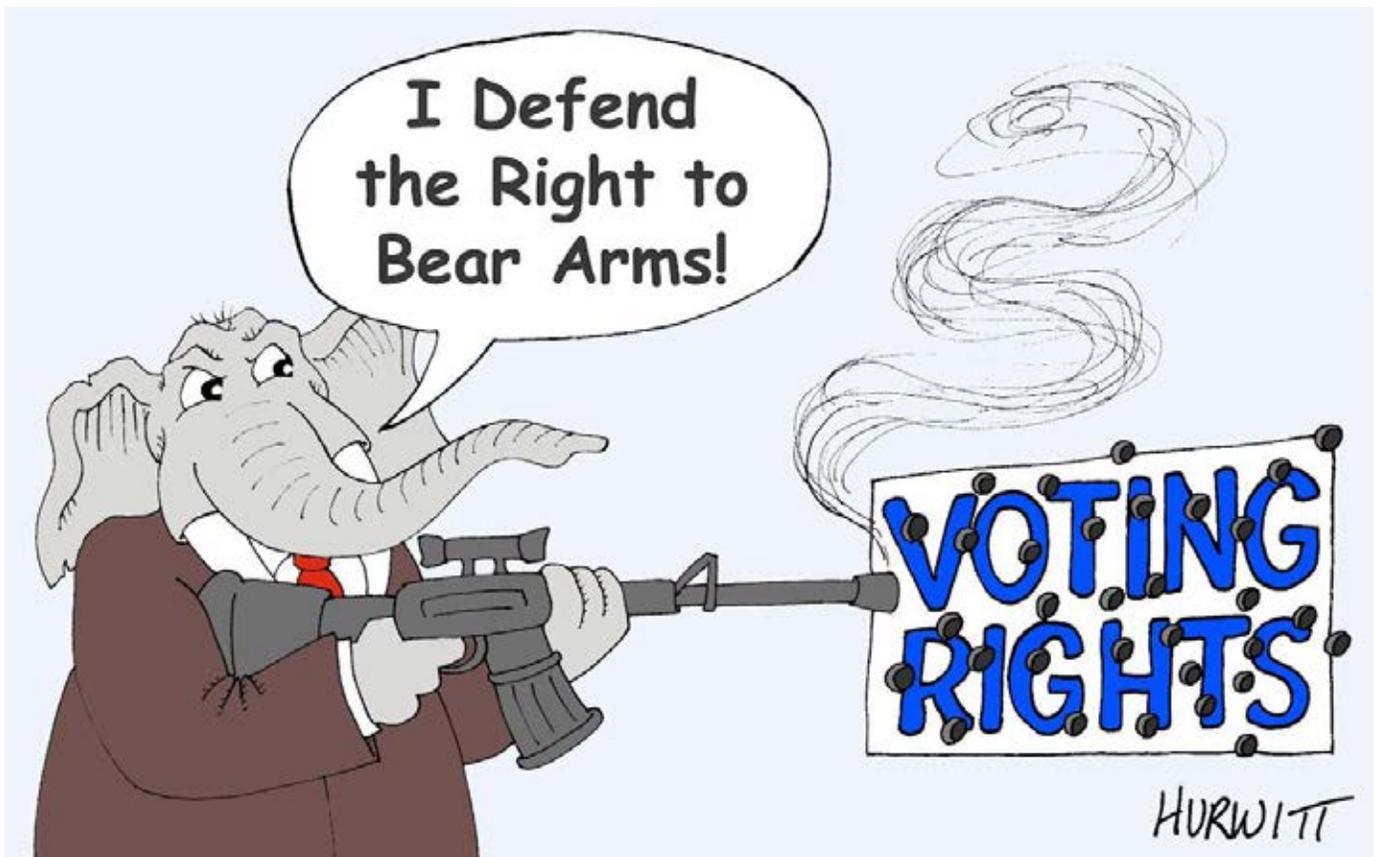
“I think they thought they could control it, and they realised that their recruiting efforts were going to go to hell in a handbasket if the truth about his death got out”, he contended. “They blew up their poster boy”.

The following year, Tillman’s mother Mary was interviewed by *Sports Illustrated* and blamed US military and George W. Bush administration officials all the way up to then-Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld for covering up her son’s killing. “They attached themselves to his virtue and then threw him under the bus”, she said. “They had no regard for him as a person. He’d hate to be used for a lie. I don’t care if they put a bullet through my head in the middle of the night. I’m not stopping”. **CT**

**Brett Wilkins** is a staff writer for *Common Dreams* – [www.commondreams.org](http://www.commondreams.org) – where this article first appeared.

## Hurwitt’s Eye

Mark Hurwitt



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DAVID EDWARDS & DAVID CROMWELL

# ‘A beautiful outpouring of rage’: The *Observer*, the Great Peace March – and Nord Stream

The whole focus on weapons of mass destruction in Iraq was fake, a crude deception

The 20th anniversary of the illegal, unprovoked US-UK war of aggression on Iraq comes at an awkward time for a UK press currently suppressing the truth of the illegal, provoked Russian invasion of Ukraine. It’s particularly awkward for our fearless watchdogs to recall the great anti-war march of 15 February 2003 when, in 2023, they are busy stifling dissent protesting America’s horrific proxy war in Ukraine.

In the *Observer*, Tim Adams wrote a piece under the joyous title: “‘A beautiful outpouring of rage’: did Britain’s biggest ever protest change the world?”

Now that it doesn’t matter – Iraq hasn’t mattered, or even existed, for the UK press for years – the Guardian Media Group can allow one of its journalists to portray the protest as “beautiful”. Ironically, Adams’ piece is an ugly rejection of everything it professes to admire. This comment

says it all: “Knowing what we know now, those who gathered that day in the capital were on the right side of history”.

In fact, on 15 February 2003, it was absolutely clear that we protestors “were on the right side of history” on the basis of what we knew then! But 20 years on, as though caught in a time warp, Adams persists with the fake mainstream focus of the time: “The marchers at the time did not agree on everything, but they shared a commitment to try to silence the drumbeat to war – or to at least to give the UN weapons inspectors more time to find the fabled weapons of mass destruction on which the rhetoric of Blair and President George W Bush depended (the previous day, Hans Blix, leader of those inspectors, had again informed the UN that no such weapons had yet been found)”.

And again: “The *Observer* was split down the middle over wheth-

er to support the government in its desperate efforts to get a UN mandate for war...

“Although the news section of that day’s *Observer* was solidly in awe of the peace march, elsewhere the leader column suggested that, ‘as the least worst option’ it reluctantly went along “with a majority in Britain who would accept military action if backed by the UN security council.”

It’s fine to mention that these were indeed mainstream obsessions at the time, but not without pointing out that it was all nonsense. The whole focus on weapons of mass destruction (WMD) was fake, a crude deception. There were no weapons of mass destruction left in Iraq by 2002 – as chief UN weapons inspector Scott Ritter was telling anyone who would listen in 2002 and 2003. But even if there had been, they were battlefield weapons, artillery shells, made with Western assistance by



William M. Connelley / Wikipedia

**MARCHING FOR PEACE:** A million demonstrators took to the streets of London 20 years ago in an attempt to prevent an illegal war on Iraq. They were ignored by the majority of the UK media and the government.

an Iraqi government that had no links whatsoever to the September 11 terrorists; a government that had shown no interest whatever in waging a terror campaign against the US or Britain – countries that had been using any manufactured excuse to torture the country into submission through genocidal sanctions for 13 years.

There was never any question of Iraq possessing nuclear weapons. But even if there had been battlefield biological and chemical weapons, and even if Iraq had had links with al-Qaeda, Britain and the US would have had no right to invade a country by which neither had been attacked or even threatened. And what would Saddam Hussein, clearly facing an all-out superpower oil grab, possibly gain by attacking or supporting attacks on the West? Any such attacks would have dramatically increased the risk to his own life for no practical gain.

But even if Britain and the US had been attacked by Iraq, they would not have had the right to devastate the country with a completely disproportionate invasion and occupation. Would we argue that Iraq had the right to invade, occupy and devastate the United States and Britain in response to “our” air attacks and invasion?

We very much doubt that the *Observer*’s then editor, Roger Alton, was “solidly in awe” of the peace march. In January 2003, as war loomed, Alton told his staff: “We’ve got to stand shoulder to shoulder with the Americans.” (Nick Davis,

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*Flat Earth News*, Chatto & Windus, 2008, p.350)

In September 2006, the *Evening Standard* reported that Alton had been on “something of a lads’ holiday” in the Alps. His companions included Jonathan Powell, “Tony Blair’s most trusted aide”, and staunch Blairite MP and propagandist Denis MacShane. (Gideon Spanier, “In the air,” *Evening Standard*, 6 September 2006)

A few days after the march, leading *Observer* columnist Nick Cohen poured scorn on: “The satisfaction of an anti-war movement which persuaded one million people to tell Iraqis they must continue to live under a tyranny...” (Cohen, “The Left’s unholy alliance with religious bigotry,” the *Observer*, 23 February 2003)

What does Adams have in mind when he writes of “Knowing what we know now”? Of course, he means there were no WMD and the results of the war were catastrophic for Iraqis (although not for the US-UK; the war was not at all a failure, as is often claimed). But that is a tiny part of what we now know, and no thanks to the *Observer* and the *Guardian*.

As we reported last year, any casual reader can Google “BP and Iraq” and find: “In 2009, bp became the first international oil company to return to Iraq after a period of 35 years...”

“Today, bp, PetroChina and BOC are working in partnership to develop Rumaila, the second-largest producing field in the world, estimated to have around 17 billion barrels of recoverable oil remaining.”

Anyone can Google “Exxon and Iraq” and find: “In January 2010, ExxonMobil Iraq Limited (EMIL), an affiliate of Exxon Mobil Corporation, signed an agreement with the South Oil Company of the Iraq Ministry of Oil to rehabilitate and redevelop the West Qurna I field in southern Iraq...”

“In October 2011, ExxonMobil

## The result of the illegal war that cost the lives of more than a million Iraqis was that Britain’s BP and America’s Exxon got the oil

signed six Production Sharing Contracts covering more than 848,000 acres in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.”

Last year, the BBC somehow broke with its long-standing tradition of ignoring US-UK crimes in Iraq to report: “BP in oil field where ‘cancer is like the flu’.”

The BBC commented: “Prof Shukri Al Hassan, a local environmental scientist, told us that cancer here is so rife it is ‘like the flu’.”

In other words, “Knowing what we know now” really has to include the fact that the end result of the illegal war of aggression that cost the lives of more than one million Iraqis was that Britain’s BP and America’s Exxon got the oil. And Iraqis are once again paying the price.

But that is not controversial, or even news, for Tim Adams, or anyone else at the *Observer* and *Guardian* celebrating 2003’s “beautiful outpouring of rage”.

**K**nowing what we know now, a November 2001 report in the *Guardian* titled, “Among friends at ‘Blair Petroleum’”, does indeed take on a new and terrible significance: “Anji Hunter will be among New Labour friends when she starts her new job as director of communications at BP – nicknamed Blair Petroleum for its close links with the government.

“The chief executive John Browne is close to the prime minister and a grateful Mr Blair added a peerage to the oilman’s knighthood after he

helped end the fuel protests of summer last year.” (Kevin Maguire, the *Guardian*, 9 November 2001)

The report continued: “Lord Simon was chairman of BP until May 1997, when he resigned to become trade minister in Mr Blair’s first government, sparking a row when it emerged he still owned a considerable shareholding in the company... BP appears to have been embraced by the New Labour establishment and is thought to be the government’s favourite oil giant.”

Knowing what we know now, it seems clear that Blair joined George W. Bush in exploiting the atrocity of September 11 to provide a fake justification for liberating Iraq of its oil for the benefit of “Blair Petroleum”. It reads like a horror story.

When we add the recent news that “BP’s annual profits more than doubled to \$28bn (£23bn) in 2022 after a sharp increase in gas prices linked to the Ukraine war boosted its earnings’ at a time when the climate is collapsing, when we need to Just Stop Oil, it reads like dystopian science fiction.

Rather than discuss any of these real issues, Adams focused on: “The unprecedented diversity of the protesters... captured in the front-page *Observer* report from the march by my late, lamented colleague Euan Ferguson:

“There were nuns. Toddlers. Women barristers. The Eton George Orwell Society. Archaeologists Against War...”

Ah, “diversity”, virtually the sole mainstream ethical concern; universally favoured because it offers no challenge to the ‘two-party dictatorship... in thrall to giant corporations’ identified by three-time US presidential candidate Ralph Nader (Interview with The Real News Network, 4 November 2008).

A second piece in the *Guardian* by Clea Skopeliti appeared three days after Adams’ article under the

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title, “It changed my life”: protesters look back on 2003 Stop the War march’. Diversity was again the focus, remarkably even referencing the same quote: “It was a protest marked by its breadth, with Euan Ferguson writing in the *Observer*: ‘There were nuns. Toddlers. Women barristers. The Eton George Orwell Society. Archaeologists Against War ...’”

Protest presented as a spectacle, a social event. The arguments that motivated the protestors – that the US was an imperial rogue state motivated by greed, that there should be “No blood for oil”, that an already crushed Iraqi society would be utterly devastated by yet another war – were not re-examined in the light of history. What actually happened to Iraq twenty years on? Doesn’t it matter? What is the state of its democracy, its human rights, its healthcare, its free press, its freedom? Serious politics, adult analysis, are replaced by vacuous, wistful reflections on the past. The issue of oil was unmentioned in either piece.

## Letting The Germans Freeze – The US Terror Attack On Nord Stream

The cynical opportunism of the *Observer*’s supposed affection for the anti-war marches of 2003 is thrown into stark relief by the paper’s complete blanking of Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Seymour Hersh’s recent assertion that the US was responsible for the terrorist attack on the Nord Stream gas pipelines under the Baltic Sea last September.

The pipelines from Nord Stream 1, the first phase of the infrastructure, were already supplying cheap Russian gas to Germany and elsewhere in Europe. The US had long made clear its opposition to Nord Stream 2 going ahead. On 6 February 2022, more than two weeks before Russia’s invasion, US president

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## The US attack will have contributed to these excess deaths – appalling figures made uglier by the huge profits of the likes of BP and Shell

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Joe Biden said: “If Russia invades, that means tanks or troops crossing the... border of Ukraine again, then there will be... no longer a Nord Stream 2. We, we will bring an end to it.”

Asked how this would be done, given the project is under German control, Biden said: “I promise you, we’ll be able to do it.”

In January 2022, Victoria Nuland, US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, had stated: “I want to be clear with you today, if Russia invades Ukraine, one way or another Nord Stream 2 will not move forward.”

In congressional testimony this January, Nuland actually gloated: “I think the administration is very gratified to know that Nord Stream 2 is now, as you like to say, a hunk of metal at the bottom of the sea.”

On the Jimmy Dore Show, Aaron Maté shared an extraordinary video compilation of US officials insisting, before the bombing, that Nord Stream had to be “stopped”, “killed”, “shut down”, “cancelled”.

**H**ersh’s report, citing an unnamed source “with direct knowledge of the operational planning” relates what happened. In June 2022, under cover of a naval exercise, US Navy divers planted explosive devices on three of the four Nord Stream pipelines. In September, these were then remotely detonated on Biden’s orders. This took place with the assistance of the Norwegian Secret Service and

Navy, but without the awareness of Germany or other western allies.

If Hersh’s account is accurate, this was a massive US terrorist attack on one of its own allies (Germany), as well as being one of the world’s worst environmental disasters causing a huge release of global-warming methane gas. The lethal consequences of the attack for the people of Europe have been almost completely ignored. In November, the *Economist* examined the relationship between “Fuel prices and excessive deaths”: “Although heatwaves get more press, cold temperatures are usually deadlier than hot ones. Between December and February, 21 percent more Europeans die per week than from June to August.”

The report continued: “In the past, changes in energy prices have had a small effect on deaths. But this year’s cost increases are remarkably large... if past patterns persist, current electricity prices would drive deaths above the historical average even in the mildest winter.

“Exact mortality totals still depend on other factors, particularly temperature. In a mild winter, the increase in deaths might be limited to 32,000 above the historical average (accounting for changes in population). A harsh winter could cost a total of 335,000 extra lives.”

The US attack will certainly have contributed to these tens or hundreds of thousands of excess deaths – appalling figures made uglier by the huge profits of the likes of BP and Shell. As we were writing this article, the BBC reported: “British Gas owner Centrica has posted huge profits after energy prices soared last year.

“Centrica’s full-year profits hit £3.3bn for 2022, more than triple the £948m it made the year before.

“Energy firms have seen record earnings since oil and gas prices jumped following Russia’s invasion

of Ukraine.”

Hersh commented: “The point is that Biden has decided to let the Germans freeze this winter. The President of the United States would rather see Germany freeze than have Germany possibly stop supporting Ukraine, and that to me is a devastating thing for this White House...”

“The people involved in the operation saw that the President wanted to freeze Germany for his short-term political goals, and that horrified them.”

## Burying Seymour Hersh

Writer and media analyst Alan MacLeod detailed how Hersh’s account of the Nord Stream attack has been buried out of sight by US corporate media: “A *MintPress News* study analysed the 20 most influential publications in the United States, according to analytics company Similar Web, and found only four mentions of the report between them.

“The entirety of the corporate media’s attention given to the story consisted of:

“A 166-word mini report in *Bloomberg*;

“One five-minute segment on “Tucker Carlson Tonight” (*Fox News*);

“One 600-word round up in the *New York Post*;

“A shrill *Business Insider* attack article, whose headline labels Hersh a ‘discredited journalist’ that has given a ‘gift to Putin’.

“The 20 outlets studied are, in alphabetical order: “ABC News; *Bloomberg News*; *Business Insider*; *BuzzFeed*; CBS News; CNBC; CNN; *Forbes*; Fox News; the *Huffington Post*; MSNBC; NBC News; the *New York Post*; the *New York Times*; NPR; *People* magazine; *Politico*; *USA Today*, the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Washington Post*.”

Much the same is true of UK state-corporate media. In particular, BBC

## In an interview with Radio War Nerd, Hersh made clear that he had corroborated his account with other sources

News, the *Guardian* and the *Observer* have simply ignored Hersh’s story, except for a passing mention emphasising White House denials in a *Guardian* live blog on 12 February.

Curiously, despite writing in depth about Nord Stream last March, George Monbiot, the *Guardian*’s supposed dissident fig leaf, has not mentioned Hersh’s report, other than to retweet a thread that contained this comment: “...in short, the publicly available data does not corroborate Hersh’s reporting. I should have additional vessel tracking data soon, and if that shows otherwise I’ll update here”.

Recall that Hersh is a renowned reporter who exposed the US My Lai atrocity in Vietnam, Nixon-era CIA spying on left-wing dissidents, and the Abu Ghraib scandal in Iraq.

The *Independent* managed a grand total of 324 words under the politically correct headline: “White House denies journalist’s claims it blew up Russian gas pipeline”.

Hersh’s report was, the White House claimed, “utterly false and complete fiction”.

The *Daily Mail* devoted 600 words to the story. Tragicomically, by way of “balance”, the Mail included a James Bond-style graphic under the title: “How Putin’s Forces Might Have Sabotaged Nord Stream Pipelines”.

We also found a single mention in the *Times*, hidden behind its paywall.

Media Lens does not have the resources to scour the airwaves for possible mentions on radio and television.

Snopes, the “fact-checking website”, dismissed Hersh’s analysis – misspelling his name three times as “Hersch” – claiming it relied on a single “omnipotent anonymous source.” In fact, in an interview with Radio War Nerd, Hersh made clear that he had corroborated his account with other sources. The reality of what happened was, he said, “well-known” in the pipeline industry:

“Let me just say something to you: This isn’t a hard story to find.”

Jeffery Sachs – a world-renowned economist and director of the Center for Sustainable Development at Columbia University – commented: “Even reporters on our papers that are involved tell me ‘of course’ (the US did it), but it doesn’t show up in our media.”

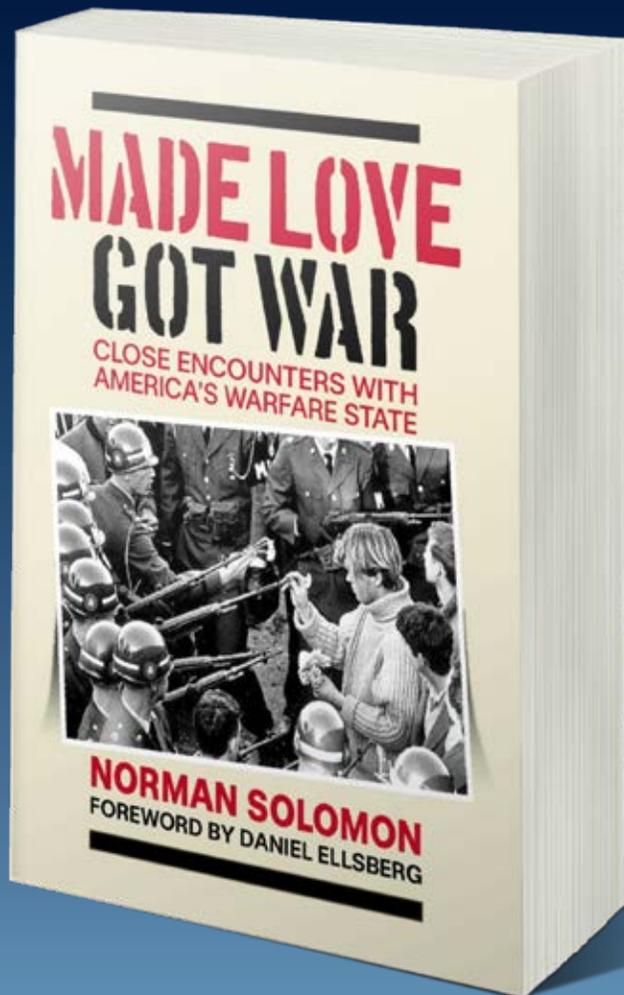
It is also worth noting that in his 2018 book, *Reporter – a Memoir*, Hersh wrote: “I resolved early that I would never publish information from someone on the inside without verifying it elsewhere, even if a second source insisted I had to pretend he didn’t exist.”

None of this matters to the “free press”. And yet, the rational journalistic response to Hersh’s claims would be to follow them up – check them, challenge them, test them. As Craig Murray commented, the mainstream treatment of Hersh is “a clear indicator of the disappearance of freedom from our so-called western democracies”. We have indeed entered a new and disturbing phase of extreme mainstream censorship by omission. **CT**

**David Edwards and David Cromwell** are co-editors of *Medialens*, the UK media watchdog. This article first appeared at their website, [www.medialens.org](http://www.medialens.org).

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JONATHAN COOK

# Why the western media is so afraid of Assange

In threatening to bring democratic accountability to the media and the security services, Wikileaks showed how sham our democracies truly are

This is the text of Jonathan Cook's talk at #FreeTheTruth: Secret Power, Media Freedom and Democracy, held in London, on Saturday 28 January 2023. Other speakers were former British ambassador Craig Murray and Italian investigative journalist Stefania Maurizi, author of the recent *Secret Power: Wikileaks and its Enemies*

During an interview back in 2011, Julian Assange made an acute observation about the role of what he called society's "perceived moral institutions", such as liberal media:

"What drives a paper like the *Guardian* or *New York Times* is not their inner moral values. It is simply that they have a market. In the UK, there is a market called "educated liberals". Educated liberals want to buy a newspaper like the *Guardian*, and therefore an institution arises to fulfil that market. ... What is in the newspaper is not a reflection of the values of the people in that insti-

tion, it is a reflection of the market demand".

Assange presumably gained this insight after working closely the previous year with both newspapers on the Afghan and Iraq war logs.

One of the mistakes we typically make about the so-called "mainstream media" is imagining that its outlets evolved in some kind of gradual bottom-up process. We are encouraged to assume that there is at least an element of voluntary association in how media publications form.

At its simplest, we imagine journalists with a liberal or left-wing outlook gravitate towards other journalists with a similar outlook and together they produce a liberal-left newspaper. We sometimes imagine that something similar takes place among rightwing journalists and rightwing newspapers.

All of this requires ignoring the elephant in the room: billionaire owners. Even if we think about those owners, and in general we



are discouraged from doing so, we tend to suppose that their role is chiefly to provide the funding for these free exercises in journalistic collaboration.

For that reason, we infer that the media represents society: it offers a market place of thought and expression in which ideas and opinions align with how the vast majority of people feel. In short, the media reflects a spectrum of acceptable ideas rather than defining and imposing that spectrum. Furthermore, almost all corporate media needs advertising revenue from other large corporations to avoid haemorrhaging money. There is nothing bottom-up about this arrangement. It is entirely top-down.

Journalists operate within ideological parameters strictly laid down by their outlet's owner. The media doesn't reflect society. It reflects the interests of a small elite, and the national security state that promotes



and protects that elite's interests.

Those parameters are wide enough to allow some disagreement just enough to make western media *look* democratic. But the parameters are narrow enough to restrict reporting, analysis and opinion so that dangerous ideas dangerous to corporate-state power almost never get a look-in. Put bluntly, media pluralism is the spectrum of allowable thought among the power-elite.

If this doesn't seem obvious, it might help to think of media outlets more like any other large corporation a supermarket chain, for example. Supermarkets are large warehouse-like venues, stocking a wide range of goods, a range similar across all chains, but distinguished by minor variations in pricing and branding. Despite this essential similarity, each supermarket chain markets itself as radically different from its rivals. It is easy to fall for this pitch, and most of us do: to the extent that we start to identify with one supermarket over the others, believing it shares our values, it em-

bodies our ideals, it aspires to things we hold dear.

We all know there is a difference between Waitrose and Tesco in the UK, or Whole Foods and Walmart in the US. But if we try to identify what that difference amounts to, it is hard to know beyond competing marketing strategies and the targeting of different shopping audiences.

All the supermarkets share a core capitalist ideology. All are pathologically driven by the need to generate profits. All try to fuel rapacious consumerism among their customers. All create excessive demand and waste. All externalise their costs on to the wider society.

**M**edia publications are much the same. They are there to do essentially the same thing, but they can only monetise their similarity by presenting marketing it as difference. They brand differently not because they *are* different, but because to be

effective (if not always profitable) they must reach and capture different demographics.

Supermarkets do it through different emphases: is it Coca-Cola or wine that serves as a loss-leader? Should green credentials and animal welfare be accentuated over value for money? It's no different with the media: outlets brand themselves as liberal or conservative, on the side of the middle class or the unskilled worker, as challenging the powerful or respectful of them.

The key task of a supermarket is to create loyalty from a section of the shopping public to stop those customers straying to other chains. Similarly, a media outlet reinforces a supposed set of shared values among a specific demographic to stop readers from looking elsewhere for their news, analysis and commentary.

The goal of the corporate media is not unearthing truth. It is not monitoring the centres of power. It is about capturing readers. In so far as a media outlet does monitor power,

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does speak difficult truths, it is because that is its brand, that is what its audience has come to expect from it.

So how does this relate to today's topic?

Well, not least it helps clarify something that baffles many of us. Why haven't journalists risen up to support Julian Assange in their droves especially once Sweden dropped the longest preliminary investigation in its history and it became clear that Assange's persecution was, as he always warned, paving the way to his extradition to the US for exposing its war crimes?

The truth is that, were the *Guardian* and the *New York Times* clamouring for Assange's freedom;

had they investigated the glaring holes in the Swedish case, as Nils Melzer, the UN's special rapporteur on torture, did;

were they screaming about the dangers of allowing the US to redefine journalism's core task as treason under the draconian, century-old Espionage Act;

had they used their substantial muscle and resources to pursue Freedom of Information requests, as Stefania Maurizi did on her own dime;

were they pointing out the endless legal abuses taking place in Assange's treatment in the UK;

had they reported rather than ignored the facts that came to light in the extradition hearings in London;

in short, had they kept Assange's persecution constantly in the spotlight, he would be free by now.

The efforts by the various states involved to gradually disappear him over the past decade would have become futile, even self-sabotaging.

At some level, journalists understand this. Which is precisely why they try to persuade themselves, and you, that Assange isn't a "proper" journalist. That's why, they tell themselves, they don't need to show

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## Journalism is publishing information that serves the "public interest". Any of us can do it. And when we do, journalistic protections should apply

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solidarity with a fellow journalist or worse, why it is okay to amplify the security state's demonisation campaign.

By ignoring Assange, by othering him, they can avoid thinking about the differences between what he has done and what they do. Journalists can avoid examining their own role as captured servants of corporate power.

Assange faces 175 years in a maximum-security prison, not for espionage but for publishing journalism. Journalism doesn't require some special professional qualification, as brain surgery and conveyancing do. It does not depend on precise, abstruse knowledge of human physiology or legal procedure.

At its best, journalism is simply gathering and publishing information that serves the "public interest". *Public*: that is, it serves you and me. It does not require a diploma. It does not require a big building, or a wealthy owner. *Whisper it*: any of us can do journalism. And when we do, journalistic protections should apply.

**A**ssange excelled at journalism like no one before him because he devised a new model for forcing governments to become more transparent, and public servants more honest. Which is precisely why the elite who wield secret power want him and that model destroyed.

If the liberal media was really organised from the bottom-up rath-

er than the top-down, journalists would be incensed and terrified by states torturing one of their own. They would be genuinely afraid that they might be targeted next. Because it is the practice of pure journalism that is under attack, not a single journalist.

But that isn't how corporate journalists see it. And truth be told, their abandonment of Assange the lack of solidarity *is* explicable. Journalists aren't being entirely irrational. The corporate media, especially its liberal outlets and their journalist-servants, understand that Assange's media revolution embodied by Wikileaks is far more of a threat to them than the national security state.

Wikileaks offers a new kind of platform for democratic journalism in which secret power, along with its inherent corruptions and crimes, becomes much harder to wield. And as a result, corporate journalists have had to face some difficult home truths they had avoided till Wikileaks' appearance.

First, the Wikileaks media revolution threatens to undermine the role and privileges of the corporate journalist. Readers no longer have to depend on these well-paid "arbiters of truth". For the first time, readers have direct access to the original sources, to the unmediated documents.

Readers no longer have to be passive consumers of news. They can inform themselves. Not only can they cut out the middle man the corporate media – but they can finally assess whether that middle man has been entirely straight with them.

That is very bad news for individual corporate journalists. At best, it strips them of any aura of authority and prestige. At worst, it ensures that a profession already held in low esteem is seen as even less trustworthy.

But it is also very bad news for

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media owners. They no longer control the news agenda. They can no longer serve as institutional gatekeepers. They can no longer define the limits of acceptable ideas and opinion.

Second, the Wikileaks revolution sheds an unflattering light on the traditional model of journalism. It shows it to be inherently dependent on and therefore complicit with secret power.

**T**he lifeblood of the Wikileaks model is the whistleblower, who risks everything to get out public-interest information the powerful want concealed because it reveals corruption, abuse or lawbreaking.

Think Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden.

The lifeblood of corporate journalism, by contrast, is access. Corporate journalists make an implicit transaction: the insider delivers selected snippets of information to the journalist that may or may not be true and that invariably serve the interests of unseen forces in the corridors of power.

For both sides, the relationship of access depends on not antagonising power by exposing its deep secrets.

The insider is only useful to the journalist so long as he or she has access to power. Which means that the insider is rarely going to offer up information that truly threatens that power. If they did, they would soon be out of a job.

But to be considered useful, the insider needs to offer to the reporter information that appears to be revelatory, that holds out the promise for the journalist of career advancement and prizes.

Both sides are playing a role in a game of charades that serves the joint interests of the corporate media and political elite.

At best, access offers insights

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## The longer we remain in a state of political paralysis, the more these political deformities are empowered

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for journalists into the power plays between rival elite groups with conflicting agendas between the more liberal elements of the power elite and the more hawkish elements.

The public interest is invariably served in only the most marginal way: we get a partial sense of the divisions within an administration or a bureaucracy, but very rarely the full extent of what is going on.

For a brief period, the liberal components of the corporate media swapped out their historic access to join Wikileaks in its transparency revolution. But they quickly understood the dangers of the path they were embarking on as the quote from Assange we began with makes clear.

It would be a big mistake to assume that the corporate media feels threatened by Wikileaks simply because the latter has made a much better fist of holding power to account than the corporate media. This isn't about envy. It's about fear. In reality, Wikileaks does exactly what the corporate media wishes not to do.

**J**ournalists ultimately serve the interests of media owners and advertisers. These corporations are the concealed power running our societies. In addition to owning the media, they fund the politicians and finance the think tanks that so often dictate the news and policy agenda.

Our governments declare these

corporations, especially those dominating the financial sector, too big to fail. Because power in our societies is corporate power.

The pillars upholding this system of secret elite power those disguising and protecting it are the media and the security services: the mind and the muscle. The media corporations are there to protect corporate power using psychological and emotional manipulation, just as the security services are there to protect it using invasive surveillance and physical coercion.

Wikileaks disrupts this cosy relationship from both ends. It threatens to end the role of the corporate media in mediating official information, instead offering the public direct access to official secrets. And in so doing, it dares to expose the tradecraft of the security services as they go about their lawbreaking and abuses, and thereby impose unwelcome scrutiny and restraint on them.

In threatening to bring democratic accountability to the media and the security services, and exposing their long-standing collusion, Wikileaks opens a window on how sham our democracies truly are.

The shared desire of the security services and the corporate media is to disappear Assange in the hope that his revolutionary model of journalism is abandoned or forgotten for good.

It won't be. The technology is not going away. And we must keep reminding the world of what Assange accomplished, and the terrible price he paid for his achievement. **CT**

**Jonathan Cook's books include *Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East* (Pluto Press) and *Disappearing Palestine: Israel's Experiments in Human Despair* (Zed Books). His web site is [www.jonathan-cook.net](http://www.jonathan-cook.net).**

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JOSHUA FRANK

# Nuclear fusion won't save the planet. But it might blow up the world

If we don't put a stop to it, this breakthrough technology could someday melt us all

I awoke on December 13 to news about what could be the most significant scientific breakthrough since the Food and Drug Administration authorized the first Covid vaccine for emergency use two years ago. This time, however, the achievement had nothing to do with that ongoing public health crisis. Instead, as the *New York Times* and CNN alerted me that morning, at stake was a new technology that could potentially solve the worst dilemma humanity faces: climate change and the desperate overheating of our planet. Net-energy-gain fusion, a long-sought-after panacea for all that's wrong with traditional nuclear-fission energy (read: accidents, radioactive waste), had finally been achieved at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in California.

"This is such a wonderful example of a possibility realised, a scien-

tific milestone achieved, and a road ahead to the possibilities for clean energy," exclaimed White House science adviser Arati Prabhakar.

The *New York Times* was quick to follow Prabhakar's lead, boasting that fusion is an "energy source devoid of the pollution and greenhouse gasses caused by the burning of fossil fuels". Even Fox News, not exactly at the top of anyone's list of places focused on climate change, jumped on the bandwagon, declaring fusion "a technology that has the potential to accelerate the planet's shift away from fossil fuels and produce nearly limitless, carbon-free energy".

All in all, the reviews for fusion were positively glowing and it seemed to make instant sense. What could possibly be wrong with something that might end our reliance on fossil fuels, even as it reduced the risks posed by our aging nuclear industry? The message, re-



peated again and again in the days that followed: this was a genuine global-warming game-changer.

After all, in the fusion process, no atoms have to be split to create heat. Gigantic lasers are used, not uranium, so there's no toxic mining involved, nor do thousands of gallons of cold water have to be pumped in to cool overheated reactors, nor will there be radioactive waste byproducts lasting hundreds of thousands of years. And not a risk of a nuclear meltdown in sight! Fusion, so the cheery news went, is safe, effective, and efficient!

Or is it?

On a very basic level, fusion is the stuff of stars. Within the Earth's sun, hydrogen combines with heli-



um to create heat in the form of sunlight. Inside the walls of the Livermore Lab, this natural process was imitated by blasting 192 gigantic lasers into a tube the size of a baby's toe.

Inside that cylinder sat a "hydrogen-encased diamond." When the laser shot through the small hole, it destroyed that diamond quicker than the blink of an eye. In doing so, it created a bunch of invisible x-rays that compressed a small pellet of deuterium and tritium, which scientists refer to as "heavy hydrogen".

"In a brief moment lasting less than 100 trillionths of a second, 2.05 megajoules of energy – roughly the equivalent of a pound of TNT – bombarded the hydrogen pellet," ex-

plained *New York Times* reporter Kenneth Chang. "Out flowed a flood of neutron particles – the product of fusion – which carried about 3 megajoules of energy, a factor of 1.5 in energy gain".

As with so many breakthroughs, there was a catch. First, 3 megajoules isn't much energy. After all, it takes 360,000 megajoules to create 300 hours of light from a single 100-watt light bulb. So, Livermore's fusion development isn't going to electrify a single home, let alone a million homes, anytime soon. And there was another nagging issue with this little fusion creation as well: it took 300 megajoules to power up those 192 lasers. Simply put, at the moment, they require 100

times more energy to charge than the energy they ended up producing.

"The reality is that fusion energy will not be viable at scale anytime within the next decade, a time frame over which carbon emissions must be reduced by 50 percent to avoid catastrophic warming of more than 1.5°C", says climate expert Michael Mann, a professor of earth and environmental science at the University of Pennsylvania. "That task will only be achievable through the scaling up of existing clean energy – renewable sources such as wind and solar – along with energy storage capability and efficiency and conservation measures".

**T**he secretive and heavily secured National Ignition Facility where that test took place is the size of a sprawling sports arena. It could, in fact, hold three football fields. Which makes me wonder: how much space would be needed to do fusion on a commercial scale? No good answer is yet available. Then there's the trouble with that isotope tritium needed to help along the fusion reaction. It's not easy to come by and costs about as much as diamonds, around \$30,000 per gram. Right now, even some of the bigwigs at the Department of Defense are worried that we're running out of usable tritium.

"Fusion advocates often boast that the fuel for their reactors will be cheap and plentiful. That is certainly true for deuterium", writes Daniel Clery in *Science*. "Roughly one in every 5,000 hydrogen atoms in the oceans is deuterium, and it sells for about \$13 per gram. But tritium, with a half-life of 12.3 years, exists naturally only in trace amounts in the upper atmosphere, the product of cosmic ray bombardment".

Fusion boosters brush this unwelcome fact aside, pointing out that "tritium breeding" – a process in

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which tritium is endlessly produced in a loop-like fashion – is entirely possible in a fully operating fusion reactor. In theory, this may seem plausible, but you need a bunch of tritium to jumpstart the initial chain reaction and doubt abounds that there’s enough of it out there to begin with. On top of that, the reactors themselves will have to be lined with a lot of lithium, itself an expensive chemical element at \$71 a kilogram (copper, by contrast, is around \$9.44 a kilogram), to allow the process to work correctly.

**T**hen there’s also a commonly repeated misstatement that fusion doesn’t create significant radioactive waste, a haunting reality for the world’s current fleet of nuclear plants. True, plutonium, which can be used as fuel in atomic weapons, isn’t a natural byproduct of fusion, but tritium is the radioactive form of hydrogen. Its little isotopes are great at permeating metals and finding ways to escape tight enclosures. Obviously, this will pose a significant problem for those who want to continuously breed tritium in a fusion reactor. It also presents a concern for people worried about radioactivity making its way out of such facilities and into the environment.

“Cancer is the main risk from humans ingesting tritium. When tritium decays it spits out a low-energy electron (roughly 18,000 electron volts) that escapes and slams into DNA, a ribosome, or some other biologically important molecule”, David Biello explains in *Scientific American*. “And, unlike other radionuclides, tritium is usually part of water, so it ends up in all parts of the body and therefore can, in theory, promote any kind of cancer. But that also helps reduce the risk: any tritiated water is typically excreted in less than a month”.

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## There’s a commonly repeated misstatement that fusion doesn’t create significant radioactive waste

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If that sounds problematic, that’s because it is. This country’s above-ground atomic bomb testing in the 1950s and 1960s was responsible for most of the man-made tritium that’s lingering in the environment. And it will be at least 2046, 84 years after the last American atmospheric nuclear detonation in Nevada, before tritium there will no longer pose a problem for the area.

Of course, tritium also escapes from our existing nuclear reactors and is routinely found near such facilities where it occurs “naturally” during the fission process. In fact, after Illinois farmers discovered their wells had been contaminated by the nearby Braidwood nuclear plant, they successfully sued the site’s operator Exelon, which, in 2005, was caught discharging 6.2 million gallons of tritium-laden water into the soil.

In the United States, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) allows the industry to monitor for tritium releases at nuclear sites; the industry is politely asked to alert the NRC in a “timely manner” if tritium is either intentionally or accidentally released. But a June 2011 report issued by the Government Accountability Office cast doubt on the NRC’s archaic system for assessing tritium discharges, suggesting that it’s anything but effective. (“Absent such an assessment, we continue to believe that NRC has no assurance that the Groundwater Protection Initiative will lead to prompt detection of underground piping system leaks as nuclear power plants age.”)

Consider all of this a way of saying that, if the NRC isn’t doing an adequate job of monitoring tritium leaks already occurring with regularity at the country’s nuclear plants, how the heck will it do a better job of tracking the stuff at fusion plants in the future? And as I suggest in my new book, *Atomic Days: The Untold Story of the Most Toxic Place in America*, the NRC is plain awful at just about everything it does.

**A**ll of that got me wondering: if tritium, vital for the fusion process, is radioactive, and if they aren’t going to be operating those lasers in time to put the brakes on climate change, what’s really going on here?

Maybe some clues lie (as is so often the case) in history. The initial idea for a fusion reaction was proposed by English physicist Arthur Eddington in 1920.

More than 30 years later, on November 1, 1952, the first full-scale US test of a thermonuclear device, “Operation Ivy”, took place in the Marshall Islands in the Pacific Ocean. It yielded a mushroom-cloud explosion from a fusion reaction equivalent in its power to 10.4 Megatons of TNT. That was 450 times more powerful than the atomic bomb the US had dropped on the Japanese city of Nagasaki only seven years earlier to end World War II. It created an underwater crater 6,240 feet wide and 164 feet deep.

“The Shot, as witnessed aboard the various vessels at sea, is not easily described”, noted a military report on that nuclear experiment. “Accompanied by a brilliant light, the heat wave was felt immediately at distances of thirty to thirty-five miles. The tremendous fireball, appearing on the horizon like the sun when half-risen, quickly expanded after a momentary hover time”.

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Nicknamed “Ivy Mike,” the bomb was a Teller-Ulam thermonuclear device, named after its creators Edward Teller and Stanislaw Ulam. It was also the United States’ first full-scale hydrogen bomb, an altogether different beast than the two awful nukes dropped on Japan in August 1945.

Those bombs utilised fission in their cores to create massive explosions. But Ivy Mike gave a little insight into what was still possible for future weapons of annihilation.

The details of how the Teller-Ulam device works are still classified, but historian of science Alex Wellerstein explained the concept well in the *New Yorker*:

“The basic idea is, as far as we know, as follows. Take a fission weapon – call it the primary. Take a capsule of fusionable material, cover it with depleted uranium, and call it the secondary. Take both the primary and the secondary and put them inside a radiation case – a box made of very heavy materials. When the primary detonates, radiation flows out of it, filling the case with X rays. This process, which is known as radiation implosion, will, through one mechanism or another... compress the secondary to very high densities, inaugurating fusion reactions on a large scale. These fusion reactions will, in turn, let off neutrons of such a high energy that they can make the normally inert depleted uranium of the secondary’s casing undergo fission”.

Got it? Ivy Mike was, in fact, a fission explosion that initiated a fusion reaction. But ultimately, the science of how those instruments of death work isn’t all that important.

The takeaway here is that, since first tried out in that monstrous Marshall Islands explosion, fusion has been intended as a tool of war. And sadly, so it remains, despite all the publicity about its possible use some distant day in relation to cli-

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## This is a rare, yet intentional, admission, surely meant to frighten officials in China and Russia

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mate change.

In truth, any fusion breakthroughs are potentially of critical importance not as a remedy for our warming climate but for a future apocalyptic world of war. Despite all the fantastic media publicity, that’s how the US government has always seen it and that’s why the latest fusion test to create “energy” was executed in the utmost secrecy at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory. One thing should be taken for granted: the American government is interested not in using fusion technology to power the energy grid, but in using it to further strengthen this country’s already massive arsenal of atomic weapons.

Consider it an irony, under the circumstances, but in its announcement about the success at Livermore – though this obviously wasn’t what made the headlines – the Department of Energy didn’t skirt around the issue of gains for future atomic weaponry. Jill Hruby, the department’s undersecretary for nuclear security, admitted that, in achieving a fusion ignition, researchers had “opened a new chapter in NNSA’s science-based Stockpile Stewardship Program”. (NNSA stands for the National Nuclear Security Administration.) That “chapter” Hruby was bragging about has a lot more to do with “modernising” the country’s nuclear weapons capabilities than with using laser fusion to end our reliance on fossil fuels.

“Had we not pursued the hydrogen bomb”, Edward Teller once said,

“there is a very real threat that we would now all be speaking Russian. I have no regrets”. Some attitudes die hard.

Buried deep in the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory’s website, the government comes clean about what these fusion experiments at the \$3.5 billion National Ignition Facility (NIF) are really all about:

“NIF’s high energy density and inertial confinement fusion experiments, coupled with the increasingly sophisticated simulations available from some of the world’s most powerful supercomputers, increase our understanding of weapon physics, including the properties and survivability of weapons-relevant materials... The high rigor and multidisciplinary nature of NIF experiments play a key role in attracting, training, testing, and retaining new generations of skilled stockpile stewards who will continue the mission to protect America into the future”.

Yes, despite all the media attention to climate change, this is a rare, yet intentional, admission, surely meant to frighten officials in China and Russia. It leaves little doubt about what this fusion breakthrough means. It’s not about creating future clean energy and never has been. It’s about “protecting” the world’s greatest capitalist superpower. Competitors beware.

Sadly, fusion won’t save the Arctic from melting, but if we don’t put a stop to it, that breakthrough technology could someday melt us all. **CT**

*Joshua Frank is an award-winning California-based journalist and co-editor of CounterPunch. He is the author of the new book Atomic Days: The Untold Story of the Most Toxic Place in America (Haymarket Books). This article first appeared at [www.tomdispatch.com](http://www.tomdispatch.com).*



THOMAS S. HARRINGTON

# The mural art of Sardinia

Village of San Sperate is rallying point for island's culture and identity

Sardinia, the birthplace of Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci, is a land of layers, and of a people whose indigenous language, Sard, is one of the oldest vernaculars to have sprung from Latin in the early medieval period. They and it have survived numerous attempts at, if not outright eradication, severe marginalisation by outside occupying powers such as the Byzantines, Vandals, Pisans, Genoese, Catalans, the Spanish, the Savoyards, and from the mid- to late 19th-century onward the unified Italian state.

All have left their linguistic and cultural marks on the island, but none have broken its people's desire to continue defining themselves in terms of their own extremely unique historical trajectory.

Owing to the peninsula's long history of political disunion previous to unification in 1871, present day Italy is, along with France, one of the least forgiving states of Europe when it comes to celebrating the linguistic and cultural diversity of its many original languages.

Yet, despite the enormous pressure to conform to the dictates of Rome, Sard is still spoken in many parts of the island. And even more incredibly, Catalan, brought from places like Barcelona and Valencia during the roughly four-century long Aragonese occupation of Sardinia is still actively spoken – with a marked Italian accent – in the beautiful northwestern port city of Alghero. True, those speaking both Sard and Alguerès are most older than 50. And this has led to a good deal of speculation



Un vecchio che ti guarda.  
Lui ti guarda  
quando arrivi.  
Ti aspetta.  
Ti osserva, come fossi  
uno sconosciuto  
ma è solo curioso.  
Il suo guardare non è fastidioso  
il suo essere non è invadente  
il suo guardare è ospitalità  
vuole di conoscerti  
di chiacchierare con te,  
vuole di raccontarsi  
di far conoscere  
il suo passato  
le sue esperienze.  
Lui è lì...  
Vive  
non gli importa  
del tempo che passa.  
Ti aspetta  
ti accoglie e ti ama...  
Lui è una forza  
lui è un anziano  
lui è  
Un vecchio che ti guarda.

Stefano Pani  
2021

S. Pani

Stefano Pani  
2021



Previous Page: A reminder that love lies at the centre of the Palestinian struggle for freedom.

Above: What the silent stare of an elderly man really means.

Left: "Man will cultured and civilised when he learns to defend his culture to the death and not be afraid of his enemies" (from the partially visible lettering bottom right).

about what will take place when they are gone.

That said, it is important remember that, while enormously important, language is not the only vehicle that a collective has for affirming its belief in its own uniqueness. When British government oppression and emigration to other English-speaking countries sapped the vigour of the Irish language, activists there turned to, among other things, the invention of the new national sports like hurling and Gaelic football.

Something similar took place in the Basque country with the creation of Basque games and the spread of all-male cooking clubs or *txokos* as central government control over language and culture began to increase greatly in the latter decades of the 19th-century, and even more dramatically so, during the Franco dictatorship.

In Sardinia, mural painting, and yes also food, are



The helplessness of the innocent in the face of bombs.

among the more important rallying points for today's Sardinian identity. The epicentre of mural culture is the village of San Sperate, 20 kilometers northwest of the capital of Cagliari. The practice of adorning the plain walls of the village began in the creative mind painter and sculptor Giuseppe "Pinuccio" Sciola.

The son of a farmer, Sciola's first creative works were executed without any formal training. His talents were soon recognised and he was given a scholarship to study art in Cagliari. From there he began traveling the world (Florence, Salzburg, Madrid and Paris) and establishing relationships with important sculptors like Giacomo Manzù, Aligi Sassu and Henry Moore.

After witnessing the Paris Spring of 1968, he returned to San Sperate with the idea of turning it into an open air museum, the first of its kind in Italy. He painted many of the first murals himself, then inviting artist friends to help.

In 1973, he was invited to go to Mexico City where he established a strong relationship with David Alfaro Siqueiros, the founder and leading force of Mexican muralism. The trip led to a sister city relationship between San Sperate and the Mexico City district of Tepito. In



In memory of the brave World War I Sardinian Brigata Sassari, made famous by the writings of their leader Emilio Lussu.

the succeeding years well-known artists from all over the world came to paint murals or contribute sculptures (Sciola's most important artistic practice) in the town.

The muralism of San Sperate spurred similar efforts



Scenes of rural life.



The classic image off La Pietà of the Virgin Mary holding her dying son Jesus is updated to reflect the abuse of the young to protect the soon-to-be-gone elderly in the age of Covid.

in other Sardinian towns including Serramanna, Fonni, Tinnura, San Gavino, Armungia, Montresta, Muravera, Suni, Palau and Orgosolo, which is perhaps the one closest to it in terms of breadth and notoriety.

I recently had the privilege of speaking with the superb Sardinian painter Piergiorgio Barranca and I asked him if he had an explanation for why muralism has been embraced so strongly by Sardinians. Without hesitating he said it comes, and here I paraphrase, from a rebelliousness born of having been overlooked, made invisible and disrespected in their own land by those from other places bent on teaching them how to become supposedly better versions of themselves. It is, he continued, a way of saying this is who we are whether you want to understand it or not.

In other words, a way of saying we might bend, and even learn the languages and other things you bring to us, but we'll never break.

**CT**

**Thomas Harrington** is an essayist, photographer and student of the Iberian, Ibero-American and Mediterranean worlds. He is a three-time Fulbright Grantee (Spain, Uruguay and Italy) who has also been visiting scholar or guest lecturer in numerous countries in Europe and Latin America. He is a frequent commentator on politics and culture in the US press and Spanish and Catalan-language media.

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Derailed freight train  
in East Palestine,  
Ohio.  
(Photo: NTSB/Handout  
via Xinhua)



KENNY STANCIL

# Rail giant's donation before toxic crash

If Norfolk Southern “can pay for lobbyists and politicians, they can pay to clean up the mess they made in our community”, says local group.

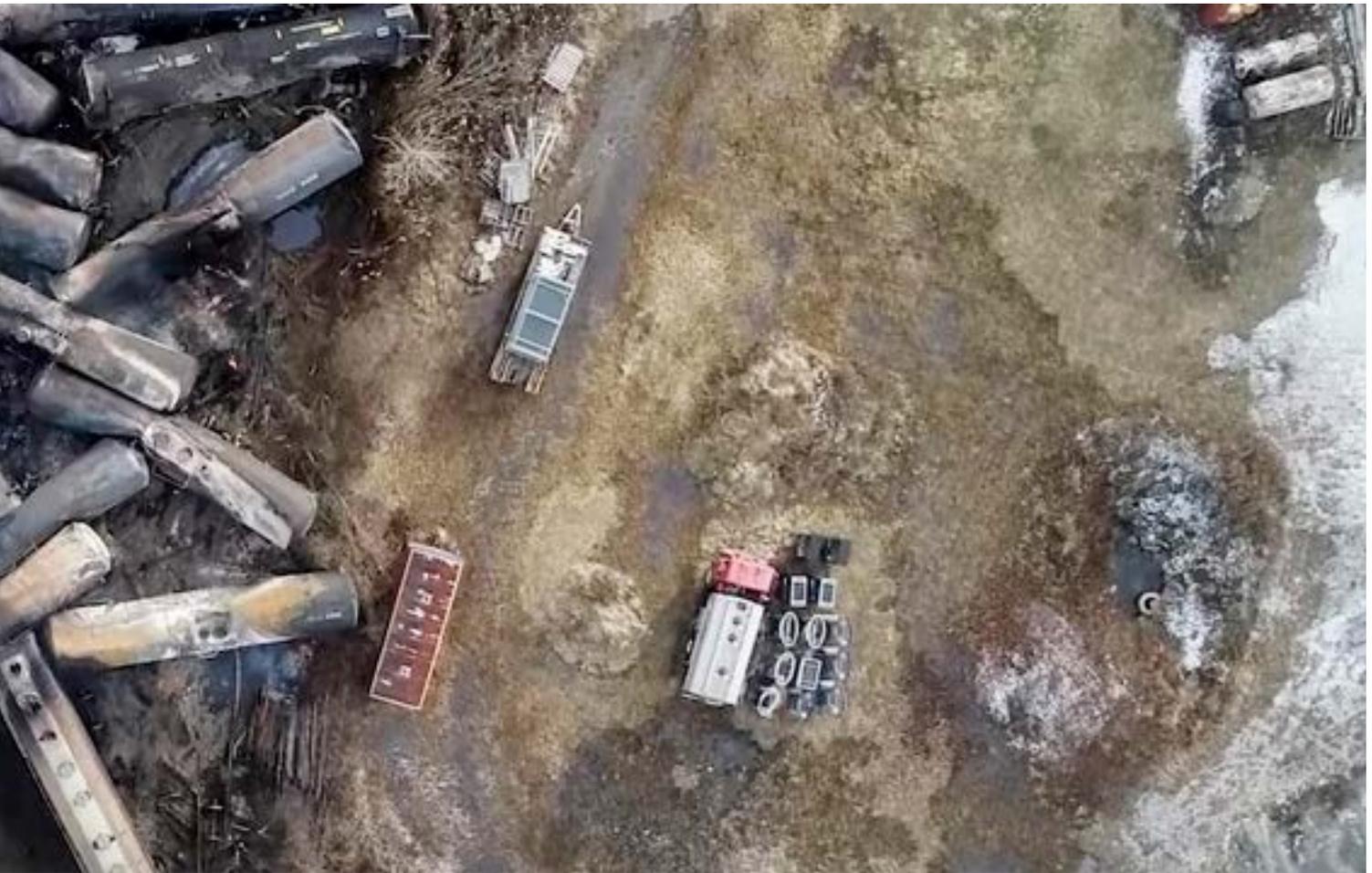
**A**n investigation published on February 20 has revealed that just weeks before a Norfolk Southern-owned train overloaded with hazardous materials derailed and caused a toxic chemical fire in East Palestine, Ohio, the rail giant donated \$10,000 – the

maximum amount allowed – to help fund the inauguration of the state’s Republican Gov. Mike DeWine.

According to WSYX, the Columbus-based news outlet that conducted the investigation, “This contribution, which is part of \$29,000 the Virginia-based corporation has contributed to DeWine’s political

funds since he first ran for governor in 2018, is merely one piece of an extensive, ongoing effort to influence statewide officials and Ohio lawmakers”.

“In all, the railway company has contributed about \$98,000 during the past six years to Ohio statewide and legislative candidates, accord-



ing to data from the secretary of state”, WSYX reported. “Virtually all went to Republicans, although Norfolk Southern hedged its support for DeWine in 2018 with a \$3,000 check to Democratic gubernatorial candidate Richard Cordray”.

In addition to shelling out leash, Norfolk Southern has also extensively lobbied DeWine, statewide officials, and Ohio lawmakers.

Quarterly reports disclosing the company’s lobbying activities show that DeWine and other statewide officials were targeted 39 times over the past six years, while Ohio lawmakers were targeted 167 times during the same time period.

“Most of the disclosed attempts to influence Ohio leaders came on generic rail or transportation issues”, WSYX reported. “Some efforts, however, were devoted to defeating

legislation that would have established tougher safety standards for rail yards and train operations.”

River Valley Organizing, a local progressive group, declared on social media that “this is what we’re up against”.

Norfolk Southern’s successful bid to thwart at least one Ohio bill aimed at improving railroad safety – explained in depth by the local news outlet – mirrors the company’s triumphant campaign to weaken federal regulations.

Before dozens of its train cars careened off the tracks and burst into flames in East Palestine on February 3 – leading to the discharge of vinyl chloride and other carcinogenic chemicals – Norfolk Southern “helped kill a federal safety rule aimed at upgrading the rail industry’s Civil War-era braking sys-

tems”, *The Lever* reported earlier this month.

US Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg, who has been criticised by progressive advocacy groups and lawmakers for his lacklustre response to the crisis in East Palestine, sent a letter to Norfolk Southern CEO Alan Shaw on Sunday stating that the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) is investigating the cause of the derailment and that the Federal Railroad Administration is examining whether safety violations occurred and intends to hold Norfolk Southern accountable if they did.

Buttigieg insisted that the company “demonstrate unequivocal support” for the poor rural town’s roughly 4,700 residents as well as the populations of surrounding areas potentially affected by air and

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groundwater contamination.

“Norfolk Southern must live up to its commitment to make residents whole – and must also live up to its obligation to do whatever it takes to stop putting communities such as East Palestine at risk”, the transportation secretary wrote. “This is the right time for Norfolk Southern to take a leadership position within the rail industry, shifting to a posture that focuses on supporting, not thwarting, efforts to raise the standard of U.S. rail safety regulation”,

The Associated Press reported on February 20: “Buttigieg also said that Norfolk Southern and other rail companies ‘spent millions of dollars in the courts and lobbying members of Congress to oppose commonsense safety regulations, stopping some entirely and reducing the scope of others.’ He said the effort undermined rules on brake requirements and delayed the phase-in for more durable rail cars to transport hazardous material to 2029, instead of the ‘originally envisioned date of 2025’.

“The transportation secretary said the results of the investigation are not yet known, but ‘we do know that these steps that Norfolk Southern and its peers lobbied against were intended to improve rail safety and to help keep Americans safe.’”

Nevertheless, as the *Lever* reported earlier this month, Buttigieg is actively considering an industry-backed proposal to further erode federal oversight of train braking systems.

The outlet has published an open letter urging Buttigieg “to rectify the multiple regulatory failures that preceded this horrific situation”, including by exercising his authority to reinstate the rail safety rules rescinded by the Trump administration at the behest of industry lobbyists.

The full environmental and public health consequences of the ongo-

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## Buttigieg is actively considering an industry-backed proposal to further erode federal oversight of train braking systems

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ing East Palestine disaster are still coming into view, as residents question the validity of initial water testing paid for by Norfolk Southern.

Despite state officials’ claims that air and water in the area remain safe, thousands of fish have died in polluted local waterways and people in the vicinity of the derailment have reported headaches, eye irritation, and other symptoms.

Just days after his company skipped a town hall meeting, Shaw visited East Palestine on February 20 and said that “we are here and will stay here for as long as it takes to ensure your safety”.

Norfolk Southern, which reported record-breaking operating revenues of \$12.7-billion in 2022, originally offered to donate just \$25,000 to help affected residents – an amount equivalent to about \$5 per person – but recently announced the creation of a \$1 million charitable fund instead.

Lawmakers in Ohio “are now scrambling to make sure the railroad is held accountable”, WSYX reported. “The House Homeland Security Committee is scheduled to hear ‘informal testimony’ Wednesday from Karen Huey, assistant director of the Ohio Department of Public Safety, and John Esterly, chairman of the Ohio State Legislative Board with the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers”.

In Washington, US Senate Commerce Committee Chair Maria

Cantwell (D-Wash.) requested information regarding the handling of hazardous materials from the CEOs of several large rail corporations, including Norfolk Southern.

“Over the past five years, the Class I railroads have cut their workforce by nearly one-third, shuttered railyards where railcars are traditionally inspected, and are running longer and heavier trains”, Cantwell wrote. “Thousands of trains carrying hazardous materials, like the one that derailed in Ohio, travel through communities throughout the nation each day”.

Notably, Norfolk Southern announced a \$10-billion stock buyback programme last March. The company has routinely raised its dividend, rewarding shareholders while refusing to invest in safety upgrades or basic benefits such as paid sick leave.

Just days after he sent co-authored letters raising safety and health concerns to the NTSB and the US Environmental Protection Agency, U.S. Sen. Sherrod Brown (D-Ohio) said during a Sunday appearance on CNN’s “State of the Union” that Norfolk Southern is responsible for the East Palestine disaster, which he characterised as another chapter in “the same old story”.

“Corporations do stock buybacks, they do big dividend checks, they lay off workers”, said Brown. “Thousands of workers have been laid off from Norfolk Southern. Then they don’t invest in safety rules and safety regulation, and this kind of thing happens. That’s why people in East Palestine are so upset”.

“They know that corporate lobbyists have had far too much influence in our government and they see this as the result,” Brown continued. “These things are happening because these railroads are simply not investing the way they should in car safety and in the rail lines themselves”.

“Something’s wrong with corporate America and something’s wrong with Congress and administrations listening too much to corporate lobbyists”, he added. “And that’s got to change”.

Another Norfolk Southern train carrying hazardous materials crashed in February near Detroit, Michigan. Like Brown, union leaders and US Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) have attributed the recent derailments to Wall Street-backed policies that prioritise profits over safety.

As David Sirota, Rebecca Burns, Julia Rock, and Matthew Cunning-

## The US is home to more than 1,000 train derailments per year and has seen a 36 percent increase in hazardous materials violations

ham-Cook of the *Lever* pointed out in a recent *New York Times* opinion piece, the US is home to more than 1,000 train derailments per year and has seen a 36 percent increase in hazardous materials violations committed by rail carriers in the past five years.

The rail industry “tolerates too

many preventable derailments and fights too many safety regulations”, the journalists wrote. “The federal government must move quickly to improve rail safety overall”.

An inter-union alliance of U.S. rail workers, meanwhile, has called on organized labor to back the nationalization of the country’s railroad system, arguing that “our nation can no longer afford private ownership of the railroads; the general welfare demands that they be brought under public ownership”.

CT

*Kenny Stancil is a staff writer for Common Dreams – [www.commondreams.org](http://www.commondreams.org) – where this article was first published.*

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JOHN W. WHITEHEAD

# Raging bulls in blue

The deadly toll of warrior policing on steroids

**T**hat the police officers charged with the beating death of 29-year-old Tyre Nichols last month are black is a distraction.

Don't be distracted.

This latest instance of police brutality is not about racism in policing or black-on-black violence.

The entire institution is corrupt.

The old guard – made up of fine, decent, lawful police officers who took seriously their oath of office to serve and protect their fellow citizens, uphold the Constitution, and maintain the peace – has given way to a new guard hyped up on their own authority and the power of the badge who have almost absolute discretion to decide who is a threat, what constitutes resistance, and how harshly they can deal with the citizens they were appointed to “serve and protect”.

Memphis's now-disbanded Scorpion unit provides a glimpse into the looming crisis in policing that has gone beyond mere militarisation.

Unfortunately, while much has been said about the dangers of police militarisation, a warrior mindset that has police viewing the rest

of the citizenry as enemy combatants, and law enforcement training that teaches cops to shoot first and ask questions later, little attention has been paid to the role that “roid rage,” triggered by anabolic steroid use and abuse by police, may contribute to the mounting numbers of cases involving police brutality.

Given how prevalent steroid use is within the US military (it remains a barely concealed fixture of military life) and the rate of military veterans migrating into law enforcement (one out of every five police officers is a military veteran), this could shed some light on the physical evolution of domestic police physiques.

**A** far cry from Mayberry's benevolent, khaki-clad neighbourhood cops, police today are stormtroopers on steroids, both literally and figuratively: raging bulls in blue.

“Steroid use”, as researcher Philip J. Sweitzer warns, “is the not-so-quiet little secret of state and city police departments”.

John Hoberman, the author of *Dopers in Uniform: The Hidden World of Police on Steroids*, estimates that there may be tens of thousands of officers on steroids.

Illegal without a prescription and legitimised by a burgeoning industry of doctors known to law enforcement personnel who will pre-



Pixabay

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scribe steroids and other growth hormones based on bogus diagnoses, these testosterone-enhancing drugs have become hush-hush tools of the trade for police seeking to increase the size and strength of their muscles and their physical endurance, as well as gain an “edge” on criminals.

Having gained traction within the bodybuilding and sports communities, steroid use has fuelled the dramatic transformation of police from Sheriff Andy Taylor’s lean form to the massive menace of the Hulk.

Broad-shouldered. Slim-waisted. Veiny. Tree-trunk necks. Rippling physiques. And as big as action heroes. That’s how *Men’s Health* describes these “juicers in blue”: cops using a cocktail of steroid drugs to transform themselves into “a flesh-and-blood Justice League”.

“Because juicing cops are a secretive subculture within a secretive subculture”, exact numbers are hard to come by, but if the anecdotal evidence is to be believed, it’s more widespread than ever, with 25 percent of police using these drugs to bulk up and supercharge their aggression.

Cue the rise of muscular authoritarianism.

**T**here are few police forces at every level of government that are not implicated in steroid use and, consequently, impacted by “roid rage”, which manifests itself as extreme mood swings, irritability, nervousness, delusions, aggressive outbursts, excessive use of force, a sense of invincibility, and poor judgment.

“For officers who work daily in high stress, high adrenaline environments and carry guns, the ‘rage’ can be even more extreme”, concludes journalist Bianca Cain Johnson, eliciting “a Hulkesque response by those using steroids to normal

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## We cannot afford to ignore the role that doping by police plays in this escalating violence

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situations”.

When that roid rage is combined with the trappings of a militarised cop armed to the teeth and empowered to shoot first and ask questions later, as well as to probe, poke, pinch, taser, search, seize, strip and generally manhandle anyone they see fit in almost any circumstance, all with the general blessing of the courts, the danger of any encounter with a cop grows exponentially more deadly.

Given the growing numbers of excessive force incidents by police, especially against unarmed individuals, we cannot afford to ignore the role that doping by police plays in this escalating violence.

For instance, in one of the largest busts nationwide involving law enforcement, 248 New Jersey police officers and firefighters were found to have been getting fraudulent prescriptions of anabolic steroids, human growth hormones and other muscle-building drugs from a doctor. A subsequent investigation of those officers found that many had previously been sued for excessive force or civil rights violations, or had been arrested, fired or suspended for off-duty.

As David Meinert reports, “Steroid use has been anecdotally associated with several brutality cases and racially motivated violence by police officers, including the 1997 sodomising of an Haitian immigrant in New York”.

Not surprisingly, police have consistently managed to sidestep a steady volley of lawsuits alleging a

correlation between police doping and excessive force, insulated by a thin blue wall of silence, solidarity and coverups, powerful police unions, and the misapplied doctrine of qualified immunity.

At its most basic level, what this really translates to is an utter lack of accountability, whether over police brutality or doping.

Thus, any serious discussion about police reform needs to address the use of steroids by police, along with a national call for mandatory testing.

For starters, as journalist David Meinert suggests, police should be subjected to random drug tests for use of steroids, testosterone and HCG (an artificial form of testosterone), and testing should be mandatory and immediate any time an officer is involved in a shooting or accused of unnecessary force.

This is no longer a debate over good cops and bad cops.

We’ve allowed the government to create an alternate reality in which freedom is secondary to security, and the rights and lives of the citizenry are less important than the authority and might of the government.

As I make clear in my book *Battlefield America: The War on the American People* and in its fictional counterpart *The Erik Blair Diaries*, the longer we wait to burst the bubble on this false chimera, the greater the risks to both police officers and the rest of the citizenry. **CT**

**John W. Whitehead** is a constitutional attorney and founder and president of the Rutherford Institute. His most recent books are the best-selling *Battlefield America: The War on the American People*, the award-winning *A Government of Wolves: The Emerging American Police State*, and a dystopian fiction novel, *The Erik Blair Diaries*.

CHRIS HEDGES

# Ukraine: The war that went wrong

Nato support for the war in Ukraine, designed to degrade the Russian military and drive Vladimir Putin from power, is not going according to plan. New sophisticated military hardware won't help

**E**mpires in terminal decline leap from one military fiasco to the next. The war in Ukraine, another bungled attempt to reassert US global hegemony, fits this pattern. The danger is that the more dire things look, the more the US will escalate the conflict, potentially provoking open confrontation with Russia.

If Russia carries out retaliatory attacks on supply and training bases in neighbouring Nato countries, or uses tactical nuclear weapons, Nato will almost certainly respond by attacking Russian forces. We will have ignited World War III, which could result in a nuclear holocaust.

US military support for Ukraine began with the basics – ammunition and assault weapons. The Biden administration, however, soon crossed several self-imposed red lines to provide a tidal wave of lethal war machinery: Stinger anti-aircraft systems; Javelin anti-armour systems; M777 towed Howitzers; 122mm GRAD rockets; M142 multiple rocket launchers, or HIMARS; Tube-Launched, Optically-Tracked, Wire-Guided (TOW) missiles; Patriot

air defense batteries; National Advanced Surface-to-Air Missile Systems (NASAMS); M113 Armored Personnel Carriers; and now 31 M1 Abrams, as part of a new \$400-million package.

These tanks will be supplemented by 14 German Leopard 2A6 tanks, 14 British Challenger 2 tanks, as well as tanks from other Nato mem-

bers, including Poland. Next on the list are armour-piercing depleted uranium (DU) ammunition and F-15 and F-16 fighter jets.

Since Russia invaded on February 24, 2022, Congress has approved more than \$113-billion in aid to Ukraine and allied nations supporting the war in Ukraine. Three-fifths of this aid, \$67-billion, has been allocated for military expenditures. There are 28 countries transferring weapons to Ukraine. All of them, with the exception of Australia, Canada and the US, are in Europe.

**T**he rapid upgrade of sophisticated military hardware and aid provided to Ukraine is not a good sign for the Nato alliance. It takes many months, if not years, of training to operate and coordinate these weapons systems. Tank battles – I was in the last major tank battle outside Kuwait City during the first Gulf war as a reporter – are highly choreographed and complex operations. Armour must



F-16 Fighting Falcon at the 2015 Royal International Air Tattoo

Geoff Moore/Wikimedia

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work in close concert with air power, warships, infantry and artillery batteries. It will be many, many months, if not years, before Ukrainian forces receive adequate training to operate this equipment and coordinate the diverse components of a modern battlefield. Indeed, the US never succeeded in training the Iraqi and Afghan armies in combined arms manoeuvre warfare, despite two decades of occupation.

I was with Marine Corps units in February 1991 that pushed Iraqi forces out of the Saudi Arabian town of Khafji. Supplied with superior military equipment, the Saudi soldiers that held Khafji offered ineffectual resistance. As we entered the city, we saw Saudi troops in commandeered fire trucks, hightailing it south to escape the fighting. All the fancy military hardware, which the Saudis had purchased from the US, proved worthless because they did not know how to use it.

Nato military commanders understand that the infusion of these weapons systems into the war will not alter what is, at best, a stalemate, defined largely by artillery duels over hundreds of miles of front lines. The purchase of these weapons systems – one M1 Abrams tank costs \$10-million when training and sustainment are included – increases the profits of the arms manufacturers. The use of these weapons in Ukraine allows them to be tested in battlefield conditions, making the war a laboratory for weapons manufacturers such as Lockheed Martin. All this is useful to Nato and to the arms industry. But it is not very useful to Ukraine.

The other problem with advanced weapons systems such as the M1 Abrams, which have 1,500-horsepower turbine engines that run on jet fuel, is that they are temperamental and require highly skilled and near constant maintenance. They are not forgiving to those op-

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## The neoconservative pimps of war watch with dread as Ukraine is being pummelled by a relentless Russian war of attrition

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erating them who make mistakes; indeed, mistakes can be lethal.

The most optimistic scenario for deploying M1-Abrams tanks in Ukraine is six to eight months, more likely longer. If Russia launches a major offensive in the spring, as expected, the M1 Abrams will not be part of the Ukrainian arsenal. Even when they do arrive, they will not significantly alter the balance of power, especially if the Russians are able to turn the tanks, manned by inexperienced crews, into charred hulks.

So why all this infusion of high-tech weaponry? We can sum it up in one word: panic.

Having declared a de facto war on Russia and openly calling for the removal of Vladimir Putin, the neoconservative pimps of war watch with dread as Ukraine is being pummelled by a relentless Russian war of attrition. Ukraine has suffered nearly 18,000 civilian casualties (6,919 killed and 11,075 injured). It has also seen around 8 percent of its total housing destroyed or damaged and 50 percent of its energy infrastructure directly impacted with frequent power cuts.

Ukraine requires at least \$3-billion a month in outside support to keep its economy afloat, the International Monetary Fund's managing director recently said. Nearly 14 million Ukrainians have been displaced – 8 million in Europe and 6 million internally – and up to 18 million people, or

40 percent of Ukraine's population, will soon require humanitarian assistance. Ukraine's economy contracted by 35 percent in 2022, and 60 percent of Ukrainians are now poised to live on less than \$5.5 a day, according to World Bank estimates. Nine million Ukrainians are without electricity and water in sub-zero temperatures, the Ukrainian president says. According to estimates from the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, 100,000 Ukrainian and 100,000 Russian soldiers have been killed in the war as of last November.

"My feeling is we are at a crucial moment in the conflict when the momentum could shift in favour of Russia if we don't act decisively and quickly", former US Senator Rob Portman was quoted as saying at the World Economic Forum in a post by The Atlantic Council. "A surge is needed".

Turning logic on its head, the shills for war argue that "the greatest nuclear threat we face is a Russian victory". The cavalier attitude to a potential nuclear confrontation with Russia by the cheerleaders for the war in Ukraine is very, very frightening, especially given the fiascos they oversaw for twenty years in the Middle East.

The near hysterical calls to support Ukraine as a bulwark of liberty and democracy by the mandarins in Washington are a response to the palpable rot and decline of the US empire. America's global authority has been decimated by well-publicised war crimes, torture, economic decline, social disintegration – including the assault on the capital on January 6, the botched response to the pandemic, declining life expectancies and the plague of mass shootings – and a series of military debacles from Vietnam to Afghanistan.

The coups, political assassinations, election fraud, black propaganda, blackmail, kidnapping, bru-

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tal counter-insurgency campaigns, US sanctioned massacres, torture in global black sites, proxy wars and military interventions carried out by the United States around the globe since the end of World War II have *never* resulted in the establishment of a democratic government. Instead, these interventions have led to over 20 million killed and spawned a global revulsion for US imperialism.

In desperation, the empire pumps ever greater sums into its war machine. The most recent \$1.7-trillion spending bill included \$847-billion for the military; the total is boosted to \$858-billion when factoring in accounts that don't fall under the Armed Services committees' jurisdiction, such as the Department of Energy, which oversees nuclear weapons maintenance and the infrastructure that develops them. In 2021, when the US had a military budget of \$801-billion, it constituted nearly 40 percent of all global military expenditures, more than the next nine countries, including Russia and China, spent on their militaries *combined*.

**A**s Edward Gibbon observed about the Roman Empire's own fatal lust for endless war: "[T]he decline of Rome was the natural and inevitable effect of immoderate greatness. Prosperity ripened the principle of decay; the cause of the destruction multiplied with the extent of conquest; and, as soon as time or accident had removed the artificial supports, the stupendous fabric yielded to the pressure of its own weight. The story of the ruin is simple and obvious; and instead of inquiring *why* the Roman Empire was destroyed, we should rather be surprised that it had subsisted for so long".

A state of permanent war creates complex bureaucracies, sustained

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## This militarism needs mortal enemies, even when those demonised have no intention or capability of harming the US

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by compliant politicians, journalists, scientists, technocrats and academics, who obsequiously serve the war machine. This militarism needs mortal enemies – the latest are Russia and China – even when those demonised have no intention or capability, as was the case with Iraq, of harming the US. We are hostage to these incestuous institutional structures.

Last month, the House and Senate Armed Services Committees, for example, appointed eight commissioners to review Biden's National Defense Strategy (NDS) to "examine the assumptions, objectives, defense investments, force posture and structure, operational concepts, and military risks of the NDS".

The commission, as Eli Clifton writes at the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, is "largely comprised of individuals with financial ties to the weapons industry and US government contractors, raising questions about whether the commission will take a critical eye to contractors who receive \$400-billion of the \$858-billion FY2023 defense budget".

The chair of the commission, Clifton notes, is former Rep. Jane Harman (D-CA), who "sits on the board of Iridium Communications, a satellite communications firm that was awarded a seven-year \$738.5-million contract with the Department of Defense in 2019."

Reports about Russian interference in the elections and Russia bots manipulating public opinion – which Matt Taibbi's recent report-

ing on the "Twitter Files" exposes as an elaborate piece of black propaganda – was uncritically amplified by the press. It seduced Democrats and their liberal supporters into seeing Russia as a mortal enemy. The near universal support for a prolonged war with Ukraine would not be possible without this con.

America's two ruling parties depend on campaign funds from the war industry and are pressured by weapons manufacturers in their state or districts, who employ constituents, to pass gargantuan military budgets. Politicians are acutely aware that to challenge the permanent war economy is to be attacked as unpatriotic and is usually an act of political suicide.

"The soul that is enslaved to war cries out for deliverance", writes Simone Weil in her essay "The Iliad or the Poem of Force", "but deliverance itself appears to it an extreme and tragic aspect, the aspect of destruction".

Historians refer to the quixotic attempt by empires in decline to regain a lost hegemony through military adventurism as "micro-militarism". During the Peloponnesian War (431-404 BC) the Athenians invaded Sicily, losing 200 ships and thousands of soldiers. The defeat ignited a series of successful revolts throughout the Athenian empire.

The Roman Empire, which at its height lasted for two centuries, became captive to its army that, similar to the US war industry, was a state within a state. Rome's once mighty legions in the late stage of empire suffered defeat after defeat while extracting ever more resources from a crumbling and impoverished state. In the end, the elite Praetorian Guard auctioned off the emperors to the highest bidder.

The British Empire, already decimated by the suicidal military



An M1 Abrams main battle tank prepares to move on a range near Zagan in Poland

folly of World War I, breathed its last gasp in 1956 when it attacked Egypt in a dispute over the nationalisation of the Suez Canal. Britain withdrew in humiliation and became an appendage of the United States. A decade-long war in Afghanistan sealed the fate of a decrepit Soviet Union.

“While rising empires are often judicious, even rational in their application of armed force for conquest and control of overseas dominions, fading empires are inclined to ill-considered displays of power, dreaming of bold military masterstrokes that would somehow recoup lost prestige and power”, historian Alfred W. McCoy writes in his book, *In the Shadows of the American Century: The Rise and Decline of US Global Power*. “Often irrational even from an imperial point of view, these

## Politicians are acutely aware that to challenge the permanent war economy is usually an act of political suicide

micro-military operations can yield haemorrhaging expenditures or humiliating defeats that only accelerate the process already under way.”

The plan to reshape Europe and the global balance of power by degrading Russia is turning out to resemble the failed plan to reshape the Middle East. It is fuelling a global food crisis and devastating Europe with near double-digit inflation. It is exposing the impotency, once again, of the United States, and the bank-

ruptcy of its ruling oligarchs. As a counterweight to the United States, nations such as China, Russia, India, Brazil and Iran are severing themselves from the tyranny of the dollar as the world’s reserve currency, a move that will trigger economic and social catastrophe in the United States.

Washington is giving Ukraine ever more sophisticated weapons systems and billions upon billions in aid in a futile bid to save Ukraine but, more importantly, to save itself. **CT**

**Chris Hedges** is a Pulitzer Prize-winning author and journalist who was a foreign correspondent for fifteen years for *The New York Times*. His latest book is *The Greatest Evil is War* (Seven Stories Press).

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STEVE FRASER

# America's afraid of communism – again!

How Corporate America became the bogeyman of today's anti-communist crusader



**R**on DeSantis, governor of Florida and perhaps the next president of the United States, is waging war against something he and many others on the right identify as “woke communism”. DeSantis even persuaded the Florida legislature to pass a Victims of Communism law, mandating that every November 7 (the anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia), all public schools in the state must devote 45 minutes of instruc-

**Governor Ron DeSantis speaks at the 2021 Student Action Summit in Tampa, Florida.**

tion to the evils of the red menace. You might reasonably ask: What menace? After all, the Soviet Union fell apart more than 30 years ago and, long before that, communist parties around the world had dwindled in numbers and lost their revolutionary zeal. The American Communist Party was buried alive nearly three-quarters of a century ago during the McCarthy hysteria of the 1950s.

How then can there be a muscular rebirth of anti-communism when there's no communism to face off against?

The Claremont Institute, a right-wing think tank, explains the paradox this way: the powers that be of the present moment, including “education, corporate media, entertainment, big business, especially big tech, are to varying degrees aligned with the Democratic Party which is now controlled by Woke Communism”.

All clear now? A “cold civil war” is afoot, so we're assured by DeSantis and crew, and if we don't act quickly, “woke communism will re-

Gage Skidmore

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place American justice... the choice is between liberty or death”.

Naturally, Donald Trump has joined the chorus, declaiming that the Democratic Party functions as a cover for “wild-eyed Marxists”. People like Presidents Barack Obama and Joe Biden, formerly considered proud defenders of capitalism, are now censored as socialists. Steve Bannon, right-wing populist organiser and one-time Trump adviser, has attacked the Business Roundtable and venture capitalists like Larry Fink of Blackrock, the largest asset management firm in the world, because he’s determined to defend a “government of laws, not Woke CEOs”.

At the January gathering of the Republican National Committee, angry that Ronna McDaniel had held onto her position as its chairperson, right-wing activist Charlie Kirk put the matter in stark class terms: “The country club won today. So, the grassroots people who can’t afford to buy a steak and are struggling to make ends meet, they just got told by their representatives at an opulent \$900/night hotel that ‘We hate you.’”

How surpassingly odd! Somehow, the “spectre” invoked nearly 200 years ago by Karl Marx in the *Communist Manifesto*, reflecting his urge to see the exploited and impoverished mobilised to overthrow capitalism, now hangs out at country clubs, corporate boardrooms, and the White House – all the redoubts of capitalism.

**L**isten to DeSantis. At a rally in Sarasota during the 2022 midterm elections, he got his loudest applause for denouncing corporate America – and not just for assaulting the Walt Disney company’s criticism of the state’s “don’t say gay” policy. He went after Wall Street, too, noting that the

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## Once upon a time, anti-communism was the ideology of a ruling class under siege by enemies intent on destroying civilised life

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“masters of the universe are using their economic power to impose policies on the country that they could not do at the ballot box” and promising to “fight the Woke in corporate America.” A recent Gallup poll signals that he might be onto something, since the percentage of Republicans unhappy with big business has soared.

Once upon a time, anti-communism was the ideology of a ruling class under siege, warning that its enemies among hard-pressed farmers and industrial workers were intent on destroying the foundations of civilised life: private property, the family, religion, and the nation. Now, of all the unlikely suspects, anti-communism has become part of the ideological arsenal aimed at those very dominating elites.

### Bankers and Bolsheviks

What happened? There’s certainly a history here. Start with Henry Ford, a folk hero to millions of Americans during the early decades of the twentieth-century. He not only invented the Model T Ford but also helped articulate a new version of anti-communism. He was a notorious antisemite, even publishing a book in 1923 called *The International Jew* that warned of a Jewish conspiracy to take over the world. (It became a bestseller.)

Antisemitism had long traded on the stereotype of the Jew as Shylock, the usurious, heartless banker. Ford, who also hated bankers, sought something far grander than classic antisemitism. As he came

to see it, the International Jew was conspiring not just with the titans of high finance but with their supposedly inveterate enemies, the Bolsheviks, whose tyranny in Russia was but a foretaste of the future.

In America, as he saw it, financiers were secretly plotting with the Industrial Workers of the World and the Socialist Party to make war on capitalism, an unholy alliance of Wall Street, Jewish financiers, and the Kremlin, the Rothschilds and Lenin, seeking to unravel the very moral fibre of western civilisation.

Together, so this line of thought went, they plotted to saturate a hard-working, family-centred, patriarchal, sexually orthodox, racially homogenous, god-fearing capitalist society with soul-destroying hedonism, allowing the bankers to make money and the Bolsheviks to find their way to power.

After all, communists were atheists, who held the traditional patriarchal family in contempt, believed in both woman’s equality and racial equality, and felt no loyalty to the nation. Similarly, bankers worshipped Mammon, who had no homeland.

According to the automaker, evidence of this conspiracy of moral subversion lay in plain sight. After all, the commies were peddling pornography through their control of the movie business, while – it was the prohibition era – they saturated the country in bootleg gin. Because they were also the masterminds behind the publishing industry, they arranged an endless flow of sex and sensationalism in newspapers, magazines, and pulp novels. And “Jewish jazz”, bankrolled by the same circles, was on its way to becoming the national music, its rhythms an open invitation to the lewd and lascivious.

In the years just preceding Ford’s antisemitic outburst, the Palmer raids, conducted by United States Attorney General A. Mitchell Palm-

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er during and following World War I, had imprisoned and deported thousands of radical political activists, only heightening the panic about a coming communist revolution in America. But no one before Ford had ever imagined communists combining forces with the ruling class they presumably were out to overthrow. That was the bizarre eye-opener of a disturbed and disturbing moment and, mad as it was, should once again sound eerily familiar.

## From anti-communism to anti-capitalism

That imaginary league of Bolsheviks and bankers would remain an undercurrent of popular superstition, while anti-communism began to mutate, coming to have ever less to do with communist movements and ever more with a perverse form of anti-capitalism.

As the giant corporation run by faceless functionaries in suits and ties along with vast government bureaucracies supplanted old-style family capitalism, a whole galaxy of moral and social certitudes about self-reliance, frugality, independence, upward mobility, and piety came under assault. The new order, capitalism on steroids, left a beleaguered and angry world of “little men” in its wake, overwhelmed by a sense of material and spiritual dispossession.

In the 1930s, President Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal response to the Great Depression would only reignite the dark fantasies of Ford’s conspiracy-mongering.

In those years, populist demagogue Father Charles Coughlin (known as the “radio priest” thanks to his charismatic weekly sermons listened to by millions) preached about how corporate capitalism was “privately sustaining in some instances the worst elements of

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## The new order, capitalism on steroids, left a beleaguered and angry world of “little men” in its wake

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Communism.”

Coughlin grew increasingly hostile to the New Deal. Its bureaucracies, he claimed, meddled in family life, while its regulatory reforms were a disguised version of “financial socialism.” In 1936, he and fellow demagogues formed the Union Party to try (unsuccessfully) to stop Roosevelt’s reelection.

In the eyes of that radio priest, another antisemite by the way, Roosevelt was nothing less than America’s Lenin and his New Deal “a broken-down Colossus straddling the harbour of Rhodes, its left leg standing on ancient Capitalism and its right mired in the red mud of communism”.

Though Ford’s and Coughlin’s outpourings were infected with a deep strain of antisemitism, the invective of Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy, whose name became synonymous with mid-twentieth century anti-communism, McCarthyism was not. He was after bigger game, namely the whole WASP establishment.

**T**he Cold War with the Soviet Union provided the ostensible context for McCarthy’s ravings about “a conspiracy so immense and an infamy so black as to dwarf any previous venture in the history of man”. But his focus was far less on the Russians and far more on the upper-crust mandarins running the post-New Deal state.

Traitors to their class, as he saw it, figures like Secretary of State

Dean Acheson or international banker John McCloy were, he insisted, closet communists. Yet, gallingly, they also hailed from the most privileged precincts of American society, places like the elite prep school Groton, Harvard, and Wall Street. McCarthy would mock their cosmopolitan associations, their Anglophilia, their gilded careers as international financiers and the heads of major corporations. He would typically portray Averell Harriman, the scion of a railroad and banking family (and a future governor of New York), as “a guy whose admiration for everything Russian is unrivalled outside the confines of the Communist Party”.

The notorious Senate “hearings” he held and the McCarthyism he promoted would prove potent enough to ruin the lives of countless teachers, writers, trade unionists, civil-rights activists, performing artists, journalists, even librarians who lost their jobs and worse, thanks to his infamous inquisitions. And in those years, much of the Republican Party would mimic his message.

Few were safe from such fulminations and McCarthy was anything but alone in delivering them. For instance, the son of a former president, Senator Robert Taft, known as “Mr. Republican” and a leader from the party’s midwestern heartland, was often hailed as its future presidential nominee. Running in the 1952 primaries, he told his supporters in Ohio that “if we get [Dwight D.] Eisenhower, we will practically have a Republican New Deal Administration with just as much spending and socialism as under [President Harry] Truman.”

When he lost the nomination to the former World War II commander, Taft would rage that “every Republican candidate for president since 1936 has been nominated by Chase Bank”.

The imagery of tea-sipping, silk

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handkerchiefs, and silver spoons that spiced McCarthy's savage depiction of the supposedly left-wing establishment pointed to a subtle shift in the political centre of gravity of the anticommunist crusade. While the economic throw-weight of those capitalists-cum-communists remained in the crosshairs of the McCarthyites, cultural matters tended to take center stage.

Although the moral dangers of a supposedly communist-influenced New Deal-style state still preoccupied the senator and his legions of followers, his archetypical enemy came ever more to resemble Coughlin's: not just left-leaning intellectuals but Ivy League financiers, bankers with "grouse-hunting estates in Scotland", whom they saw as an aristocracy of destruction.

## Liberty or death in the time of "woke communism"

Oscillating with the ups and downs of the economy, that version of anti-capitalism regularly masqueraded as anti-communism. And all these years later, "woke capital", the target of so much Trumpublican fury, is once again being labelled a communist phenomenon. That's because so many Fortune 500 companies, leading banks, and mass-media outfits have had to come to terms with racial and gender equality, sexual and marital choice, and multicultural diversity – with, that is, the latest version of secularism generally.

Coca-Cola and Delta have even criticised Republican state voter-suppression laws. As early as 2015, corporate opposition forced Republicans in Indiana and North Carolina to back off anti-gay and anti-transgender legislation.

In 2019, more than 180 CEOs posted a full-page ad in the *New York Times* announcing that restrictions on abortion were bad for business. A year later, Goldman Sachs estab-

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## The woke-communist persuasion may be loony about "communism", but they are unintentionally right that capitalism is indeed the problem

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lished a \$10-million fund to promote racial equality to "honour the legacy of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery". After the January 6 insurrection at the Capitol, more than 50 companies said they would no longer contribute to the eight Republican senators who objected to certifying the presidential election.

Moreover, dominant financial and business interests depend on the various agencies of the state to subsidise profits and stabilise the economy. This feeds a government apparatus that has long been the *bête noire* of anti-communists. When the Covid-19 pandemic took down the economy, the 1 percent thrived, engaging many on the right as well as the left.

Refugees from the social revolutions in Venezuela and Cuba, who have gathered in significant numbers in Florida, no doubt resonate to the latest anticommunist dog whistles of Governor DeSantis in a way that echoes the sentiments aroused in the old days by the Bolshevik Revolution. But what really fires up the passions of Republicans is the tendency of modern capitalism to make peace with (and profit from) the social, racial, and more recently environmental upheavals of the last half-century. Resentment about this continues to ferment in right-wing circles.

The Republican Party now claims to be "standing between capitalism and communism". But the capital-

ism it promotes – of the self-reliant entrepreneur, the pious family patriarch, the free-booting version of commerce that depended on racial and gender inequalities and brooked no interference from the state – has been on the defensive for a long time.

Yes, the DeSantis-style anti-communists of today do worry about the possible appeal of socialism to young people, but in real life, the "communism" they face off against is modern capitalism, or what one right-wing wit termed "capitalism with Chinese characteristics". "Woke capital" or, if you're the governor of Florida, "woke communism," has indeed seized power.

Ironically, the woke-communist persuasion may be loony about "communism", but they are unintentionally right that capitalism is indeed the problem. Capitalism exploits millions of workers, devours the environment, creates obscene inequalities in income and wealth, depends on war and the machinery of war, poisons the well of democracy, incites resentments, and destroys any instinct for social solidarity. But count on one thing: the wet dreams of today's anti-communists when it comes to restoring some superannuated, idealised form of small-town capitalism are harmful fantasies of the first order. Indeed, they have already done much damage, and Governor DeSantis and crew will only make things far worse. **CT**

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EDWARD CURTIN

# Inside the iron cage

This is one of those stories that is hard to believe.  
When I first heard it, I thought it was a joke or some sort of parable

*“No one knows who will live in this [iron] cage in the future...”*  
– Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*

I would prefer not to relay the following very strange story given to me by a fellow sociologist, but he had done me a number of favours, and since he asked me to do him a favour in return, I feel obligated. I don't know what to make of the whole thing. Following this brief introduction, you will find the manuscript he handed me. I realise you are getting this third hand, but there's nothing I can do about that. I don't know his friend. When he asked me to print it for him, I told him I would prefer not to, but then guilt got the best of me, so here it is.

This is one of those stories that is hard to believe. When I first heard it, I thought it was a joke, some sort of parable, and my friend who was telling it to me had had too much to drink or was just pulling my leg. I'm not sure. Like so much in today's world, the difference between fiction and fact has become very blurry.

Let me call him Sean, since these days holding a strong dissenting opinion can cost you your job. He is a professor who, like the character David in John Fowles' story, *The Ebony Tower*, teaches art history. And like Fowles' character he is a

very frustrated academic. In Sean's case, he has had to contend with the transformation of his college from a place of learning to a place where “woke” ideology stifles dissent. Perhaps more importantly, he has suffered from extreme writer's block. He had just been telling me how, after years of writing copiously in his private journals, he had grown nauseated by it because it seemed so self-involved, concerning self and family stuff he was sick of. He wanted to write articles and books, yet when he tried, he couldn't. All his energy had been going into his futile daily journals, where he felt trapped by family matters. Until one recent day at the bar where we regularly meet, he heard this strange story. It jolted him.

Here is what he told me over beer at the tavern. I am paraphrasing, but because his tale was so startling, I know I have the essentials right. This is what he said:

“It was late in the afternoon last Wednesday when I came in here for a beer. I was feeling very tired that day, though depressed would be more accurate. The teaching routine seemed absurd to me. I wasn't writing. I felt at a dead end. I guess I was. Anyway, you know that guy Tom whom we've talked to here

before? Well, he was here and we got talking. The place was empty. It turns out his last name is Finn – Tom Finn. His father was Russell Finn, the famous painter, you know, the one the mainstream media gush over. A realistic sentimentalist is the way I've heard him described, although I would say he was a sick fabulist trying to repaint history for Hallmark Cards. Anyway, so this Tom Finn had had a few beers, and as he got talking, the both of us had a few more. It became obvious that he was obsessed with his father. He didn't say that exactly, but I could guess it from the snide remarks about him he'd laugh out of the side of his mouth. I asked him about a big travelling exhibit of his father's paintings which I had recently read about in the newspapers; had he seen it? ‘No’, he said, ‘I don't go to that kind of crap. That's his bag of marbles’. Things like that.

“It turns out the son is also a painter, but he said nothing about his own work, just that he painted. He talked all about his father's work, how his father stole ideas, wasn't very good, etc. I told him I agreed that his father's work was overhyped and mediocre, but that my experience studying art taught me that was true for every era. I was trying to be nice, something I tend to overdo. I got the impression he turned to painting by default, it being some kind of knee-jerk reaction



to his father, some kind of Oedipal contest.

“It turns out his real obsession is toys, no shit, and he got very animated as he talked about them. He wanted me to come over to his house to see his vast toy collection. The invitation was so weird, and with the beer’s effects, I couldn’t refuse. It was nearly dinner time, so I called Sara and told her I’d be late. I was actually interested in what made him tick. I mean, why would a grown man – I’d say he is in his mid-forties – collect fucking toys? And weirder still, he said his speciality

was tiny plastic figures of all sorts. Of these he had more than 25,000 – for some reason he emphasised that number – that he’d periodically put on display at local libraries.

“So I followed him over to his house which is on that street adjoining the university where a number of art history professors live. Oak Terrace, I think it is. I couldn’t help laughing when I saw all those abstract sculptures decorating their lawns. It was getting dark and they were spotlighted. What a juxtaposition – so perfect – so-called realism and cerebral abstraction side-by-

side. And both utter bullshit. I was reminded of a description of Russell Finn’s paintings that I once read: Cute wallpaper for readers of *Reader’s Digest*.

“Actually, Finn’s house is quite cute itself. When we were going in, I had to restrain myself from saying to him, ‘Life’s cute, isn’t it?’ I don’t think he would have appreciated that, although it’s very possible that he wouldn’t have known what the hell I was getting at. He’s a toy collector after all and what’s cuter than that.

“I’ll tell you this. I wasn’t pre-

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pared for what he showed me. He took me down to his finished basement, which he called ‘the laboratory.’ When he switched on the lights the room was empty except for the walls. They were covered with shelves about six inches apart that ran from wall to wall and ceiling to floor. It gave the large room this incredibly bizarre look as though it were a prison cell. There were even spotlights that illuminated the shelves, upon which, right along the outer edges looking out, he had lined up his collection of little figures. As we stood in the middle of the room, it was as though thousands of little people were staring at us, the giants. I felt as though I was hallucinating. Finn just chuckled when I said, ‘Pretty fucking amazing!’ Then he said, ‘I like the perspective, don’t you?’ I knew he didn’t expect an answer and I could only chuckle in response, even as I felt a chill on the back of my neck. It was so eerie that I had to contain a shudder. For a brief moment I had the feeling that the door we had entered was going to shut and be bolted and that something terrifying was about to unfold.

“But at that moment he gestured to me to follow him to another door, over which a sign read, The Family Fun Room. ‘This is my favourite’, he said with a smile.

“In the middle of this pink painted room there was a cage that extended from floor to ceiling, and in the cage, sitting on stools, were two life-sized and very realistic figures of a man and a woman. They were both dressed in those black and white striped prison uniforms you’ve seen in old movies. The woman was facing away from the man. I couldn’t tell who the woman was, but I immediately recognised the man. It was Finn’s father, down to the most realistic detail. He was holding a small toy figurine and was looking into its face. The door to the cell was pad-

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**‘Sara accused me  
of having drunk  
too much ...  
she said I was  
sounding like a deluded  
conspiracy nut’**

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locked shut. ‘That’s to make sure they can’t escape’, Finn said with a straight face. ‘Now that I got them where I want them, I can’t take any chances. They’re dangerous and can cause me a lot of grief’.

“He then closed the door and we went upstairs. Neither of us said a word. He offered me a beer, but I declined. I felt spooked, some dreadful feeling in my gut. I told him I had to be leaving, which I did. On the way out I noticed a framed photograph in the foyer. It was a picture of Finn at about the age of nine or ten with his parents and sister. They are sitting together on a couch, the two kids caught between the parents. No one is smiling. Behind them on the wall is the father’s famous painting of a family of four sitting on a couch. In that one, everyone is smiling and the father in the painting is Finn’s father. As you probably know, that was one of his father’s favourite techniques – to put himself in his paintings. Such a cute double-message: I did it, of course, but how could I have done it when I’m in it. You’re left wondering: who really did it? Who executed the painting of these happy people. But since it’s all supposed to be so amusing, you’re left to chuckle, to think, how cute, how tricky. You’re supposed to smile. But no one was smiling in the picture on the wall. It seemed like a house of smoke and mirrors and I was damn glad to leave.

“As I drove home, I sure as hell wasn’t smiling. There was something terribly disturbing about it all. I felt nauseated, disgusted, re-

ally disturbed. Maybe it seems obvious, but I felt there was a connection between this weird experience and myself. A double connection, actually. I won’t go into all the details now, and you know about my writer’s block, but this bizarre experience has left me with a new sense of freedom, some kind of opening to a new way to write that at the time I couldn’t put my finger on. I’ve come to think of it as writing beyond a cage of categories.

“I thought about all the stuff we talk about, the political propaganda about everything, the loss of a sense of reality, the illusions and delusions with the digital technology, the war-mongering by the US against Russian, the covid bullshit, all of it, all the stuff we share over beers. Especially the disconnect between the private and the public and the two-faced nature of a way of living that is so fucking phony. I realised why I had been hiding in my notebooks, how they had become my cage.

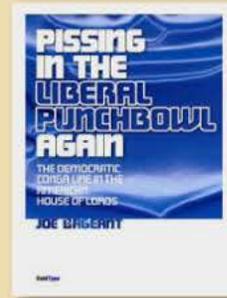
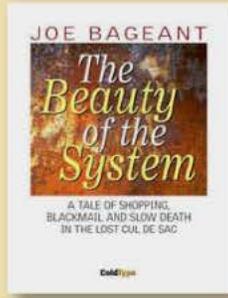
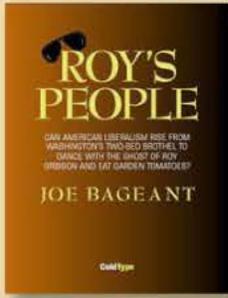
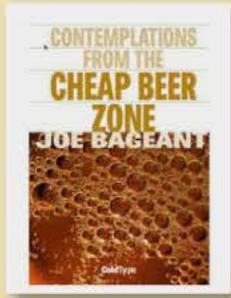
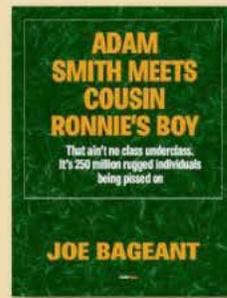
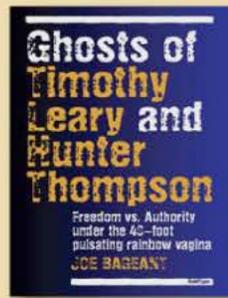
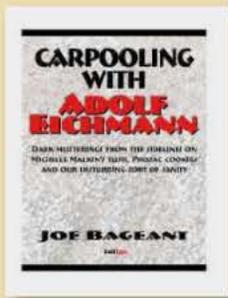
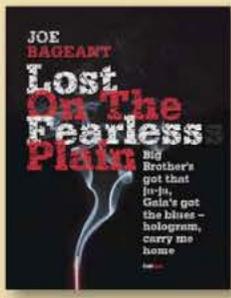
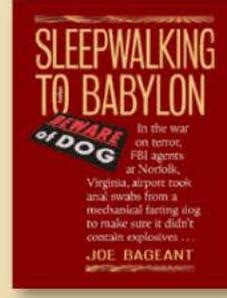
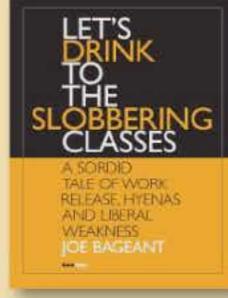
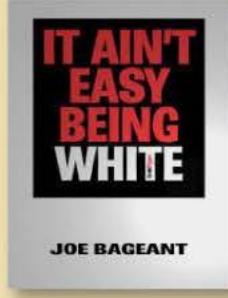
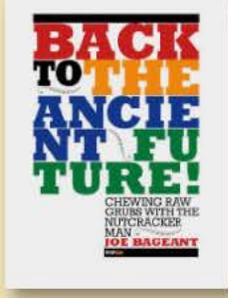
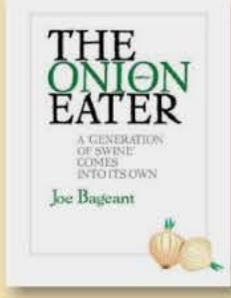
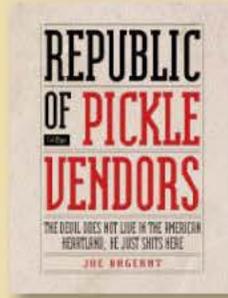
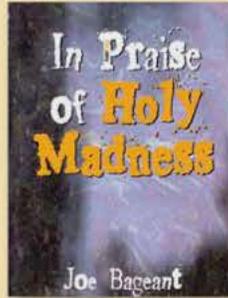
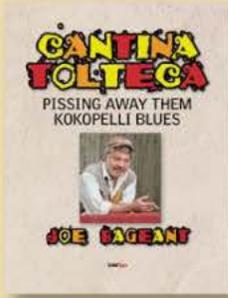
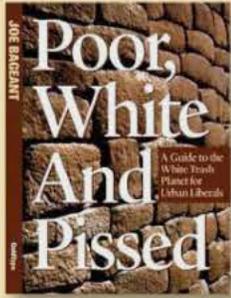
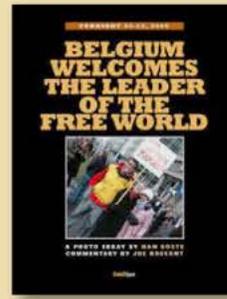
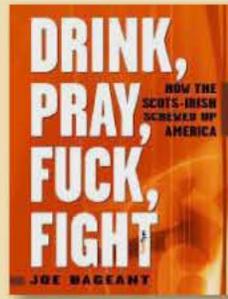
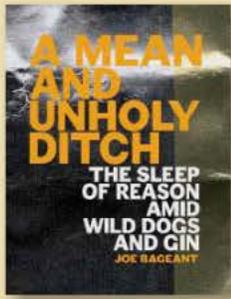
“To top it all off, when I got home and told Sara about my experiences with Tom Finn, the cage and all, she didn’t believe me. She accused me of having drunk too much, which I had to admit I did. She said I was scaring her with such a ridiculous tale and that I was sounding like a deluded conspiracy nut.

“Anyway, I’ve told no one else about Finn. I’m afraid they wouldn’t believe me either. You’re a sociologist and know all about Max Weber’s prediction of a coming disenchanted world with its iron cage. Shit, I feel like I had a small glimpse of it. Do you think anyone would believe me if I told this story?

“Do you?”

**CT**

*Edward Curtin is an independent writer whose work has appeared widely over many years. His website is [edwardcurtin.com](http://edwardcurtin.com) and his new book is *Seeking Truth in a Country of Lies*.*



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RALPH NADER

# Corporate personhood vs human beings

12 reasons why US corporations benefit from legal double standards that make them immune from laws that affect ordinary people

The word “inequality” is everywhere in the media. It usually refers either to race, gender, rich vs. poor, or other differences between human beings. Absent from the public debate is the biggest perpetrator of “inequality” against human beings – the corporate entity itself.

Ever since 1886 when a US Supreme Court reporter, in a headnote for the Court’s opinion,

wrote that corporations possessed equal rights under the Constitution, judges and corporatist legislators have equipped corporations with an arsenal of inequitable rights. (The Constitution makes no mention whatsoever of “corporation” or “company”).

How is that possible with the 14th Amendment mandating equal protection under the law? Because this central provision for our alleged rule of law didn’t take into account the contrivances of corporate lawyers, corporate judges and corporate-indentured lawmakers.

Corporations that are created by state charters are deemed “artificial persons”. States like Delaware and Nevada have made a revenue business out of chartering corporations under permissive laws that concentrate power at the top of autocratic commercial hierarchies, leaving their shareholder-owners with very few options other than to sell. Since the early 1800s, states have chartered corporations giving their shareholders limited liability. The maximum they can

lose is the amount of dollars invested in their company’s stocks or bonds. The modern history of corporate law is now aimed at maximizing the limited liability of the corporation itself.

The following twelve examples of inequality are shocking:

**1. The corporate entity protects owners and shareholders from business debts and other liabilities.** Yet, individual business owners are not personally shielded from business related debts or liabilities.

**2. Bankruptcy laws favour corporations mightily over individuals.** Bankrupt corporations can cancel their labour union contracts, are free from lawsuit liabilities against them, and can even get judges to grant retention bonuses for the culpable executives so they can provide parties with their alleged historical memory. Then under Chapter 11 bankruptcy, the company, having shed its liabilities, can reorganise and be back in business. If it is a giant bankrupt company like General Motors was in 2009, its recreation can get many billions of taxpayer dollars because it is considered “too big to fail”. Compare all these privileges with an individual going bankrupt no matter how wealthy he or she may have been. No contest.



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**3. Under criminal laws, corporations have huge advantages.** Unlike most individuals who commit serious crimes, corporations have lawyers who shield them with “no-prosecution” or “deferred prosecution” agreements instead of criminal penalties. Unlike individual criminals, corporations cannot be jailed, and are almost never executed (that is having their charter pulled and put out of business, unless they are small business crooks). Former US Attorney General Eric Holder said the big banks may even be too big to be prosecuted. While the big corporations, having cost the lives of many people and sickened more, continue on their merry profiteering ways. In this category are the large drug, chemical, auto, oil, coal and hospital chains.

**4. Wrongfully injured people suing corporations under tort law find corporations can endlessly delay, with their insured or deductible legal expenses.**

Victims who are desperate for money to pay medical and other bills, cannot deduct their legal expenses and may not have insurance. Corporations can force low settlements because of their inequality of status and power.

**5. Unequal taxation is a Niagara of inequality. The top federal tax rate for individuals is 37 percent and only 21 percent for corporations, before a plethora of loopholes.** Why should an individual businessperson or any individual have to pay 37 percent and face an economic disadvantage vis-a-vis a competitor that only pays 21 percent? The baseless response is that there is a rational classification for this unfairness – nonsense.

**6. Unlike individuals, corporations can create their own parents – (holding companies) for**

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## Corporations are able to survive and thrive after horrendous overcharges, crimes and casualties

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**evasive purposes.** They can also create hundreds of children (subsidiaries) to evade all kinds of law enforcement. The tax and non-regulatory haven of the Grand Cayman Islands has thousands of corporations “domiciled” there. One large building – Uglad House – “houses” 12,000 corporations. Real humans would be insufferably cramped if they attempted to quarter themselves with such inorganic efficiencies.

Until the decision in January by the Third Circuit of Appeals, saying no to profitable Johnson & Johnson’s corporate lawyers, corporations could create a subsidiary and put in it all the pending lawsuits by injured consumers, declare the subsidiary bankrupt and then leave the harmed plaintiffs with little recourse. This is called the “Texas two-step” a creation of corporate lawyers.

**7. Corporations’ one-sided contracts requiring you to sign or click on, turn you into contract peons.** Freedom of contract is gone. Your status is reduced to obeying the harsh impositions by banks, auto dealers, insurance companies, credit card companies, utilities, etc. Try to escape and go to a competitor. No dice. They all have the same restrictions, with minor variations. These long, inscrutable fine-print handcuffs require you to waive your right to go to court for a trial by a jury of your peers.

**8. The antitrust laws, being**

little enforced over the years, have resulted in monopolies or shared monopolies, replete with manipulative powers that make a mockery out of an alleged free marketplace. How’s that for inequality – destroying the right to and benefits from a competitive market?

**9. Corporations are given monopoly licenses by the FCC to control 24/7 what we own – the public airwaves.** The radio and TV corporations get this bonanza free of charge along with the power to decide who gets on and who doesn’t. No individual could either have such a status or in any way challenge these license renewals made virtually automatic by the corporatized US Federal Communications Commission.

**10. Emanating from these inequalities, embedded in corporate-lobbied unequal laws, are the realities of raw economic, political and cultural power that intimidate and coerce mere human mortals.** Corporations are able to survive and thrive after horrendous overcharges, crimes and casualties – the opioid and other drug companies, the vast toxic pollution of air, water and food, the crimes of Wall Street and the exploitation of workers’ health and economic well-being. Corporations continue, as they are not human, without feeling the sanctions of social shame, guilt or ostracism. Mere humans have no such inherent escapes.

**11. Other derivative political power allows corporations to strategically plan and control the lives of humans with algorithms and monopoly patents.** They get away with direct marketing that exploits children and circumvents their parents’ authority, breaking long-held cultural barriers to mass

gambling online, and continuing to discriminate against women and minorities, as workers and consumers.

12. The biggest prize of all for the uses of corporate-dominant inequality over real people is the control of the Congress, state legislatures, country boards, city councils, and elections along with the selection of judges. Their assemblage of ever larger entrenched legal and illegal inequalities produces a multiplier effect, achieving deeper inequalities as corporate control over capital, labour, technology and choice of jurisdictions here and abroad intensifies their privileges and immunities.

## These drives for maximum power and control are maturing the corporate state – as Wall Street and Washington merge

All these drives for maximum power and control are maturing the corporate state – as Wall Street and Washington merge. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, in a formal message to Congress in 1938, called the control of government by private power “fascism”. In 1933 Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis wrote an opinion warning about big corporations becoming a “Franken-

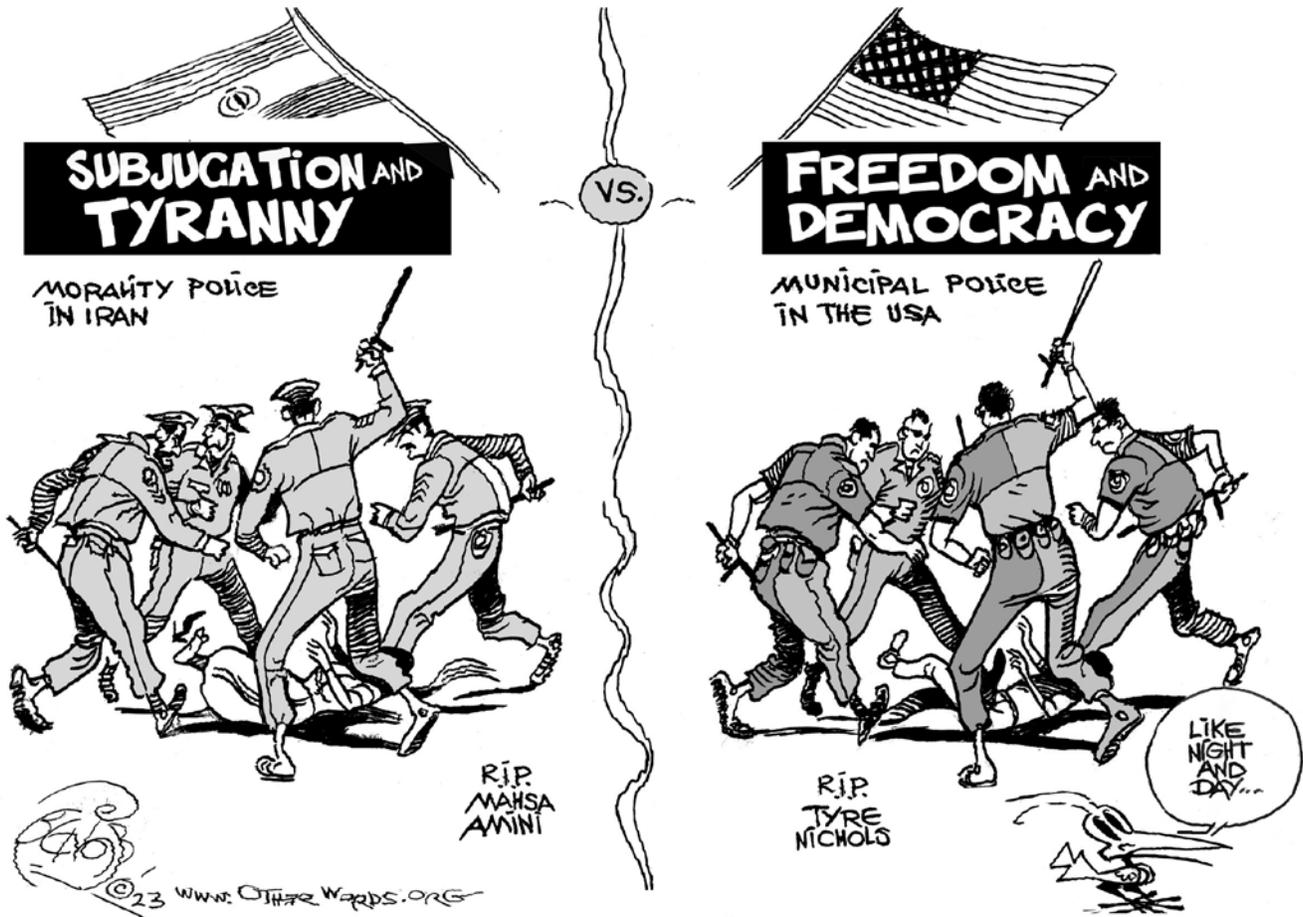
stein monster” in our midst.

So, all you fighters against inequality between people leap into the Big Leagues and confront the biggest progenitors of inequalities of all – giant corporations. Grab hold of the roots if you wish to prevent the bitter fruits. End cruel exploitation provided by these double standards. **CT**

*Ralph Nader is an American political activist, author, lecturer, and attorney noted for his involvement in consumer protection, environmentalism, and government reform causes. The son of Lebanese immigrants to the United States, Nader attended Princeton University and Harvard Law School.*

## Bendib's World

Khalil Bendib





"Artificial intelligence? Pfft. Nothing 'intelligent' about it."

JOE ALLEN

# Gazing into the Gates of Hell

AI conjures a Cronenberg film. Imagine a world where every image has been sifted through the Machine

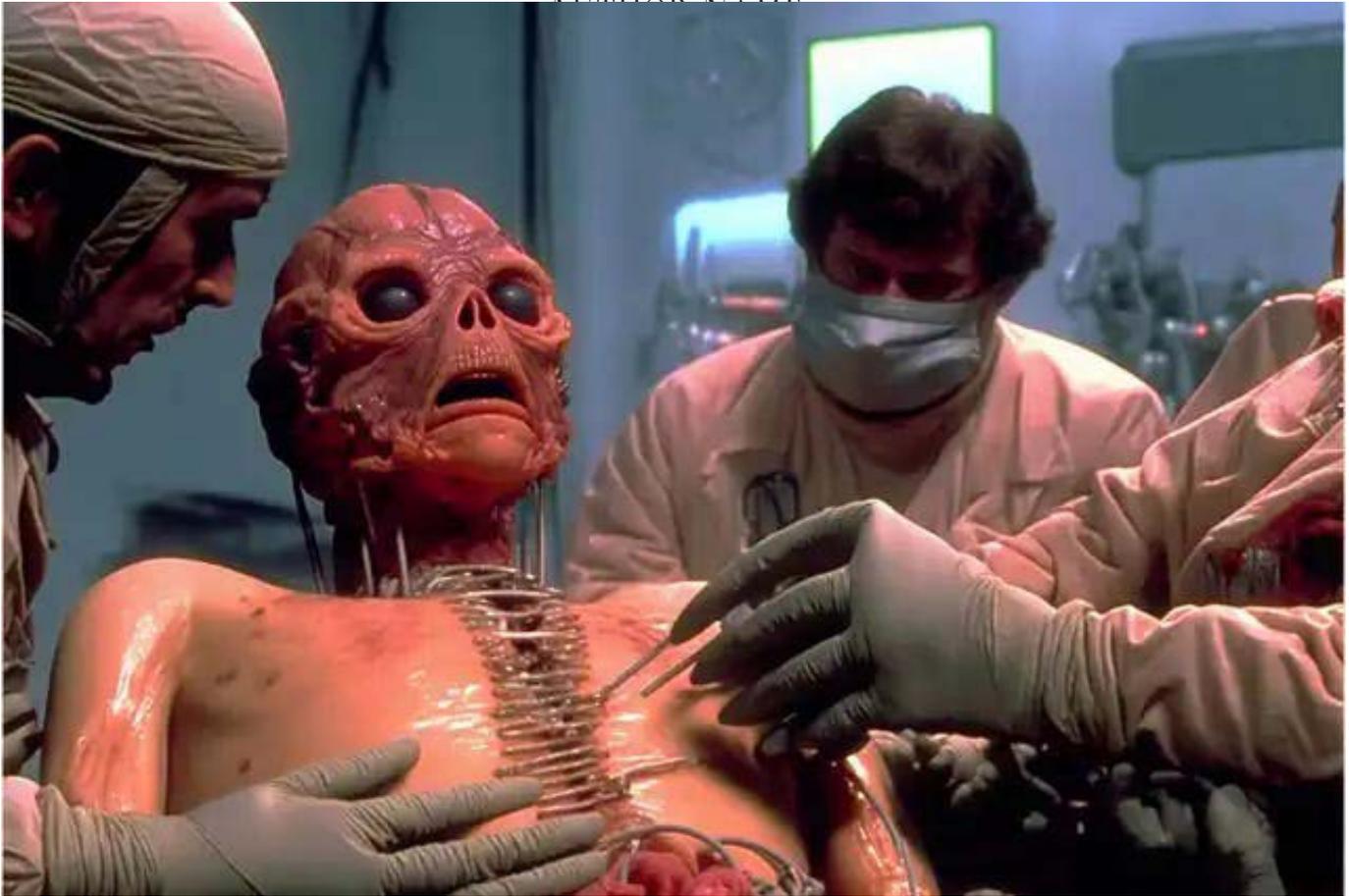
Artificial intelligence? Pfft. Nothing 'intelligent' about it." David Cronenberg is one of the freakiest filmmakers of all time. His vision is perverted and disgusting – but always heavy, and always insightful. His movies evoke biomedical horrors, where machines look like pulsating organs, and organ-

isms look like slimy machines. The vibe is a high brow barf-fest.

You've got the exploding head in *Scanners*. You've got the rapey homo-caterpillar in *Naked Lunch*. You've got those butthole-looking bio-ports in *eXistenZ*. You've got plastic-eating, trans-organ-harvesting narcissists in the new *Crimes of the Future*. Not exactly date night mate-

rial. By the end of each movie, you can't imagine how the next would be more repulsive. And by the end of the next one, you realise you were sorely mistaken.

As it turns out, things can always get worse. At the end of January, Cronenberg's brilliant cinematography was siphoned up from the Internet, data-mined to the last



**"Some men are born, others are made. Make me beautiful, doc."**

frame, broken down into statistical models, and refashioned into a film that never existed.

These computer-generated images bother me for two reasons. First, they really do look like something Cronenberg would make. Setting aside my hatred for this dehumanising technology, I'll admit some scenes are as good as anything he ever did. They even smell like a Cronenberg movie.

More troubling, though, is that these hellish scenes of malnourished cyborgs and brittle robots were literally dreamed up by a machine. They are the mathematical distillation of a subconscious mind.

Exposed organs. Insectoid hybrids. Artificial archetypes. The electric Id. It's all there.

Of course, it was some mask-obsessed Covidian who did this. Who

else? Using a new AI image generator, Midjourney, the ad-maker Keith Shofield became a prodigious "prompt engineer". Each image was cranked out in the blink of an eye.

This is all part of the new normal. Text-to-image AI art is filling cyberspace so fast, it'll soon be all we see. Before you know it, these derivative images will be on every ad and book cover. People won't see anything that hasn't been sifted through the Machine.

**T**his software is like a genie who moonlights as a graphic artist. He may be unoriginal, but he grants unlimited wishes. The user just rubs the magic lamp, makes a wish, and the Machine spits out another image. Of course, each one is derived from the

vast catalogue of previous human efforts, which amounts to stealing and repurposing artwork at scale.

These AI remixes are picking up where the DJ left off. But you know, the original artists can always learn to code. Or engineer prompts. Or something.

Intoxicated by this creative destruction, Shofield generated over two hundred images in no time. Naturally, long-time Cronenberg fans are furious – partly because the pics look so cool.

Although Shofield doesn't reveal what prompts he used, you could imagine a text string like "cronenberg with alien meat pile buffet". Or maybe "cronenberg with castrated robot lovers, ribs like worms".

It's just a guess. What do I know? I'm not a "prompt engineer".

Before passing judgment, though,



"Clockwork elves... definitely a simulation... every last atom..."



"It's not rocket science, boys. Just computer code. Garbage in, garbage out."



"Mark Twain didn't hold back." / "Utter that word to no one."



"Alexa... ALEXA... play 'In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida...'"

let's roll through a few striking scenes. Keep in mind this parallel universe never existed until a computer drifted off into digital nightmares. (I've add a little dialogue beneath the images for context.)

The hokey effects look great on VHS, but my favourite Cronenberg film is his subdued historical drama, *A Dangerous Method*. There's no oily surrealism or mutilated humanoids. It's based on the true story of Sigmund Freud and his protégé Carl Jung. The action centres on their psychotherapeutic love triangle with a super hot, if hysterical patient, Sabina Spielrein.

I saw it at a grimy art house theatre in Knoxville, Tenn, some twelve years ago. Beer was cheap in those days. Some movies were still shot on film and slightly crooked teeth were sexy. Shrinks were still horny old

## Freud thought dreams released our repressed desires. Jung believed they tapped into a spiritual dimension

dudes and nobody gave a damn one way or another.

So far as I remember, the only gross scene involved a brief glimpse of some bloody sheets. The rest was just talk therapy and dream analysis, with a little kink here and there. It was an elegant film to make ya think.

Freud thought dreams released our repressed desires. Jung believed they tapped into a spiritual dimension. Throughout his bizarre

career, Cronenberg managed to capture both angles.

Thinking back on all three paradigms – the Id and Super Ego; the Collective Unconscious; the weird phallic pustules – what do these new, AI-generated images even mean? Are the symbols potent? Whose soul do they express?

What does it mean for a machine to dream? What happens when our minds brim with synthetic fantasies?

I'm no psychologist, but I'll tell you this. If AI comes to dominate the cultural landscape, human beings will lose their minds. **CT**

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

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