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RENEGOTIATING NAFTA BY LAURA CARLSEN

TRUMP'S MONEY TRAILS BY DAVID MACARAY



CounterPunch

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EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
Jeffrey St. Clair

MANAGING EDITOR
Joshua Frank

CONTRIBUTING EDITORS

Lee Ballinger, Melissa Beattie, Darwin Bond-Graham, Chloe Cockburn, Windy Cooler, Chris Floyd, Kevin Alexander Gray, Steve Horn, Lee Hall, Conn Hallinan, Barbara Rose Johnson, Binoy Kampmark, JoAnn Wypijewski, David Macaray, Chase Madar, Kim Nicolini, Brenda Norrell, Vijay Prashad, Louis Proyect, Martha Rosenberg, Christine Sheeler, Jan Tucker, Mike Whitney

SOCIAL MEDIA EDITOR
Nathaniel St. Clair

BUSINESS MANAGER &
DESIGN PRODUCTION
Becky Grant

SUBSCRIPTIONS & ORDER FULFILLMENT
Deva Wheeler

DESIGN CONSULTATION
Tiffany Wardle

Contact Information

CounterPunch Business Office
PO Box 228, Petrolia, CA 95558
Toll Free 1 (800) 840-3683
1 (707) 629-3683

EDITORIAL:

counterpunch@counterpunch.org
BUSINESS: becky@counterpunch.org
SUBSCRIPTIONS AND MERCHANDISE:
counterpunchdeva@gmail.com

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counterpunchdeva@gmail.com

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In Memory of
Alexander Cockburn
1941–2012

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

You Lefty Scum!

You got something right. Trump may actually go to war. I hope he does. Then all hell will break out. There are no words to describe how I feel about you lefty open borders scum at CounterPunch, The animal killing savages who call themselves Republicans, and the racketeering Democrats. The sooner you kill each other off the better. By the way, you spend more time bashing Israel than you did bashing ISIS. You are VERY sick dudes.

Sincerely,
Janet Lee Beatty

Buyer's Remorse

Although, I am a black conservative, with libertarian leanings; I look forward to reading "Roaming Charges" each week. Now seeing that Trump wants to prove that he is weak-minded his predecessors—asserting moral authority, while killing indiscriminately, I do have buyer's remorse. Although I still enjoy the fact that another Clinton is not in the White House. Anyway, although, I obviously don't agree with everything you write, I do enjoy this column. Thank you for it.

Larry W. Calloway

Mr. Good Street

I am in jubilation [Paul Street] has said what should have been said vociferously from the beginning of this faux "populism" idiocy. Mr. Street has written a superb rebuttal to the ignorant journalists and sycophants of the neo-fascist right by calling them out.

I wish he had included, during the Populist Revolt of the 1890's, Populists literally

shot people the "mainstream" press is referring to today as "populists".

I suspect we all understand why Populism seldom is discussed seriously anywhere, including in our public schools and colleges and universities, and why it is so frequently used flippantly to describe neo-fascists. If Populism become identified in the minds of the public as right wing and fascistic, it de-legitimizes Populism for anyone anywhere left of center. I believe the ruling oligarchy understands clearly Populism is the best, and possibly only way we are going to dethrone the oligarchs, establish GENUINE democracy in this country, and have a reasonably equitable socio-economic system.

In a recent exchange with Professor Alfred McCoy, whom I respect and whose books I have used in my Political Science courses, in which I admonished him for using "populism" as now too commonly is being done, he replied saying language is fluid and the meaning of words change over time. He went on to argue we had lost the battle on the meaning of Populism. I pointed out to him that was a cop out. To my knowledge, there has been no battle, only acquiescence by the vast majority on the left, which now, unfortunately, included Professor McCoy. I am sending Mr. Street's article to him in hopes he will reconsider. A battle is lost only when one side deserts the battlefield. Those of us who KNOW what Populism is must occupy the battlefield; we must make a fight of this; and, for many reasons (to include stopping the

fascist tide) we must win.

Please forward my comments and my profound thanks to Mr. Street for saying what needed to have been said a long time ago.

Thank you,
*Samuel Freeman, Ph.D.
Political Science*

Mt. Hood is Melting

I read your article about Mt. Hood. I climbed Mt. Shasta in the 80s. Made it to the top. I haven't seen Mt. Shasta since then.

I don't know what the snow is like now but we used our crampons and ice axe in mid summer.

This is the most depressing and gloomiest time for all of nature, the earth and people who hold them dear. I can only hope that nature has a plan. Even if that plan is

to rid itself from the "growth" that humankind has become, I will rest in peace.

Bonnie Dombrowski

Toxic Hanford

Hello Joshua,
First, thanks for CounterPunch, my lifeline to something like reality.

Hanford has always been a disaster. My favorite uncle, a SeaBee in WWII and the steel foreman on the Grand Coulee dam, went from the dam to Hanford, where he was again steel foreman and worked there until he retired. He told me of watching radioactive waste pools being covered with soil by bulldozers. The contractors there have always been corrupt.

Many times he remarked that Hanford would eventually "destroy" a big chunk of the

state of WA. Do we even monitor the strontium 90 levels in the clams on the Oregon and Washington coasts? The Columbia River is a giant sewer for Hanford radioactivity and won't be clean, ever.

There is no human organization, private or public, which can grasp and respond appropriately to the reality of nuclear weapons and technology. Oppenheimer knew this. I met him at OSU, Corvallis, in the 50's.

But then, Rick Perry is head of DOE, so I guess we can rest easy.

There is no hope.
Dave Hanson

Chelsea on the March

So Chelsea Clinton is once again bashing the anti-war movement as she prepares to launch her political career. George Magazine, in its fawning coverage of Chelsea as she left for college, quoted some professorial long marcher through the institutions that he could "radicalize Chelsea in a few weeks". Perhaps that had been tried; if so, it looks like it didn't quite take.

Matt Hardwick

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ROAMING CHARGES

The Plot Sickens

BY JEFFREY ST. CLAIR

What is it about Arkansas that so often makes the state the perfect measure for the distemper of the times? Twenty-five years ago, Bill Clinton interrupted his presidential campaign by rushing home to supervise the execution of Ricky Ray Rector, a brain-damaged black man who had shot himself in the head after killing a police officer. The gunshot obliterated Rector's frontal lobe, leaving him severely disabled. For his last meal, Rector ordered a steak, cherry Kool-Aid and a slice of pecan pie. Rector wrapped the pie in a napkin, telling the prison guards he was "saving it for later." Bill Clinton spent the evening of Rector's execution dining with the actress Mary Steenburgen.

The killing of Rector was a political execution, meant to symbolize the death of the old liberalism that obsessed over the rights of prisoners and the morality of capital punishment. Since that grim spectacle, the Democrats have never again made the death penalty a political issue, except to help engineer its expanded application, as Clinton and Gore did by pushing through the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1994, which gutted habeas corpus in federal appeals courts and allowed for the death penalty to be imposed in cases that didn't involve homicides.

Supervising a few well-timed executions has become a way to bankroll political capital in American politics. George W. Bush tempered his brand as a "compassionate conservative" by executing 157 prisoners, more than any governor in modern history. At one point, Bush was treating his Texas constituents to an execution every two weeks with the pace accelerating as his

presidential ambitions mounted. Bush seemed to take a sadistic pleasure in denying clemency requests, especially in the case of Karla Faye Tucker, whose desperate last-minute pleas for mercy he publicly mocked.

Bush and Clinton had both realized that by the 1990s the American public, at least the voting public, desired politicians who aren't shy about spilling blood. Questions of guilt or innocence were beside the point. In fact, the ability to kill the innocent came to be viewed as a prerequisite for being a firm and unflinching ruler. A real leader kills without regret and never looks back. Collateral damage just comes with the territory. In late-Capitalist America, we have witnessed a rabid enthusiasm for political figures who wield power without pity. Executions now rank high on the syllabus of power politics.

No one symbolized this extreme moral frigidity more acutely than Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, who infamously opined in a 1993 death penalty case called *Herrera vs. Collins* that "mere factual innocence is no reason not to carry out a death sentence properly reached." Scalia may be dead, but the menacing specter of his lethal legal casuistry continues to haunt the federal judiciary.

This spring Arkansas strode forth once again to reveal morbid new innovations in the cult of barbarism. In a race to clear its death row before the state's supply of Midazolam, a controversial sedative used in executions by chemical injection, expired at the end of April, Governor Asa Hutchinson scheduled eight executions in a span of ten days. It's symbolic of the moral declension of American liberalism that international drug companies raised

more objections to the Arkansas execution derby than the feckless leaders of the Democratic Party, who largely remained mute as this constitutional and ethical travesty unfolded.

Hutchinson, a born-again Christian, pursued his slate of executions with an almost Messianic zeal, prompting Sister Helen Prejean to pronounce that "the Bible Belt is now the Execution Belt." True enough. But the South is also the Destitution Belt and capital punishment is inextricably enmeshed with an economic system whose chief domestic product is poverty. As Peter Linebaugh convincingly demonstrated in his seminal work on the death penalty in England, *The London Hanged*, executions function as a kind of economic policy imposed against the capitalism's losers and outcasts.

In the end, Arkansas only succeeded in killing four of the condemned, two of them in a grotesque back-to-back execution the press dubbed a "double-header." The first to be put to death was a black man named Ledell Lee, who, like Rickey Ray Rector, suffered from crippling mental disabilities. Unlike Rector, however, Lee may well have been innocent of the 1993 murder of his neighbor, Debra Reese. Lee's trial was a mockery of justice. The judge in the case was secretly having an affair with the assistant prosecutor, whom he later married. But Lee's lawyer was an alcoholic and his cross-examinations and summation at trial was bumbling and incoherent. Subsequent appeals to perform DNA testing of blood and hair samples at the crime scene were denied as being "tardy." Innocence had ceased to be a legitimate defense.

Neil Gorsuch was skiing in Aspen when he got the call that his idol Scalia had died. He weeped on the slopes at the news. By the time he assumed his seat on the Supreme Court, Gorsuch's moral arteries had fully hardened. In his very first case, Gorsuch cast the deciding vote to execute Ledell Lee, proving that, like his gnomish mentor, he too is willing to kill with an unhesitating stroke of the pen. CP



EMPIRE BURLESQUE

Southern Exposure of Empire's Realities

BY CHRIS FLOYD

A few weeks ago, on the fourth of May, Senator Bob Casey of Pennsylvania took a moral stand. While the Congressional Republicans were swigging manly cans of Bud Light that day to celebrate passage of their historic healthcare law—also known as the “Rape Victims and Kids With Cancer Can Fuck Off and Die Already” Bill—Casey was working hard to save a refugee mother and her five-year-old child from being deported back to near-certain death in Honduras.

After witnessing a gang murder, she'd been marked to die by the killers. So she fled with her child to the United States in December 2015. They were held in a Pennsylvania detention center where families—none of them with criminal records—are locked down in a bleak, badly mismanaged facility that the state has tried to close, only to be blocked by a federal judge. On May 4, lawyers for the Honduran woman and the child were in court, arguing that the child had qualified for Special Immigrant Juvenile Status and should be allowed to stay in the US with his mother. Yet at that very moment, the mother and child were being loaded onto a plane by ICE agents, hurrying to get the deed done before any court ruling stopped them.

Casey fought throughout the day to halt the deportation, working the phones to federal officials and the White House, live-tweeting his efforts as he went. It was a noble effort, but it failed: the woman and her child were flown back to meet the wrath of the murderous gang. Trump's Homeland Security honcho, John Kelly, was then trotted out to lie brazenly about the

incident, claiming the pair had to be deported because all legal appeals had been exhausted—despite the unfinished court proceedings going on that very day. No matter. It was over. They were gone. By the time you read this, they might well be dead.

But the story doesn't end there. More importantly, it doesn't begin there. For while the episode seems emblematic of the peculiar cruelty of the Trump regime—and to be sure, that regime is peculiar and cruel—it is also a microcosm of a vast, long-running bipartisan system that chews up human lives, regularly and remorselessly, in pursuit of inhuman ends.

The murderous gangs of Honduras have flourished mightily under that nation's current regime—and often with the connivance of the regime, when it finds them useful in its campaigns of repression, corruption and corporate rapine. But how did Honduras descend into such a pit?

As everyone knows—which is to say, as almost no one knows in “the United States of Amnesia” (G. Vidal)—in 2009 a gang of oligarchs and military honchos overthrew the democratically elected president and installed themselves in power. At first, the Peace Prize President and his progressive partner in the State Department, H.R. Clinton, tut-tutted a bit—and even suspended a military cooperation program!—but as soon as the vicious coupsters promised “free and fair elections,” Barack and Hillary gave their blessing ... and the military aid started flowing copiously again.) The subsequent “election” was marked by murder, suppression and fraud; but when the horrendous farrago

was over, B & H looked upon it and said it was good.

In the years since, repression and state murder have grown apace and the gangs have overwhelmed the cities, driving thousands into exile. Indeed, the horrors grew so blatant that Hillary, whose memoirs had trumpeted her “statecraft” in Honduras, removed all mention of it when her book came out in paperback. She erased the role of “progressive” Democrats in creating the hell in Honduras, and erased the victims as well. Not to be outdone, Barack then seized and deported hundreds of children—children—who had fled his co-created hell in the hope of finding refuge in the land of the Peace Prize President. Instead, he sent them back to face daily lives of death and terror.

There is no record of Bob Casey speaking out against the deadly Obama-Clinton dealings with Honduras. However, Casey was an early and ardent champion of Clinton's 2016 presidential bid, becoming “one of her most important surrogates.” It is almost certain that the woman and child he rightly tried to save in 2017, while rightly highlighting the merciless response of the Trump regime, would not now be in mortal danger but for the policies of the “progressives” he championed. (And let's not forget it was Obama—the all-time deportation champ, so far—who forced them into Dickensian detention in the first place.)

You'll find a similar bipartisan hinterland behind any number of Trump's egregious depredations. Yes, he is a loose sprocket in the machine of domination and empire, but that's all he is. He is not an aberration, not an outlier, and certainly not a disrupter of the power structure's sinister agendas. He is a continuation, in many ways, a culmination, of a rotted system that encompasses the entire media-political establishment. It is this system itself that must be fought, along with specific crimes of its momentary leaders—else its outrages will go on metastasizing into ever more virulent forms. CP



EXIT STRATEGIES

Justice and the Poor White Trump Voter

BY YVETTE CARNELL

President Donald Trump held what appeared to be a signing ceremony at the White House after he, with the help of House Speaker Paul Ryan, finally wrangled enough votes to pass Trumpcare. The ceremony was odd, considering that the Obamacare replacement, an even more robust transfer of wealth from the bottom to the top than the original, may not even get a vote in the U.S. Senate. Trump bussing over Republican House members who voted for the bill signified something we don't see often in our new president: desperation.

Trump promised during the campaign to renegotiate NAFTA but, according to the New York Times, told foreign leaders that the trade deal can remain for now. He promised to designate China as a currency manipulator, but hasn't. And his executive orders on immigration have been shot down by the courts.

Trump needed a win, even a small one, and eeking out a win for Trumpcare, albeit only in one chamber of Congress, gave him that much. That's not enough of a win, however, to soothe the buyer's remorse, or continued suffering, that some Trump voters are feeling.

According to two Princeton economists, many poor whites are dying deaths of despair, succumbing to suicide or alcohol and drug addictions. In a comment section on the topic at HuffPost, readers were relentless. Writer Matt Stoller compiled some of the comments on Medium, which included quips such as "Is it bad news or good news? Middle aged undereducated white Americans are Donald Trump's

base" and "maybe they should take the advice they used to give minorities, take responsibility and pull up your boot straps."

Stoller took to Twitter to call out the comments. He wasn't alone. In an essay titled "Compassion and Politics", Current Affairs editor Nathan J. Robinson argues that the Democratic Party has become a political quarter for snobs, which is true, and rightly asks "what common political interests are shared by both black communities in Detroit and Warren Buffett?" Robinson argues in favor of a politics of compassion, whereby empathizing with people's pain does not necessarily excuse their actions.

Robinson believes that the left should show compassion for Trump voters who've been among the hardest hit in a shrinking economy because "you don't discard people merely because they've made foolish decisions." This is especially true when we consider how much of our decision making is influenced by our environment, Robinson argues. I'd add that misinformation and propaganda is also routinely deployed against low information voters as well.

Still, both Robinson and Stoller fall short in their understanding of the limitations of the politics of compassion. It is a fairly noble axion for Robinson to call on people to begin "caring about what happens rather than caring about who it happens to." That's just not real life though, as the opioid crisis in White America has crystallized in all of our minds.

While the crack epidemic was sweeping through Black America, our political leaders fanned the flames of

anti-black hatred as they approved budgets with increased appropriations for new Supermax prisons. In much of White America's understanding, Black women were welfare queens; Black men were superpredators. Those assumptions remain, even today. Even as Stoller and Robinson roil with anger, aghast at the unsympathetic reaction to working class Whites by liberals, Blacks continue to serve long sentences for nonviolent drug crimes. As they're both calling for a more compassionate approach to poor whites, we're watching how law enforcement is taking a gentler approach to white opioid addicts than they ever took to black "crackheads".

There are plenty of statistics which attest to the arbitrary and discriminatory application of justice in America. This is also why Stoller and Robinson's moralising is absurd. Morality is not something that is taught in tweets and magazines. It is lived and learned. As such, I prefer a politics of justice over a politics of compassion any day.

Take health care for example, what if a group of gravely ill white supremacists were losing their government provided health care? Do you think an "all lives matter" essay would spur readers toward inner rectitude? Me neither. Therein lies the rub; when you rely on compassion as the basis for redistribution of resources, propagandists can easily strip any group of the very humanness that is supposed to evoke compassion in the first place. So if humans deserve compassion, make the group in need subhuman. Moral crisis averted. Unlike compassion, however, which relies on an assumption that humans are mostly decent, justice relies on numbers. It relies on people who commit the same crime receiving the same punishment.

So what's the answer to the current crisis? More white people need to go to prison. If a black man's life doesn't evoke enough compassion to overhaul our draconian drug laws, then maybe an influx of white women will do the trick. CP



GRASPING AT STRAWS

When Voting for Change Doesn't Work

BY MIKE WHITNEY

Why did Hillary lose the election?

According to Clinton, it was a combination of Russian meddling and former FBI Director James Comey's 11th hour announcement that he was reopening the investigation into her secret emails. Comey's blundering intervention torpedoed Hillary's chances of winning by creating a cloud of suspicion around her handling of classified material.

A number of surveys that were conducted after the election show that Comey's announcement put Clinton's campaign into a nosedive, in fact, the author of one survey stated bluntly that Comey's action was the "precipitating event" that led to Clinton's defeat.

But while Hillary may be justified in blaming Comey, her claims about Russia hacking are pretty far-fetched. So far, there's no proof that Russia interfered in the election or that WikiLeaks release of Clinton's emails had any meaningful impact on the outcome. Hillary maintained a sizable lead in the polls even while her emails were popping up daily on the Internet, which suggests that neither WikiLeaks or the Russians were responsible for the loss. That narrows it down to Comey who remains the prime suspect in a case of political sabotage that clearly tipped the election in Trump's favor.

But the Comey incident is just the tip of the iceberg, the real reason Hillary lost the election is because a large percentage of the people who voted for Obama in 2012 either didn't vote for a presidential candidate in 2016 or switched parties to vote for Trump. And the reason they responded the way they did is because, as one pollster noted,

"the Democrats' economic policies favor the wealthy".

Bingo. The Democratic Party is no longer the party of working people. The majority of voters now think the party has aligned itself with its uber-wealthy constituents and no longer represents the interests of the 'little guy'. And the 'interests' we're talking about here, are not extravagant by any means.

Most people just want to be able to feed, clothe, educate and provide shelter for themselves and their families, and maybe scrape together enough for a modest retirement.

That's all we're talking about, basic economic security. But the Democrats don't want to talk about economic security anymore. They're too busy pushing their globalist agenda, moaning about the Russians or wining and dining their fatcat Wall Street buddies.

There was an excellent article by Greg Sargent in the Washington Post titled "Why did Trump win? New research by Democrats offers a worrisome answer." As it happens, a significant number of working class whites who voted for Obama four years earlier, switched to Trump in 2016. A poll that was conducted by Priorities USA and cited in the article provides some illuminating details about the conditions that precipitated the shift in political loyalties. Here's an excerpt:

"50 percent of Obama-Trump voters said their incomes are falling behind the cost of living, and another 31 percent said their incomes are merely keeping pace with the cost of living."

Keep in mind, the survey was conducted in the battleground states of Wisconsin and Michigan. Obama won

in both states in 2012, while Trump narrowly beat Clinton in 2016.

What's shocking about the survey is that 81 percent of the people who switched from Obama to Trump are either barely keeping their heads above water or sinking deeper into debt. This is the critical subtext of the 2016 election, that the outcome was decided on the basis of financial distress and economic insecurity. Working class people are being ground down by neoliberal austerity, deindustrialization, and monetary policies that only serve the rich. As a result, they're desperate. Trump didn't win because people thought he was the best man for the job. He won because people think the country is headed in the wrong direction and Hillary promised more of the same.

If the Democrats were serious about winning elections, they'd adjust their policies to meet the minimal requirements of their working class base. But everyone knows that's not going to happen.

But will the strategy work? Will voters really be hoodwinked by another silver-tongue politico like Obama who promises 'change' but spends his entire eight year term kowtowing to Corporate America.

No. There won't be another Obama because incomes are falling, wages are stagnating, good-paying jobs are harder to find, and standards of living are progressively slipping. As a result, voters are looking beyond establishment candidates to more extreme remedies. Donald Trump is a prime example of an extreme remedy, an impulsive real estate mogul with zero political experience whose mercurial temperament makes him thoroughly unsuitable for the job of Commander in Chief.

The status quo has become the enemy of the working man. The establishment has become the enemy of the working man. And as long as economic conditions continue to deteriorate, our politics are bound to get more acrimonious, more radical and more violent. CP

BORDERZONE NOTES

Renegotiating NAFTA for a Living Wage Across Borders

BY LAURA CARLSEN

President Donald Trump's commitment to "renegotiate or cancel" the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) has caused panic in the Mexican business/political leadership and among U.S. transnationals, but for unions it could be a long-awaited opportunity.

Last week, union representatives from the progressive coalition "Change to Win" and the Communication Workers' of America (CWA) met with their Mexican counterparts to discuss risks and opportunities. On the Mexican side, representatives of the telephone workers, flight attendants, and the union of the National Autonomous University of Mexico participated, among others grouped in the National Workers Union (UNT).

"Under NAFTA written by corporations, workers and our rights and protections were an afterthought—another tool in their pursuit of greater and greater profits. Now is our time to reverse that," said Shane Larson of the CWA.

Could workers get a better deal in the context of Trump's renegotiation? For the union leaders, opening the debate, making their own proposals and joining together at a regional level to raise common demands is in itself an important achievement.

For the United States, the renegotiation discussions are revealing what many already knew—that the new president is not the champion of working class interests he claimed to be during the campaign. Joe Geevarghese

of Change to Win explained, "Donald Trump is a fraud. He ran as an economic populist, but the truth is his cabinet and the Republican Party are focused principally on privatization and plunder of the U.S. government to benefit corporate elites. And that war on workers, which has been underway for the past 40 years, is going to accelerate under Donald Trump."

A far greater percentage than expected of U.S. workers supported Trump based on his often racist-infused rhetoric that manipulated insecurities in the country with promises of "America First", opposition to NAFTA, and supposed defense of workers abandoned by Washington and Wall Street. Now that Trump has filled his cabinet with white, billionaire men with pro-corporate policies, his pro-worker facade is beginning to crumble.

The lesson for U.S. unions is to organize in the streets. During the past government, they launched a "Fight for 15" campaign (to raise the minimum wage to \$15 an hour) that has achieved increases at state and municipal levels in many parts of the country. After attempting the same and failing in negotiations with the White House, the unions launched strikes of tens of thousands of workers. "With Obama we realized that the Democratic Party wasn't our ally and we had to take the fight to the streets," Geevarghese said.

Negotiating improvements for workers will be an uphill battle. Unionization in the two countries is at all-time lows. In the United States, it fell to

the lowest level in history the last year of the Obama administration. José Luis Téllez of the Telephone Workers' union reported that in Mexico 10% of workers are unionized, and of these only 10% are real unions, meaning that only about 1% have a real contractual wage. He added that, "structural reforms have been a disguised labor reform" that seeks to eliminate unions.

In the face of the crisis, opening up NAFTA offers the opportunity to build a North American platform that rejects both Trump's demagoguery and Peña Nieto's anti-worker offensive. The conclusions of the Mexico City meeting are now circulating within the unions to build consensus that will lead to a shared stance in the negotiations. The goal is also to include Canadian unions.

One of the main agreements is to raise the minimum wage in all three countries to guarantee a living wage for all people. When I asked what impact Mexican wage improvement would have for workers in the United States, Larson of CWA responded, "It would be a huge benefit for folks in the U.S. to raise Mexican wages. With a global economy, the floor pulls all of us down so if we can lift up that wage floor it benefits everybody."

Another point that emerged was the need to integrate the issue of the rights of migrant workers into the regional integration agreement. The lack of a NAFTA chapter to guarantee labor mobility has promoted the criminalization of migrant workers and the constant violation of their rights. After years of seeing them as the enemy at home, U.S. unions increasingly recognize the need to defend the rights of migrant workers in their home country and the United States in order to defend labor rights as a whole and expand the power of collective bargaining. The unions propose mechanisms to permit cross-border negotiating and union affiliation of employees of the same company in different countries. They also agreed on the importance of having a gender perspective that not only addresses the

needs of women workers, but also recognizes their leadership capacity and the specific threats they face.

While the union representatives met in Mexico City, in Washington Trump signed two executive orders on trade. One requires a report on deficits in trade relations that seeks to identify unfair practices and the other orders the application of anti-dumping sanctions. Actually, there is nothing new in either.

A draft memorandum on the renegotiation of NAFTA, written by U.S. Trade Representative (USTR) that includes the prospect of taxes on imports and mechanisms to protect sectors of the U.S. economy in certain circumstances. It also calls for compliance with internationally recognized rights and the application of national labor laws. Faced with criticism that the draft does not reflect the anti-NAFTA position of the campaign, the spokesman of the White House denied that has delineated its content.

What follows is that in a few days the Secretary of Commerce Wilbur Ross will notify Congress of the intention to renegotiate the agreement and opens a period of 90 days of analysis of proposals. The unions are preparing.

"Trump always says that in NAFTA, Mexico has won at the expense of the United States and is a big lie. The reality is that employers have gained at the expense of workers on both sides of the border," says Dan Mauer of CWA. Is there a real possibility to change this equation? It's unclear, but for now, the re-opening is serving to revitalize trade union movements and weave cross-border alliances and that alone is a gain. **CP**

EUROZONE NOTES

Europe's Rightwards Zeitgeist

BY DANIEL RAVENTÓS AND JULIE WARK

After 1945 it was widely believed that the defeat of fascism had set a normative benchmark. Fascism was a rotten apple in the barrel of history. If it did exist, it was supposedly only in isolated forms like the French Organisation Armée Secrète during the Algerian War and the Greek military junta of the early 1970s. Yet ultra-right symbols and orthodoxies lurked beneath the surface, waiting for neoliberalism to pave the way for their ideological rebirth as outgrowths of early-twentieth-century movements or, to go back still further, of post-1789 counterrevolutionary dogma. Today's media-savvy far-right political parties dress old ideology and forms of mass mobilization in pseudo-democratic garb to impose their radicalized versions of accepted systems. Hence, they can co-opt even former adversaries. For example, about 20% of French gay men voted for the National Front (FN) in the present elections because Marine Le Pen says that gays are in danger in Islamic countries. And a poll suggested that 50% of Mélenchon's left supporters would transfer their vote to Macron, but 20% preferred Le Pen.

The establishment media presents elite politics as remote and complicated, not a matter for ordinary people. Slogans, memes, emotion-goaded chicanery, symbols and scapegoats replace serious debate and mimetic violence creates a tinderbox buzz which attracts disaffected individuals and groups. As Timothy Snyder argues in *On Tyranny* (2017), politicians use highly-

constrained language "to starve the public of the concepts needed to think about the past, present and future", so self-deception becomes a state of mind and this "is how tyrannies spread". Refugees, immigrants, and the EU are blamed for feelings of impotence and all social ills. A recent Eurobarometer survey finds that only 35% of Europeans see the EU as positive. Finally, especially after the 1992 Maastricht Treaty annulled national jurisdiction over some important issues, national politicians are decried as elitist and ineffectual.

In the 2014 European parliamentary elections, far-right parties achieved a record 22.9% of the vote (expected to rise to 37% in 2019). In the parliament they form three groups plus some non-attached members, mostly from Hungary's Jobbik, Germany's NPD, Greece's Golden Dawn and FN malcontents. While they haven't established a broad front they do influence national governments or form part of them. Most blame the EU for everything, though their MP's aren't averse to using its perks and media infrastructure as a privileged soapbox.

Far-right parties are the largest in Greece, Hungary, Italy, Slovakia, and Switzerland, and are in the national governments of Finland, Greece, Hungary, Lithuania, Norway, Slovakia, and Switzerland. As a rule of thumb, "far right" means they are to the right of the European People's Party (EPP). They are not totally homogenous but, as the Dutch analyst, Cas Mudde notes, they share the "pathological normalcy"

of their origins in mainstream society and a core doctrine with varying degrees of xenophobia, ethnocentrism, nationalism, racism, negativism and populism. Like France's FN, they change tone and content according to how political winds are blowing. The following list of eight parties shows their main characteristics.

Germany: Alternative for Germany (2014), with two streams, neoliberal and nationalist-conservative, attracts anti-establishment, anti-liberalization, anti-European, anti-Islam, anti-refugee voters.

France: the FN is anti-European, anti-immigrant, anti-finance, anti-globalization and protectionist. Marine Le Pen's populism seems less extreme than her father's but the party has a hardline center and militant neo-fascist base.

The Netherlands: the Party for Freedom is nationalist, anti-EU, xenophobic (but pro-Israel) and anti-Islam.

Greece: Golden Dawn (1980), anti-EU and openly neo-Nazi with violent anti-immigrant views, sees Donald Trump's victory as one for "ethnically clean states".

Hungary: Jobbik (2003), largely supported by young, educated, middle-class men, is anti-immigration, anti-Zionist (pro-Muslim), anti-homosexual, and protectionist. Its rise is due less to economic problems than to its "taboo-breaking" anti-Roma virulence.

Austria: the nationalist Freedom Party wants family values, fortified borders, restricted benefits for immigrants, and jobs for Austrians.

Slovakia: Kotleba is anti-Roma, anti-immigrant, anti-American, anti-Semitic, anti-Europe, anti-NATO and for Christian morality.

Italy: besides the anti-immigration, anti-EU Lega Nord there are many far-right ideological currents, groups and practices in the north. Claiming to be "right and left", Lega Nord enjoys the support of Marine Le Pen, the French Bloc Identitaire, Germany's Pegida, and

Greece's Golden Dawn.

What these parties have in common is a catch-all anti-politics of grievance and vaguely formulated national supremacism. There is more than a grain of truth in their criticism of Europe and they use this to focus anger on vulnerable targets like refugees and immigrants. One problem for the left, as Brexit showed, is that they have appropriated the word "sovereignty" when attacking a European Union which has proven to be inimical to jobs and public services. If Europe's far-right discourse is understood in terms of populism, Cas Mudde's definition fits the phenomenon: a thin-centered ideology based on a Manichean distinction between "pure people" and "corrupt elite", and defense of an ill-defined sovereignty. "The people" are pitted against dishonest, inept elites and ideological flexibility blurs left-right differences when it is claimed, not incorrectly, that the "people" are being deprived of rights, values, prosperity, identity and voice. The "uncontaminated" community then becomes the standard for defining who belongs and who does not.

This us-versus-them model works as an identity anchor when there are widespread feelings of being unmoored or cut adrift. Blame smoothly swings between political elites and ethnic minorities. The purer the conception of "the people", the more violent is the antagonism towards outsiders and the greater the desire to overthrow the democracy that includes them. The mainly uncritical media parrots the message. The recent crisis has played its part in the rise of the right but this should be seen in all its facets—existential (terrorism), identity (migration) and cultural (xenophobia)—as well as economic. Sometimes there is a more or less clear correlation between a country's economic performance and a rightwards drift of disgruntled nationalists but this is not generalizable. In fact, populist parties with their "welfare-chauvinism" rants against immigrants or EU transfers to states that are hard

hit by the crisis are mainly successful in the economically stronger northern and western parts of the EU. Claiming to speak for the people ("We Say What You Think"), far-right populism is selective, whipping up such strong sentiments around its pet anti-themes that they seem to address all the world's wrongs. Populist parties differ from far-right parties in that they frequently claim a commitment to democracy and rule of law, thus aping liberal parties. While this has led to the sidelining of some earlier extreme-right organizations (as with the rise of UKIP and decline of the British National Party, or Marine Le Pen's FN ousting her father's), they usually have a base of militant ultras. And in Spain, for example, the monarchy is a direct heir of the Franco regime, while the governing, allegedly center-right People's Party has a strong ultra-right core, a fact which is rarely remarked upon.

Extremist loners skulk in the gray zones. Increasingly accepted far-right parties differ from ultra-right loners more in form than in content. They may not openly espouse the loners' positions and actions but this doesn't mean they don't benefit. A recent UK Royal United Services Institute study shows that these zealots aren't as detached as is widely believed. The dangers of normalizing extremism are highlighted by the fact that, in his 1,500-page manifesto, Anders Behring Breivik, who killed 73 people in Norway in 2011, draws heavily on Europe's right-wing populist ideology. Transatlantic influences are also clear in his lengthy quotes from a 2004 publication of the US Free Congress, edited and partly authored by the paleoconservative William S. Lind.

As Toby Archer notes in his essay "Breivik's Mindset: The Counterjihad and the New Transatlantic Anti-Muslim Right" (2013), the European Counterjihad is "fundamentally a product of the 9/11 attacks on the United States and the connectivity brought about by the internet over

the last decade". Sidling around the far right's overt racism with a "liberal critique" of Islam, the Counterjihad effectively endows anti-Islam politics with some degree of respectability and therefore embraces a much broader political spectrum than is usually acknowledged, including upholders of the "classical liberal tradition". This US-European far-right convergence requires closer scrutiny and should sound alarm bells now that Donald Trump and his chief strategist Steve Bannon aren't shy about showing their support for Marine Le Pen.

"Social" Europe was never a major concern of the supranational state of the European Union where international financiers cream off profits from a broken economic system, national public services collapse, investors in their privatization grow richer, and populations are punished with harsher austerity measures. Elections in debilitated states appoint candidates who work within the system to further undermine them. Corruption is rampant and sophisticated and, as Madrid's mayor Manuela Carmena notes, corruption is a form of social violence.

The barely-concealed contempt of EU leaders for the "people" fuels an anti-everything backlash against this political oligarchy which trashes the democracy it purportedly upholds. Voters are disturbingly inured to far-right politics and the left, also anti-establishment, has little to offer by way of alternatives. The 99% versus the 1% slogan gets people onto the streets but it isn't nuts-and-bolts policy (which now appears more at the municipal level than anywhere else, or in grassroots support for universal basic income, for example). In France, much of the FN's discourse could come from the mouths of Fillon, Nicolas Sarkozy and Manuel Valls. Meanwhile, Le Pen takes the old concept of laïcité and—*abracadabra!*—it turns into anticlericalism aimed at Islam. Evidently she doesn't support laïcité in the left republican sense in which religion is strictly

a private matter and no concern of the state (which doesn't recognize "communities" of the faithful as political interlocutors) but is what might be called imperial-multiconfessional (the state recognizes all ethnic/religious communities as political interlocutors). But most voters don't make the distinction.

Right-wing nationalist campaigns, including Brexit and Donald Trump's, make two fundamental claims currently trending in many western countries: uplifting workers in a crippling globalized economy and blocking immigration. Clashes over culture and economics seem to be driving the rise of the far right but overwrought discourse disguises another disaster, namely loss of trust in the institutions (precisely the area where left municipal movements are now (net)working to good effect). The rise of the far right is an ominous symptom of a much more serious crisis. Hence, there is an urgent need to study why mainstream politics has failed at all levels to deliver on its promises. Democratic republican policies, genuinely reflecting Europe's long-held claims of championing universal freedom, justice and human dignity are needed if the continent is not to sink deeper into the cesspool of intolerance now being "democratically" peddled across a good part of the political spectrum. **CP**

The Money Virus Conflicts-of-Interest Within the Trump Organization

BY DAVID MACARAY

Until recently, "conflict-of-interest" wasn't discussed much. You might hear it mentioned when a judge was forced to recuse himself from a case involving a friend or associate, but that was

about it. Essentially, the term refers to a person with professional or public-interest responsibility being placed in a position where decisions could be made on the basis of self-interest (greed, patronage, cronyism) rather than merit.

And while Donald Trump and his Traveling Circus seem like prime candidates, conflict-of-interest isn't always easy to identify. For one thing, there must be a clearly delineated "interest," and that interest must clearly be seen to be "in conflict." If those conditions aren't met, the term doesn't apply.

Although it's still early, there have already been several scandals or setbacks, two of which involved Trump surrogates: Michael Flynn and Paul Manafort. Flynn was Trump's hand-picked National Security Advisor (NSA), the same job Henry Kissinger initially had under Nixon.

Flynn remained NSA for a total of 21 days before resigning in disgrace after being linked to secret talks with the Russians, and receiving cash gifts. When routinely questioned by the FBI, Flynn stunned everyone by instantly requesting immunity, not something you want to hear from an intel officer who's been on the job 10 minutes. It all happened so quickly, their gums were still bleeding. Goodbye, Michael.

As slimy as Flynn was, Manafort was even slimier. With a history of sleaze going back to the 1980s when he was accused of manipulating HUD money, Manafort was appointed Trump's campaign manager in April, 2016, after Corey Lewandowski was fired. [Fun fact: After getting fired, the resourceful Lewandowski became a consultant, and is now said to be peddling "face time" with the president.]

Manafort remained campaign manager only until August, 2016, when, like Flynn, he resigned in disgrace. Apparently, this greedy and calculating lobbyist had his own "oligarch problem," allegedly having accepted \$12.7 million in dirty money from former Ukraine president Viktor

“Ross pushed the through the merger of two companies, but ‘forgot’ to mention he owned both of them.”

Yanukovych. Goodbye, Paul.

Unfortunately, unsavory “career climbers” like Flynn and Manafort are unlikely to spend time in jail even if convicted of violating the Foreign Agents Registration Act, various bribery statutes, or the Emoluments Clause. That’s because unless the government is determined to fuck with you, conflict-of-interest usually gets you “disqualified,” not imprisoned.

Shifting from politics to real estate, President Trump is said to own 422 luxury condo and penthouse units, from New York City to Las Vegas. Their combined value (ranging from \$200,000 to \$35 million) is estimated at \$250 million. This covers only those properties in the U.S. Trump has real estate all over the world.

So what’s wrong with having a property-rich president? Answer: When his holdings go on sale, sharp-eyed opportunists will emerge from under rocks and offer considerably more than market value in order to gain favor with Donald Trump.

It already happened in Palm Beach, in 2008. Dmitry Rybolovlev, a Russian billionaire now living in Monte Carlo paid Trump \$95 million for a mansion appraised at \$45 million. Rybolovlev never resided in the mansion, and never even saw it. We can only imagine what other goodies he got out of the deal.

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It’s been reported that Trump’s Cabinet-level appointees have a combined worth of \$14.5 billion. The majority of it is represented by four billionaires: Betsy DeVos, Secretary of Education; Wilbur Ross, Secretary of Commerce; Todd Ricketts, Deputy Secretary of Commerce; and Linda McMahon, chairwoman of the Small Business Administration. [Fun fact: Betsy’s brother, Erik Prince, was co-founder of Blackwater, the security outfit that ran roughshod over Iraq.]

This overview of Trump and his coterie isn’t intended as another broadside. Rather, it’s a straightforward examination of the first and only U.S. president in history whose entire adult life prior to taking office revolved around making money.

Indeed, it’s not unfair to say that Trump’s very existence has been defined by that endeavor. If we removed everything having to do with the accumulation of personal wealth—removed every scrap related to business—there would be nothing left. Clearly, we have never had a president so one-dimensional or grasping.

Immediately after being elected, Trump pledged to “fully disengage” himself from his commercial enterprises by

January 20, his first day in office. We’re already in May, and he hasn’t done so. While he has made a few symbolic gestures, as of this writing there has been nothing resembling full disengagement (e.g. divesting businesses, placing assets in blind trusts).

In fact, instead of severing ties to his entrepreneurial empire, he nominally placed it in the hands of his children—as if anyone believes that Trump’s kids would in any meaningful sense remain “independent” of their father. It’s like that Gambino crime family member who went to prison but continued to run the operation from his cell.

Considering that Donald Trump formerly owned the Miss Universe Pageant, we can expect this pro forma appointment to be the bureaucratic equivalent of the swimsuit competition.

Then there’s the Trump International Hotel, housed in what was previously Washington’s Old Post Office. Before being elected, Trump signed a 60-year lease on the building and spent \$200 million renovating it. Because he’s technically leasing it from the U.S. government, this makes him both tenant and landlord. The General Services Administration (GSA) has been preternaturally mum about the arrangement.

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Which brings us to son-in-law Jared Kushner. To the shock of many (including Steve Bannon), Trump named him “Senior Advisor to the President.” Since being given that auspicious title, Kushner, a real estate and newspaper mogul, has gone from wet-behind-the-ears political novice to elder statesman. Arguably, he appears to have become what James Baker was to George H.W. Bush.

Except Baker wasn’t in it for the money. Following the election, Kushner and Ivanka wasted no time in burying their snouts in the trough. Before Trump was even sworn in, son-in-law and wife arranged a meeting with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and other Japanese officials.

Normally, one of these sit-downs wouldn’t raise eyebrows, but this one occurred while Trump’s daughter was in the process of negotiating a licensing contract for her “Ivanka” clothing line with a company owned by the Japanese government. Repeat: A company owned by the government. While greasing the skids in this manner wasn’t technically “illegal,” it reeked of impropriety and greed.

A critical difference between “networking” and conflict-of-interest is based on the stature (and presumed influence) of the person doing it. And in the case of the Stepford Couple, they were obviously using the office of the President of the United States to promote a commercial venture.

And then it happened again. In April of 2017, Ivanka gained

provisional approval for three of her company trademarks from China, which is universally recognized as a tough market to crack. By a “happy coincidence,” she pulled this off on the same day she had dinner with Chinese president, Xi Jinping and his wife.

Say what you will about the notorious “Hans und Fritz” (H.R. Haldeman and John Ehrlichman of Watergate infamy), but those obstructionist bastards were only looking to protect Richard Nixon. As loathsome as they were, unlike the swinish Jared and Ivanka, they weren’t in it for the money.

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By now everyone knows that Trump has businesses, investments, licensing deals (i.e., where he has sold the Trump name) and subsidiaries literally all over the world. Besides substantial real estate holdings in Virginia, Illinois, Florida, Nevada, New Jersey, California, New York, Connecticut and Hawaii, he has investment property in Canada, Turkey, Panama, South Korea, the Philippines, India and Uruguay.

During the campaign it was reported that he “ran” approximately 400 businesses. It would have been more accurate to say that he monitored approximately 400 “revenue streams.” In either case, that is one gargantuan portfolio. In his financial disclosure statement, Trump listed himself as “trustee, president, chairman, stakeholder or member” of 530 entities.

Questions have been raised: Was Exxon Mobile’s request (in mid-April) to be granted a waiver to do business with Russia’s state-owned Rosneft oil conglomerate (off-limits due to sanctions) another “happy coincidence,” or was it made because former Exxon CEO Rex Tillerson (a recipient, in 2013, of Russia’s “Order of Friendship”) is now Secretary of State?

Question: Was the bogus “Trump University” a freakish anomaly, or evidence that we have a self-deluded Wharton hophead in the White House? Although Trump managed to avoid racketeering charges, he was forced to pay tens of millions of dollars in restitution to former “students” who’d filed a class action lawsuit, claiming the whole thing had been worthless.

Question: Was there a quid pro quo arrangement between him and the Azerbaijan government allowing his luxury hotel to be built in Baku? Given the buttoned-down secrecy in which these things are cloaked, it’s unlikely we’ll ever know.

As for his divestiture promise, we may as well forget about it. Because so many of these holdings are intentionally convoluted and buttressed in legalese, by the time an investigatory committee gets around to sorting them out, Trump’s term will be over. It’s no accident that the world of international high-finance is forbiddingly opaque.

Yet, what many don’t realize is that besides being the “richest” president in history, Trump is also the most “indebted.” The man is swimming in debt. Upon taking office, Trump owed \$364 million to one lender alone, and that lender happens to be Deutsche Bank, the German bank that

was forced to pay \$7.2 billion in penalties for its role in the 2008 mortgage debacle.

Because the Justice Department is still investigating Deutsche for, among other things, helping criminals funnel money out of Russia, it raises all sorts of ethical questions, largely because it puts Trump appointee Jeff Sessions—a savvy Alabama politician and profoundly gifted liar—in the spotlight.

The Department of Justice’s on-going investigation of Deutsche Bank’s shady dealings with Russia is overseen by the Department of Justice. And the head honcho of the DOJ is the Attorney General. And Jeff Sessions is Trump’s AG. The plot thickens.

Unfortunately, Sessions has his own “Russiagate” history. He was mentioned as one of the individuals associated with alleged mischief during the 2016 presidential campaign, having had several secret meetings with ranking officials, including Sergey Kislyak, the Russian ambassador to the U.S.

Yet Russia could be the least of his problems. While Sessions is duty-bound to continue investigating the U.S. president’s biggest lender, what will he do when Deutsche announces that the loan it made to Citizen Trump was going to be modified for President Trump? Banks do this all the time, so the request itself wouldn’t be cause for alarm.

But there’s an issue of public trust here. As cynical as the American public has become, people nonetheless need to be assured that Deutsche won’t gain preferential treatment from the Justice Department by dangling the prospect of debt reduction under Donald’s nose, and that Trump won’t pressure his beholden AG to back off.

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Given Trump’s obsession with revenue, another Cabinet member who may warrant scrutiny is Wilbur Ross, Secretary of Commerce. Because Trump presides over a grape vineyard in rural Virginia (Who knew?), he had previously applied for “foreign worker visas” from the very government he now runs.

It will likely be Secretary Ross’s department that’s asked to fast-track all future applications, and while it is a trivial matter that barely moves the needle, it should be noted that this visa request wasn’t made for “humanitarian” reasons. We’re already aware of Trump’s sour view of immigration. It was done solely for financial gain.

Also, Wilbur Ross is no stranger to conflict-of-interest scandals. In 2006, following an explosion that killed 12 West Virginia coal miners, Ross was reported by former Sago executives to have been “intimately involved” with the coal company and, accordingly, knew all about the safety issues. In the year prior to the accident, the Department of Labor reported issuing 208 citations for safety violations. Ross walked away from it clean.

But in 2014, he wasn’t so lucky. Ross paid \$81 million to settle a lawsuit filed by shareholders who accused him of

failing to disclose vital information. According to the documents, Ross was instrumental in pushing through the merger of two companies, but embarrassingly, had “forgotten” to mention that he was majority owner of both companies. Unhappy with the merger (and Ross’s subterfuge), shareholders sued him and won.

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On the topic of workers’ safety and welfare, another possible conflict-of-interest looms with Alex Acosta, the new Secretary of Labor. As president, Trump not only gets to pick a Labor Secretary, he gets to appoint the five-person NLRB (National Labor Relations Board) panel, one of whose jobs is to oversee union certification elections. Ask any union officer, and they will tell you the Labor Board is critically important.

Not to get all conspiratorial here, but we’re faced with the question of how “loyal” Secretary Acosta will be to his benefactor. After all, he was plucked from relative obscurity (Acosta was dean of a backwater law school, which is far from the Big Show), and he may not wish to challenge the man who “invented” him, not if he wants a career in government.

Again, what makes Acosta’s dilemma so coarse, is that it isn’t ideological. It won’t be like Reagan’s Secretary of Labor (Raymond Donovan) risking his boss’s ire by doing something that could be interpreted as philosophically “pro-union.” Acosta’s dilemma won’t resemble anything remotely “philosophical.” It will be all about putting money in his boss’s pocket.

Over the years, entry-level employees at Trump hotels and casinos have filed numerous ULP (Unfair Labor Practice) lawsuits claiming that their right to join a union had been impeded. Like that Virginia vineyard issue, this all revolves around money. Because union membership means higher wages and better benefits for workers, it represents a threat to Trump.

While there’s no doubt that those ULPs are factually based, they will not only take a year to be adjudicated, it will require a brave Secretary of Labor to side with Trump’s employees against Trump himself. But isn’t that precisely what’s being discussed here? Isn’t that the governing principle of conflict-of-interest? That you can’t serve two masters?

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Trump does a prodigious amount of business in countries where the concept of “conflict-of-interest” doesn’t exist. And this is where Donald, Jr. and Eric, Trump’s wildly ambitious Number One and Number Two sons, come in.

It’s always struck me as low-class for the media to pick on a president’s kids, as if being his progeny made them deserving of public ridicule. Whether it was Nixon’s daughters, Amy Carter, Chelsea Clinton, or the Bush twins, it seemed irresponsible and spiteful. Which is why, out of respect for her privacy, Ivanka’s spectacular breast job and nose job (which, of course, being a Trump, she stubbornly denies having) must

go unmentioned.

But the sons are a different story. Donald Jr. and Eric have been asked to help oversee Trump’s vast commercial empire, which makes them fair game. They have officially been initiated into the family business. Mice studying to become rats, so to speak.

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One thing is certain. A president with Trump’s background and number of international ties is going to be inundated—barraged, pelted, carpet-bombed—with questionable opportunities, whether he solicits them or not.

And Donald, Jr. and Eric have been authorized to handle those. They will be trading on the family name. Unaccountably, the name “Trump” has been deemed so valuable that even before becoming president, Donald made millions of dollars by licensing it to companies he had no role in running.

Not that every venture succeeded. Too much spaghetti, not enough meatballs. Some notable flops: Trump Airlines, Trump Vodka, Trump Steaks, Trump Magazine, Trump Mortgage, Trump Travel Agency, Trump: The Board Game, and of course, Trump University. Even his casinos (Trump Entertainment Resorts) filed for bankruptcy four times.

But maybe we’re guilty of jumping the gun here. Maybe it’s reckless and mean-spirited of us to prematurely question Trump’s sons’ trustworthiness. After all, we regularly put our faith in the integrity and wisdom of municipal and superior court judges, don’t we? And wasn’t Donald, Jr. a judge on the TV show, “The Apprentice”? **CP**

DAVID MACARAY, a former union rep, is a Los Angeles-based playwright and the author of *It’s Never Been Easy: Essays on Modern Labor and Night Shift: 270 Factory Stories*. His latest book is *How to Win Friends and Avoid Sacred Cows: Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About India But Were Afraid to Ask*.

In Search of the Kennedys

The Myth and Madness

BY MATTHEW STEVENSON

You would think, over a lifetime of reading and reflection—plus having seen both in person in the 1960s—that by now I would have come to a conclusion about John and Robert Kennedy, whether they were part of the problem (as unreconstructed Cold Warriors and abusers of women, including the tragic Marilyn Monroe) or part of the solution (politicians, in the best sense of the word, with progressive views about civil rights and opposed to militarism).

Questions about both men linger because they were assassinated at the peak of their powers. John Kennedy was killed as he was getting ready to push through arms control agree-

ments with the Russians and maybe pull American troops out of Indochina. Similarly, Robert Kennedy was shot dead as he spoke about putting the powers of the presidency behind the values of a more just and equitable society, and to end the Vietnam war (which he had a hand in starting).

Instead, early death turned both into fragments of broken sculpture—perhaps one of those busts from the ruins of Diocletian Rome that, because of earthquakes or wars, are too damaged to tell whether the marbled statesman was a worthy democrat or one of the twelve Caesars that Suetonius profiled to explain the decline and fall of the once great republic.

In that sense I am never sure whether the Kennedys stood with Cicero or Caligula, and I have spent a lifetime searching for the answers.

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I was six years old in September 1960, when my mother took me to Long Island's Roosevelt Field (on his way to Paris, Charles Lindbergh used it as a runway, but in 1960 it was a

astically to the crowd.

As I stood by the main street, what was most vivid was the shock of the president's bright red hair, suddenly now in living color, as if from a glossy magazine.

I also remember thinking—although it is possible my memory is mixing with the images that were beamed from Dallas a month later—that on the back of a convertible he made an inviting target for anyone trying to get him. In grade school in the 1960s, the assassinations of presidents Lincoln, Garfield, and McKinley made most history classes.

Because I was a nine-year-old boy running around with a football, I had to watch the president dedicate the Frost library on a large screen television set up inside a gym.

Alas, in those days I had a limited attention span for presidential addresses, and cannot remember anything he said in Amherst. Nevertheless, I had, the year before in 1962, followed the Cuban Missile Crisis with an intensity that still surprises me.

Each day in Mrs. Kahn's third-grade class, I would present

“Had JFK missed the essence of the Cold War much the way his father had confronted fascism with the loving embrace of appeasement?”

suburban shopping mall) to see Senator John F. Kennedy campaign for the presidency.

We were fifty yards from the podium, in a thick crowd of thousands. I had to be hoisted on to my mother's shoulders to get a glimpse of the candidate, who on that grey autumn day seemed more out of a black-and-white photograph than in technicolor.

If he spoke to the crowd, as I am sure he did, I have no recollection of his words. But in the vote that took place in my first grade class at Munsey Park School, he had mine, and I took pleasure when, in early November, our neighbors no longer had any use for their super-sized campaign buttons, really the size of dinner plates, that read: “Ike Likes Nixon... We Do Too.”

* * *

The next time I saw Kennedy in person was on October 26, 1963, a month before he was shot in Dallas. He was dedicating the Robert Frost Library at Amherst College in Massachusetts, where my uncle, Ed Phreaner, had been an undergraduate.

Ed led our entire family to the ceremony, which took place on a beautiful autumn weekend. The president might well have been the homecoming king, given that he toured around Amherst on the back of an open convertible, waving enthusi-

a “current event” from the newspaper, and for weeks I had “stayed with the story” of Cuban missiles, which may explain why in graduate school I chose the subject for a seminar paper.

* * *

Was I distraught a month later when President Kennedy was shot dead in Dallas? Yes and no. I was in the fourth grade when it happened, and he was the only president in my memory. I had seen him twice in person, and knew that my parents, and my aunt and uncle, admired him, especially because of his war service in the Solomon Islands, where my father had made landings with the Marines.

At another level, however, Kennedy's killing felt like yet another primetime rubout on our black-and-white television. Two days later I saw Lee Harvey Oswald go down in front of the cameras. Then on the Monday, I tuned into the funeral, but it had too many black suits and dresses to hold my attention.

By the time the eternal flame was lit, I had joined a neighborhood football game.

For a nine-year-old boy on Long Island, the death even of a president was an abstraction. For a long time I didn't dwell on the Warren Commission, silent coups, the Cuban connection, or the Grassy Knoll. I had baseball and my bike.

I just assumed Oswald had done the killing. After all, he had the words communist dupe written all over his white t-shirt and mail-order rifle, the kind of evidence that on Dragnet would be rounded up in every half-hour episode. I had seen many perpetrators, and he was one.

* * *

By the time Robert Kennedy was being mentioned as a presidential candidate in winter 1968, I had read many Kennedy histories and remained convinced that somehow neither John nor Robert was cut from the sinister cloth of Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, or any of those southern senators who defended racism and the war.

Therefore I jumped when my mother took me out of school in the eighth grade so that I could meet Robert Kennedy. She was on the Long Island board of the League of Women Voters, and he was coming to one of their meetings, held in a seashore house in Great Neck. (That was Jay Gatsby's West Egg, according to the book I was reading for English class, in which F. Scott Fitzgerald writes about "the consoling proximity of millionaires.")

About fifteen women in that elegant living room listened to Senator Kennedy talk about the issues of the day, including race and Vietnam. I stood behind one of the sofas, listening intently and taking in the small details: that he was shorter than I expected (maybe five-foot eight inches?) and that his barber had made a hash of his sideburns, cutting them at a sharp angle.

After talking to the League board, the senator approached me, the only boy in the room and—even though I was wearing a necktie and jacket—clearly playing hooky from school.

He asked if I liked school (I did), played football (yes, quarterback), and what I was studying (I think I talked up the 1960 election in Art Merovick's social studies class).

For the two minutes of our conversation, I picked up his humor (he made a joke about football), his compassion (he had also liked school, reading, and history), and his determination (there was something steely in his grey-blue eyes). Then he was off in his chauffeured car—although, as it turned out, he was heading toward eternity.

Several months later, on a hot June day just before the end of school—when instead of classes we would have picnics under trees—I woke up early and turned on my clock radio, which was broadcasting the overnight news of Robert Kennedy's shooting. He was still alive in Los Angeles, but barely.

I went to school that day, but with a feeling of dread, a part of which has never left me. I had had three political heroes growing up—the two Kennedys and Martin Luther King, Jr.—and now all had been shot dead.

Intellectually, I wanted to think of American politics as a noble pursuit—its chapters lifted from Jefferson's letters or Lincoln's nobility; if not the inspiration of Periclean Athens; emotionally, however, it felt more like an underworld.

* * *

It was in high school that I stopped reading accounts about PT-109; I had seen the Cliff Robertson movie several times, and the feel-good story was starting to wear thin.

Once (around the 11th grade) I discovered the pleasures of used bookstores, however, I began searching for titles that I knew JFK had admired: hence John Buchan's *Pilgrim's Way*, Winston Churchill's *Life of Marlborough*, and Barbara Tuchman's *The Guns of August*. He seemed at one with Sir Lewis Namier, who said: "History writing is not a visit of condolence."

I got nowhere with Churchill or Buchan (not anyway until the 1990s) but read Tuchman with admiration, even when my friend John Lubar told me that she "never let the facts get in the way of a good story." And when, later in high school, I began traveling on my own, some of my trips had a distinctly JFK feel to them.

For example, for my independent study project at the end of my senior year, I decided to study the coal industry and went with a classmate, Kevin Glynn (by train, bus, and hitchhiking) around Appalachia.

My father had worked there in the sugar business after World War II and spoke often about the hollows with affection—he had liked the mountain rails and the directness of the people in commercial affairs.

In May 1972, when Kevin and I headed west on the B&O Railroad (toward Grafton, Clarksburg, Hundred, and Wheeling), West Virginia was an issue in American politics because in 1960 John Kennedy had won its presidential primary.

In 1968, just before he declared for the presidency, Robert Kennedy had conducted hearings in Appalachia on poverty in rural America. For the Kennedys to show compassion, West Virginia was their state of mind.

* * *

Somewhere between high school and freshman year in college—that summer I read David Halberstam's *The Best and the Brightest*, about the decisions to go deeper into Vietnam ("The problems were political, but the response was military")—I began to see that there might be a flip side to Camelot and my boyish dreams.

John Kennedy had talked a good game about leaving Asians to fight their own wars, but he had upped the ante by sending 16,000 soldiers to Vietnam and turning a blind eye to Ngo Dinh Diem's assassination, assuming he had not orchestrated it.

As a congressman Kennedy had visited French Indochina and talked to reporters on the ground who saw no hope for a colonial restoration, news that he reported to his House colleagues; but then as a presidential candidate and in office, he had taken up the white man's burden—trying to convince himself and the world that American green berets could make

a better fashion statement, on the walkways of the Cold War, than had French kepis.

* * *

Through college, including Tom Travis's freshman seminar about American intervention, I continued to find it hard to distance myself from Kennedy orthodoxy.

In various seminars and papers, I would repeat the received wisdom that JFK wanted out of Vietnam, at least after the 1964 election, and that he had played the right hands in dealing with the Cubans and Russians.

Although in college I began to read revisionist historians—including books by Gar Alperovitz and William Appleman Williams (*The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*)—I kept hoping that the bad news about “imperial hubris” or “visions of omnipotence” could not be left at the Kennedys’ doorstep, and that, for example, the Bay of Pigs (really an Eisenhower show) was not simply an update of William McKinley’s splendid little war against Spain. But it was.

Appleman Williams begins his book: “The tragedy of American diplomacy is aptly symbolized...by the relations between the United States and Cuba from April 21, 1898 through April 21, 1961. The eruption of the two wars involving the same two countries in precisely the same week provides a striking sense of classical form and even adds the tinge of eeriness so often associated with tragedy.”

* * *

In my junior year, tired of undergraduate hijinks, I decided to study abroad and naturally the program that caught my attention was one offered by the Institute of European Studies at the London School of Economics, which in the late 1930s was something of a Kennedy family finishing school.

The year abroad began with an orientation course in Oxford, where I spent all my time devouring Alan Bullock’s Hitler: A Study in Tyranny, and it ended with a student rail trip around Russia to Moscow and Smolensk, where I read Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s August 1914 lying in the berth of a sleeping car, the light of the midnight sun illuminating his dark prose.

In between I studied in the libraries of London, Freiburg, and Vienna, and I left Europe convinced that the Cold War had been a hoax and that American exceptionalism was another casualty in the trenches of the Argonne and at Anzio. Russia had looked more like a Potemkin village, and even the Marshall Plan had taken on aspects of a marketing promotion.

Why hadn’t any of my Kennedy histories and biographies made these points? Had Jack Kennedy missed the essence of the Cold War much the way his father had confronted fascism with the loving embrace of appeasement?

* * *

The cracks in John Kennedy’s Ich-Bin-ein-Berliner reputation began in the 1970s and 80s, with the revelations that

he had had the sex life of a tom cat and that most days he had spent less energy profiling courage and more time on the prowl.

That his conquests included mafia mistresses, East German femmes fatales, and Washington socialites—many of whom frolicked like nymphs in the White House pool—gave the Kennedy presidency the dissolute air of a Neapolitan brothel.

Although it was only published in 1995, Seymour Hersh’s *The Dark Side of Camelot* was the high water mark of the charges that John Kennedy’s runaway sex life had compromised his ability to govern and to make clear decisions.

Hersh argued that Jack’s libido had made him vulnerable to blackmail from the mob, the Pentagon, J. Edgar Hoover, and the CIA and, further, that his sexual dalliances had crossed into a death-wish through his dealings to take down Castro’s Cuba.

After Hersh’s compendium of revelations (many had been reported before), Kennedy changed—in my mind—from a statesman of confident judgment to someone who was happy to gamble his or the country’s future for the sake of landing a little more pussy. (On one of the harrowing nights of the Cuban Missile Crisis, he snuck into the White House Mimi Alford, one of Jackie’s interns who was then an undergraduate at Wheaton College in Massachusetts.)

Was it possible to take John Kennedy seriously as a politician, for example, if his and his brother’s emotional fingerprints were all over the vials of the sleeping pills that allowed the vulnerable Marilyn Monroe to take her own life?

Hersh writes of his Cuban policies: “For the first time in his presidency, Kennedy publicly brought his personal recklessness, and his belief that the normal rules of conduct did not apply to him, to his foreign policy.”

Hersh even suggests that Kennedy’s sexual escapades made it harder for him to push back in Vietnam and could well have explained a few more gunmen around the Grassy Knoll, if not the back brace (from a tryst gone wrong) that kept him from falling over when first shot. (Another theory is that he re-injured his back making the ceremonial “first shovel” in Amherst at the Frost Library dedication.)

* * *

Personally, I found that the revelations of Kennedy’s sexual insecurities made it easier for me to explore the dark corners of the assassination in Dallas. He was no longer on a Greek pedestal.

Until I read Hersh and some of the other tell-all books about the likes of mafia playmate Judith Exner, I had stayed away from conspiracy theories, assuming that the CIA wasn’t in the business of killing its own president and that, thanks to Justice Earl Warren and author Gerald Posner, the case had been closed.

A series of trips to Dallas in the 2000s reopened the investigation, at least in my eyes. I went to the Sixth Floor Museum in the Texas School Book Depository, hung around the picket

fence on the Grassy Knoll, walked in the footsteps of the Three Tramps and Umbrella Man, and studied the route of the motorcade and its weird left turn (an assassin's delight) onto Elm Street.

In grade school, I had read William Manchester's *The Death of a President*, at least those parts serialized in Life magazine, but little else on the assassination—probably for the same reason that I never read mysteries or science fiction. But after my three trips to Dallas, it was the Warren Report that had all the elements of fabulism.

Like any convert to a new religion, I found it hard to imagine that Oswald had even been on the sixth floor (he was too busy at the Coke machine), let alone that he could have managed three shots with Alek Hidell's rusty Mannlicher-Carcano rifle (useless even in World War I).

I no longer believed the storyline of Oswald's "defection" to Russia (who paid for his flight to Helsinki, anyway?) or the cover story of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee (using David Ferrie's return address?), not to mention Hoover's own doubts that it was our Lee Oswald in Mexico City, applying for that Cuban visa.

Because it reminded me of a Dostoyevsky short story, I thought often about the line from Don DeLillo's novel, *Libra*: "Who arranged the life of Lee Harvey Oswald?"

* * *

So what I did think had happened during the six seconds in Dallas?

After I gave up on Warren's articles of faith, I found myself more drawn to the scenarios of Anthony Summers, David Talbot, Peter Janney, Oliver Stone, and, most of all, the near endless theories of what is called "the research community," all those citizen-soldiers who have devoted their lives (without getting paid) to deconstructing the Tippit murder, the two wallets, the Nash Rambler, the Moorman photograph, Clay Shaw, the botched autopsy, and all the throw-down guns and shell casings—leaving aside the magic bullet—that littered the landscape from the sixth floor to the Texas Theater.

He might have gotten it wrong—it's hard for me to say—but find me someone on the Warren Commission who shares the passion, in searching for the truth, of David S. Lifton, whose *Best Evidence* is a roller-coaster of a read that has doctors at Bethesda Naval Hospital doctoring the body and faking the autopsy. And he's just one of hundreds questioning how and why JFK died.

Ironically, the November-in-Dallas crowd (it's an annual jamboree of researchers)—despite many following on from the theories that Talbot advanced about Kennedy's dealings with the mob and the CIA in Operation Mongoose—helped restore a balance in my judgments about John Kennedy's place in American history.

As the victim of a violent crime as well as a cover up, Kennedy became again, at least in my mind, a more sympathetic figure—less the hustler on the make with Sam

Giancana's moll and more the idealistic politician of my childhood (shaking all those hands in West Virginia coal pits, leading his men to safety from the sinking PT-109), who had the right instincts about Vietnam or nuclear relations with the Russians.

* * *

After my travels to the Grassy Knoll, the Jack Kennedy that I found most attractive was the one who, growing up and after World War II, undertook a series of often difficult travels, to educate himself about foreign affairs and what the world looked like on the ground. It was how I wanted to learn about the world. Th

He was in Berlin during the summer of 1945, working as a stringer for a wire service. As a congressman and junior senator in the late 1940s and early 1950s, he traveled, often for months at a time, through Europe, the Middle East and the emerging nations of Asia.

Before war engulfed Europe in 1939, he went to Bucharest and Istanbul, and returned to London through Beirut, Damascus, and Athens. He made notes, wrote letters to friends, read voraciously, and asked questions of everyone he met.

In May 1939 he even went to the free city of Danzig, before it became a cause of war, and wrote: "Danzig is completely nazified, much heiling of Hitler, etc.... But they [the Poles] are tough here and whether they get help or not they will fight over Danzig—as they regard it first as symbolic + 2nd as the keystone." World War II began in Danzig three months later.

* * *

No book has ever been written entitled, "The Travels of John F. Kennedy," so to figure out what he thought about Palestine, India, Pakistan, or Vietnam, I had to dig around in other histories and biographies, including *Reckless Youth*.

When that biography was first published in 1992, I thought it was an add-on to all the books about Kennedy's immaturity—sexual and otherwise. But the Nigel Hamilton biography, better than many about JFK, shows his evolution from Ivy League playboy to someone intellectually engaged with the world and, moreover, capable of the growth that freed him from his father's domineering presence.

Both *Reckless Youth* and *The Kennedys at War: 1937–1945* by Edward J. Rennehan, Jr. are excellent at describing how Jack's father, Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr., didn't simply flirt with appeasement in the late 1930s, as a way to keep America out of another European war, but openly admired Germany and the fascists.

He counseled Britain to cut a deal with Hitler and warmly applauded the Munich agreement—all of which, replayed in the 1950s, if not in the West Virginia primary, could well have doomed Jack's political future.

Instead—I would argue it was through his reading and his travels—Jack was able to navigate a middle passage away from his father's reactionary views.

His love of books and printed words—many absorbed during his long illnesses—allowed him to write and publish his Harvard thesis, *Why England Slept*, which is critical of appeasement. (One reviewer suggested that it could have been called While Daddy Slept. I read the short book in high school and admired it.) From Joe Sr., JFK learned how to apply sharp elbows in his political dealings. But after events proved Munich a poisoned chalice, Jack kept his distance from his father's opinions while still retaining his love—no easy feat. Joe Jr., Jack's older brother, never managed the separation; at Harvard he helped to organize the American First Committee. Today he might be a Trumpeter.

* * *

Although there would be many trips in JFK's lifetime of traveling, the one that caught my admiration took place in the fall of 1951 (as he was thinking of running for the Senate the next year). Jack, his younger brother Bobby, and sister Patricia traveled to Israel, Iran, Pakistan, India, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, Korea, and Japan.

It was a grand tour worthy of the Kennedys, as along the way they met ambassadors, generals, and prime ministers, although sometimes they would break away from officialdom to have drinks with a reporter or a junior officer.

At least after seeing Indochina JFK could warn (for a while anyway) his countrymen about making the same mistakes there as the French.

How many American politicians since have been so comfortable in the world? Certainly not Donald Trump, whose political antecedent would have been the stay-at-home Joe Kennedy, Sr. and his flirtations with the efficiencies of national socialism.

* * *

Often in my own travels, I have come across places that shaped the political thinking of Jack and, later, Robert Kennedy.

In the late 1980s, for example, I went to the Solomon Islands by way of Port Moresby (the capital of Papua New Guinea) and Bougainville (then an outpost of rebellion on PNG).

On the flight from Aropa Airport (near the capital, Arawa) to Honiara, the capital city on Guadalcanal in the Solomons, my Air Niugini flight flew down the middle of New Georgia Sound.

It was once called the Slot, when Lt. John Kennedy patrolled these waters, first on PT-109, and later on PT-59, when he and his shipmates helped to rescue a Marine battalion that needed to be withdrawn, under fire, from Choiseul Island (which is part of the Solomons).

Because it was an inter-island flight, the plane flew low and gave me excellent views of the islands that had been the backdrop to the PT-109 story: Vella Lavella, Gizo, Kolombangara, and New Georgia. I could not see Rendova, where Kennedy

was based the night before his fateful mission, and to which he was taken after his rescue—seven days after his boat sank and he hid his men on tiny Plum Island in the Blackett Strait.

It was from the deep water port of Rabaul (on New Britain) that the Japanese navy operated what was called the Tokyo Express, the nightly armada of destroyers, cruisers, and barges that ferried men and supplies down the Slot into Iron Bottom Sound (off Guadalcanal).

The nightly orders for JFK's PT squadrons were to intercept the Express, although often these were little more than suicide missions, hastily conceived and executed in the darkness.

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It was in those waters that John Kennedy would have developed his views about senior officers and military incompetence, which informed him through the Bay of Pigs and the Cuban Missile Crisis, but which probably deserted him when he committed troops to Vietnam.

In *Brothers*, which postulates that JFK was assassinated because he pushed back against the military establishment in Washington and—after the Bay of Pigs—at the CIA, author David Talbot quotes Kennedy as saying: "They always give you their bullshit about their instant reaction and split-second timing, but it never works out. No wonder it's so hard to win a war."

I had thought about the Slot and my flight from Bougainville when I read that passage in *Brothers*, as I did many years later, when I was reading yet another history of PT-109, this one by William Doyle, entitled: PT 109: An American Epic of War, Survival, and the Destiny of John F. Kennedy.

In it Doyle quotes JFK saying: "The war made us. It was and is our single greatest moment. The memory of the war is a key to our characters. It serves as a break wall between the indolence of our youths and the earnestness of our manhoods." It also instructed JFK to be wary of military brass, which needs body counts for promotions.

In Doyle's account, which offers more details than the earlier versions of the story by John Hersey (in a June 1944 *New Yorker*) and Robert J. Donovan (which led to the Cliff Robertson film of my childhood), he writes about how in 1960 the campaigning Kennedy came across a man who that night in the Pacific had been on PT-162, which did not come to the rescue of the crew of PT-109. Doyle writes:

When John F. Kennedy learned he was talking to a man who was on the PT 162 that night, he briefly stepped out of his supremely cool, confident, and poised image and revealed a glimpse of how, for all the value the PT 109 episode provided him as a candidate for the nation's highest office, the ordeal in the Blackett Strait still haunted him somewhere within. "Where in the hell did you guys go?" Kennedy snapped. It was all he had to say to Ogilvie.

No one, in fact, had come looking for Kennedy and his crew. So much for the habits of command.

* * *

Since Kennedy's presidency, I believe that every president, including Clinton and Obama, has given militarism a free pass, with most presidential addresses sounding like those recruiting ads that run on Monday Night Football.

If you believe Talbot, and another book by James Douglass, *JFK and the Unspeakable: Why He Died and Why It Matters*, Kennedy was killed for not buying into "their bullshit."

Douglass writes: "What is unrecognized about JFK's presidency, which then makes his assassination a false mystery, is that he was locked in a struggle with his national security state.... In his deepening alienation from the CIA, the Pentagon, and big business, John Kennedy was moving consciously beyond the point of no return."

Reagan, the Bushes, Clinton, and Obama (now Trump) never challenged the deep state. They just rolled over and waved the flag while the bands marched into Grenada, Panama, Iraq, Libya, and Syria, among other places. Lt. Kennedy, however, pushed back, which may be why he is more a model for our times, and why he was killed.

* * *

I thought a lot about both John and Robert Kennedy when recently I made a series of trips in Southeast Asia, crossing Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam by bus, train, ferry, and—when out of luck—on the back of motor scooters.

During my travels, the question always on my mind was how both Kennedys, who had been to Indochina in 1951, could have been so wrong a decade later about sending troops (excuse me, "combat advisors") to Vietnam.

Douglass includes in his book an exchange between Daniel Ellsberg, of the Pentagon Papers, and Robert Kennedy, in which Bobby, with some anger, says: "We were there in 1951. We saw what was happening to the French. We saw it. My brother was determined, determined never to let that happen to us."

It's a ringing defense of Kennedy idealism, but if you read Hersh's *The Dark Side of Camelot* (to his credit Hersh also broke the My Lai story), Jack might have been too busy getting laid to keep the Joint Chiefs from sending more troops to Vietnam.

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I began my Indochina travels in the Plain of Jars, which is a nine-hour bus ride north of Vientiane, a valley between dense, rolling mountains. It's a corner of a foreign field that will be forever American, because of all the bombs that presidents Johnson and Nixon dropped there from B-52s; but also, and less well remembered, because it represents a diplomatic triumph for the Kennedy administration, which brokered a deal for Laotian neutrality in 1961 rather than embark on yet another land war in Asia.

John Kennedy's instincts in Laos were correct. He decided it was not a proxy of the Cold War, and that the West could live with a coalition government that included the forces of

the Pathet Lao (local communists). He never got the recognition for his good judgment in Laos, because in Vietnam he subsequently got so much wrong.

One of Kennedy's worst conclusions in Vietnam—eloquently told in William Prochnau's *Once Upon a Distant War*—was to dismiss press reports that the guerrilla war in South Vietnam was a lost cause to the United States.

JFK lobbied such newspapers as the Washington Post and the New York Times to make their reporting more upbeat and patriotic, something that would have outraged the younger Congressman Kennedy, not to mention the navy lieutenant sent blindly into the Slot.

After all, on his 1951 travels to Saigon, an officer in the U.S. consulate there had told him (as is quoted in Douglass): "In twenty years there will be no more colonies. We're going nowhere out here. The French have lost. If we come here and do the same thing, we will lose, too, for the same reason. There's no will or support for this kind of war back in Paris. The home front is lost. The same thing would happen to us."

* * *

I spent a lot of my time in Vietnam retracing the steps of the French-born intellectual Bernard Fall, who emigrated to the United States after World War II and earned a Ph.D. from Syracuse University.

As a boy in France, Fall had fought bravely with the resistance. In 1961, the same year that John Kennedy became president, he published *Street Without Joy*, a series of well-crafted essays on how the French lost their colonial war in Indochina.

Anyone in 1961 with access to a library card could have read Fall's stark conclusions about what it was like to fight a war in Indochina. He copies from a barrack's wall this expression: "Remember—the enemy is not fighting this war per French army regulations." He goes out on patrols ("Money can provide helicopters; it cannot provide fighting spirit"). He absorbs the lessons of the defeat at Dien Bien Phu ("...the capital error is the underestimation of the enemy's capabilities..."). But *Street Without Joy* fell on deaf ears.

It is possible that JFK owned a copy of Fall's book and read it during his presidency. I can, however, find no link between the two men. Robert Kennedy actually wiretapped Fall's phone, at the request of Hoover, although I doubt it was to gather in his wisdom about the difficulty of fighting in the Central Highlands.

Normally, John Kennedy read widely and with discrimination. He might have liked Vegas show girls for a good time, but with the printed word he was all business. One of his PT boat friends, Jim Reed, is quoted by Doyle:

"He had read almost every book on the American presidents. He had read every word that Winston Churchill had ever published. He'd read T. E. Lawrence and was a devotee of Lord David Cecil's racy account of Lord Byron and Lady Caroline Lamb in *The Young Melbourne*."

Somehow Kennedy missed Bernard Fall, whose prescient warnings he would have absorbed, much as during the Cuban Missile Crisis, he walked around the White House with a copy of *The Guns of August*.

* * *

Will I ever unravel The Kennedy Code and come to a decision about their place in American history? Will I ever make up my mind whether they were saints or sinners?

I doubt it, because every time I reach another conclusion about the Cuban Missile Crisis (my latest thinking is that it has aspects of folly) or their response to civil rights in the South (they could have done more), I go somewhere or read something that changes my mind.

For the moment—at least in my daydreams—I like both Kennedys as figures of the Trump opposition, men who could have taken down the current president’s racism and glorification of war. Who now speaks for what was once called liberal internationalism, the ideas that Kennedy’s UN ambassador, Adlai Stevenson II, articulated so eloquently?

My weakness in considering the Kennedys’ place in American history is that I am always open to reinterpretation, which—for better or worse—explains why I remain interested in the latest Kennedy biographies or visiting somewhere (such as Oxford, Mississippi or Ap Bac in Vietnam), where their policies were tested (and, I confess, were often unsuccessful). Maybe I keep searching to make sense of the fleeting images—mine and theirs—from the 1960s?

* * *

For example, I enjoyed a recent Robert Kennedy stop—described in the pages of *Playing in Peoria*—in Indianapolis. One night after dinner, I went out on my bike to find the city park where, in April 1968, Robert Kennedy was scheduled to speak in front of a largely African-American crowd.

It was a campaign whistle-stop during the Indiana primary, and en route to the event (he was to stand on the back of an open truck), Bobby had learned that Martin Luther King, Jr. had just been shot and killed at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis.

Kennedy spoke extemporaneously and said, in part:

For those of you who are black and are tempted to be filled with hatred and distrust at the injustice of such an act, against all white people, I can only say that I feel in my own heart the same kind of feeling. I had a member of my family killed, but he was killed by a white man. But we have to make an effort in the United States, we have to make an effort to understand, to go beyond these rather difficult times.

My favorite poet was Aeschylus. He wrote: “In our sleep, pain which cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart until, in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God.”

It should be remembered as the best speech he ever gave,

worthy of Lincoln’s empathy.

Any time when I think about the so-called “Bad” Bobby—the one who worked for Senator Joe McCarthy, ran Operation Mongoose in Cuba or even tapped the telephones of Martin Luther King, Jr. or Bernard Fall—I try to recall that he was also capable of much eloquence and compassion, something that for the moment has disappeared from American political life.

At least in Indianapolis—riding my bike, as if still a nine-year-old, through a forlorn city park on a warm evening—I could see and hear the Bobby who had stopped to greet me during that visit to the League of Women Voters. Then I thought that he would soon be president and could pick up the mantle that was shot away from his brother in Dallas.

Little did I realize, perhaps because when I met him I was missing an eighth grade English class, that both Kennedys would remain for me as enigmatic as Jay Gatsby, who stood in another Great Neck garden that overlooked Long Island Sound and of whom F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote:

He had come a long way to this blue lawn, and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night.

I can say this: the brothers Kennedys gave me the capacity to wonder, if not to wander. CP

MATTHEW STEVENSON, a contributing editor of *Harper’s Magazine*, is the author of many books including *Letters of Transit* and, most recently, *Reading the Rails*. He lives in Switzerland, but grew up outside New York City.

The Fog Machines

U.S. War Justification is in the Eye of the Beholder

BY DAVID SWANSON

The idea that the United States has a problem with war propaganda is typically scratched in a bad-apples manner with a story that the U.S. has set up a new propaganda agency, such as the Global Engagement Center, or hired a company, such as the Lincoln Group, to plant articles in foreign media. Or we’ll read a report that former generals are secretly picking up their talking points from the Pentagon and their income from weapons companies while appearing as objective commenters on television. Or occasionally we’ll hear the recognition that some particularly obvious or disproven set of lies (such as those regarding Iraq in 2003) were the result of a well-meaning slip-up.

But how do we explain the failure of any significant section of the population in the foreign country involved to start believing the planted articles? The U.S. public would have believed them. They were printed in the newspaper and looked completely official. How do we explain that the former generals quietly on the take are indistinguishable from any of the other “experts” discussing foreign affairs on CNN? If those bribed to promote war sound just like everyone else, is the bribery the primary problem? How do we come to terms with President George W. Bush’s pre-war proposal to Tony Blair that they paint a plane with UN colors and fly it low hoping to get it shot at, or his post-war remark that it really didn’t matter if any of the claims made about Saddam Hussein were true or not? If that’s a well-meaning slip-up, what does all-out malevolence look like?

When the Rendon Group manufactured the story of the heroic rescue of Jessica Lynch, it looked just like all the Hollywood movies made in collaboration with the Pentagon, and also just about like virtually all of the Hollywood movies made without any such input. When Donald Trump threatens to bomb some more people, the “journalists” who fall in love with him are falling for adherence to a familiar, expected, and accepted role.

Could it be that we need a 12-step program that begins with the recognition of a deeply entrenched problem, minus the 7 steps that amount to relying on a deity to clean up our mess?

I think so. I think belief in war lies is an addiction, and that those who get hooked do so not so much because of the quality of the lies as because of a predisposition to believe them. War lies have been around for millennia. I wrote a book categorizing them, called *War Is A Lie*. But why did Colin Powell’s package of war lies at the United Nations look like such obvious fakery to much of the world and appear so solemn and convincing to so many in the United States? War propaganda’s success is not primarily determined by the quality of the propaganda, any more than drug addiction rates are determined principally by the quality of the drugs available. Rather, as logic and scientific studies bear out, basic attitudes produced by fundamental educational practices predispose people to believe or not believe in war lies.

Let’s begin with the obvious. Belief in the justification of a war is quite openly irrational. Unlike other questions of belief, on which people urge us to consider facts, with war we are quite often urged to believe as a matter of duty, obedience, patriotism, and citizenship. Promoters of war lies shamelessly appeal to any existing tendency to believe on command. An insistence on reviewing the facts of the matter is often characterized as support for a designated enemy in the desired war. Asking for evidence that Syria used chemical weapons or Russia attacked Ukraine or Libya threatened a massacre is not met with a presentation of evidence so often as with an accusation of believing that the Syrian, Russian, or Libyan government is a saintly manifestation of heaven that should

be assisted in its longstanding goal of slaughtering every U.S. citizen.

When someone accused the coffee corporation Starbucks of not supporting a war, the company went to great lengths to prove that it supported “the troops” and to conflate that with supporting the war, without ever mentioning the slightest justification for or benefit from the war. As thoughtless participation is expected of members of the military, thoughtless war support is the duty of any business not wishing to face the wrath of the warmongers. Asked why it had a coffee shop at the U.S. torture camp at Guantanamo, Starbucks replied that not to have one there would constitute a political statement.

Further evidence that belief in war lies is generally irrational is found in the total disregard by war makers and war supporters for consequences, the desire to blow things up for the sake of blowing them up. A humanitarian war, if such a thing existed, would consider the human costs of the war and calculate how they might be outweighed by some imagined human benefit of the war. Instead, even knowing the costs of a war is widely considered to constitute a demand to end the war and opposition to ever having started it. “We don’t do body counts!” explained General Tommy Franks.

A rational decision to drop a giant bomb on Afghanistan would be part of some sort of plan to accomplish something or other beyond purely dropping the bomb. When Hillary Clinton laughed about having killed Muamar Gadaffi, she wasn’t expressing some rational decision of necessary evil for the greater good, but an irrational urge—and the consequences for the people of Libya and the world be damned. When Madeleine Albright claimed killing a half-million children was “worth it” she clearly meant that anything at all was “worth it,” not that she’d figured out a way to save 500,001 or more kids by killing 500,000 of them. When Donald Trump proposes to kill more families, it is not because there exists any evidence of anything humanitarian or even profitable resulting from such action. The point is purely and simply to kill more families, or at least to start speaking more about all the families being killed.

War lies are not only accepted as a matter of duty, but identified with as a matter of pride in a conception of one’s self. Freedom isn’t free, these colors do not run, I support the troops, and this brain will not tolerate opposition to mass murder when that sacred crime is committed by the U.S. military. Remember that believers in Iraq WMDs were shown evidence to the contrary, and as a result strengthened rather than weakened their beliefs in the WMDs. Rationality was not at work here, rather identity—and faith.

A further hurdle for any claim that war justifications can be rationally argued for, or that they are accepted on their own merits, lies in the fact that the claims made regarding atrocities or weapons possession are typically completely irrelevant to any legal, moral, or practical case for the war advocated. If every lie about Iraq or Libya or Syria had been perfectly

“The growing opposition of the US public to Israeli wars is not matched by any similar consideration of the problem of US wars.”

true, there would have been zero justification for those wars. The United States possesses WMDs, commits atrocities, and uses weapons most of the world has banned or shunned, none of which would justify anyone in bombing the United States. Nor would bombing the United States do any good for anyone living in the United States. (And yet war opponents go on focusing on doubts that the Syrian government really used chemical weapons, rather than opposing the supreme crime of launching war, a crime whose illegality and immorality remain untouched by anyone having used or not used chemical weapons.)

Then there is the problem of acceptance of carefully selected partial and ahistorical information. If your kid comes home from school, your wonderful noble and beloved child, and says “Michael jumped on me and hit me and called me names,” you are likely to ask, without yet drawing any conclusions: “What started that? Did you do anything to make him mad at you?” It’s a logical, almost inevitable question. It doesn’t rely on acceptance of Michael’s violence. It doesn’t assign blame or innocence. It just suggests that the universe is often comprehensible, that effects often have identifiable causes. But when North Korea builds a nuclear weapon or test fires a missile, it is almost a patriotic duty in the United States to banish from one’s mind any question of context.

Certainly we can blame the U.S. propaganda system for its careful omission of context and selection of news. That North Korea complied with an agreement to halt its nuclear weapons program until U.S. President George W. Bush tossed that agreement out and declared North Korea part of an axis of evil, and destroyed another member of that axis, might have been missed because you were shopping at the time or because U.S. media outlets were focused on the exciting destruction of Iraq. That North Korea has repeatedly proposed to halt its nuke program if the U.S. and South Korea will stop practicing to bomb the North hasn’t been widely reported. What the U.S. did to North Korea during the Korean War or that the war has never been officially ended or that the U.S. has been building up all kinds of weaponry in South Korea that North Korea and China see as threatening may be easy to miss. But not to even ask is inexcusable. The U.S. tests missiles all the time. Yet when North Korea tests a missile the U.S. media loses its collective mind. Why not ask for an explanation of the double standard? Why not ask what motivated, rightly or wrongly, North Korea to commit such an outrage? Not to ask is to want to not know.

This is a typical progression of information. The United States arms and props up a dictator, outsources torture to him, and buys his fossil fuels for years. But you’re watching football or busy working, so you miss most of that. Then the U.S. begins threatening an overthrow, and you’re in support of that but want to know a good reason in order to make the peaceniks see the light. The dictator makes all sorts of pleas for nonviolent resolution, the rule of law, a chance to stay in power and alive. But there’s a U.S. election on, so you can’t be expected to notice. Then the U.S. accuses the dictator of having killed his own people with an uncivilized weapon or of having repressed women’s rights or of having devised a doomsday machine. Instantly you’re a fully informed pundit on world affairs prepared to denounce any request for independent verification of the claims and to explain that, as former U.S. Attorney General Ed Meese put it in a domestic context, if you’re accused of a crime then you’re not innocent.

While supporters of war can often be spotted waving flags and shouting in ecstasy, they will almost universally tell you that each war is a last resort. This is true even among the vast majority of them in the United States who cannot list for you each of the current U.S. wars. In fact, it’s proven quite easy for YouTube to fill up with videos of good Americans solemnly informing us that bombing some fictional nation they’ve been asked about is absolutely necessary and unavoidable. Spy magazine once asked Congress Members if Freedonia needed to be bombed. Jay Inslee was one Congress Member who assured them that it did.

Studies have found that U.S. citizens typically assume, quite nonsensically as well as falsely, that any war has been launched only after having exhausted all alternatives. This is nonsensical because it is always possible to propose another alternative. It’s false because arriving at an actual war requires actively fending off every opportunity for peace—and fending off recognition or understanding of doing so.

In the case of Syria, the United States has spent years sabotaging U.N. attempts at peace, while on the contrary fueling the war. To imagine the U.S. riding in to rescue the hopelessly violent (and somehow armed with U.S.-made weapons) from themselves requires avoiding any knowledge that the United States dismissed out of hand a Russian peace proposal for Syria in 2012, as it had done others before it. Supposedly the United States is killing people with drones as a last resort, even though in that minority of cases in which the United States knows the names of the people it is aiming for, many

(if not all) of them indisputably could have been easily arrested. Before it could attack Libya in 2011, the U.S. had to fend off a plan for peace advanced by the African Union.

Prior to the 2003 attack on Iraq, the Iraqi government had approached the CIA's Vincent Cannistrato to offer to let U.S. troops search the entire country. The Iraqi government had offered to hold internationally monitored elections within two years, and offered Bush official Richard Perle to open the whole country to inspections, to turn over a suspect in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, to help fight terrorism, and to favor U.S. oil companies. Hussein offered, in the account that the president of Spain was given by the U.S. president, to simply leave Iraq if he could keep \$1 billion. Similar accounts of avoiding peace at all costs can be given for the U.S. attack on Afghanistan in 2001 or the First Gulf War or the war on Vietnam or that on Mexico or that on the Spanish empire and the Philippines, etc.

Then there's the problem of wars that don't happen. They've also always been marketed as a last resort. But when they're prevented—as was the proposed bombing of Syria in 2013—some other resort is pursued instead. Numerous U.S. Congress Members said in 2015 that the nuclear deal with Iran needed to be rejected and Iran attacked as a last resort, until the deal wasn't rejected. No mention was made in 2015 of Iran's 2003 offer to negotiate away its nuclear program, an offer that had been quickly scorned by the United States.

Are you yet persuaded that war support requires not a type of thinking but the absence thereof? Consider that each new war depends on having learned no lessons from any of the previous ones. Find a supporter—it's not hard—of the idea that the U.S. government lies from morning to night about all non-war topics, and ask them for an explanation of how the topic of war functions as a truth serum. Or do this: review the opinion polls on a war that hasn't yet happened (as was at the time the proposal to bomb Syria in 2013) and something that has already been done (such as the U.S. bombing of an air strip in Syria in 2017). When something has already happened, millions of people find that they support it, regardless of any coherent rationale, even as the same people tell pollsters that they don't want any more bombing to occur.

Or consider this: statistically, women are less supportive of wars than are men. Nobody has explained this as the result of greater or lesser intelligence or information or insight or wisdom. Rather it is indisputably, as common sense and studies I'll come to in a second both establish, a question of levels of acceptance of war in general playing out on the question of a particular war.

Or consider the important role played by fear. In 2013 millions of people across the U.S. political spectrum opposed bombing Syria, many objecting to the U.S. entering (as if not already in it) a war on the same side as al Qaeda. In 2014, following the release of frightening ISIS videos, millions of the same people supported escalating U.S. involvement in

that war, despite the official explanations from the U.S. government making clear that it was participating in the war on both sides. Fear appears to increase acceptance of war and of illogic in general.

Or observe the growing opposition in the U.S. public to Israeli wars that is not matched by any similar consideration of the problem of U.S. wars. A similar gap can be found between the war support of many Americans when the U.S. president belongs to one party and when he (or a hoped-for she) belongs to another. Asking many supporters of bombing a predominantly dark-skinned country where a terrorist incident has occurred whether they'd support bombing a European country in similar circumstances can be equally revealing.

Richard C. Eichenberg and Richard Stoll recently published an academic article titled "The Acceptability of War and Support for Defense Spending: Evidence from Fourteen Democracies, 2004–2013," put into straightforward English by the War Prevention Initiative. In addition to other studies reviewed, people in 14 countries were asked annually "Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the following—Under some conditions war is necessary to obtain justice."

"In survey responses from all countries, when paired against current events or short-term threats, people's attitudes towards war were more strongly and consistently related to their fundamental values and life experience. As an example, although respondents considered the extent to which they viewed the Iran nuclear program or China, for instance, as military threats, these threat assessments did not play as important a role in the formation of their attitudes on war and defense spending as did their beliefs, values, and experiences. Gender was also a strong factor. . . . The United States was found to be the . . . society whose citizens accepted war as an instrument of their foreign policy the most."

This lines up with a 2013 Gallup poll in dozens of countries that found a relatively high percentage of respondents in the United States claiming that they "would" fight in a war for their country (as if there weren't a half-dozen wars available to join if they really wanted to).

It also lines up with the geographic and academic presence of the alternative system of facts known as "just war theory." I wrote a book rejecting that whole field, called *War Is Never Just*, and sent it with friends to discussions at the Vatican of whether the Catholic Church should finally reject one of its most destructive creations. The most interesting feedback I received was the report that members of the Catholic Church from outside the Western world had never actually heard of "just war theory"—a creation, after all, of empire.

The skillful propagandizing of the U.S. public, with many of those techniques dating back to the government propaganda effort during World War I has, no doubt, played a major role. Yet I suspect that, not only is the general culture and the system of childhood education more at fault than particular

propaganda in any given case, but the problem also dates to much earlier than World War I in a country that grew out of colonies founded on the basis of war.

The lesson to be drawn by the fact-based community from the irrationality of war support is not that all is hopeless, but that

1. the danger is greater than might be imagined, as much war support knows no limits—a danger that grows with every day that the U.S. government works toward the deployment of more and smaller and “more usable” first-strike nuclear weapons; and
2. key to building resistance to each particular war is educating young and old people to oppose the entire institution of war.

I recently spoke to a college class and asked them to name some justified wars. It absolutely made my day that for the first time in my experience nobody said “World War II.” But they did say “the revolution” as if there had only ever been one, and “the civil war” as if these young people had had the good fortune to be born into the one country where both of the justifiable wars in world history had happened. This line of thinking is no different from imagining one’s parents, by virtue of being one’s parents, to have possessed and bestowed on you the one true religion.

When a Florida school district this past year announced that it would evict from its sporting events anyone who failed to properly honor the U.S. flag, it was engaging in a policy of holy excommunication, and it was doing as much or more for the support of coming wars as any forged documents that any future Karl Rove might commission. CP

DAVID SWANSON wants you to declare peace at <http://WorldBeyondWar.org>. His new book is *War No More: The Case for Abolition*.

Medium Cool Decades of the FBI's Surveillance of Haskell Wexler

BY DAVID PRICE

American cinematographer Haskell Wexler (1922-2015) transformed Hollywood and independent filmmaking. His use of natural light and sound and innovations in mixing scripted action with the unscripted world, and pioneering use of handheld cameras raised the bar decades before the coming of the *Dogma 95 Manifesto* or Soderbergh's films. Wexler won academy awards for his camerawork on *Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf*, and *Bound For Glory*'s groundbreaking use of the Steadicam, while his unprecedented mixing

of documentary and fictional styles and his choice of the political subjects in *Medium Cool* broke artistic and political boundaries. Now, with the FBI's release of Wexler's 175 page FBI file, we can see how his politics and art brought him decades of FBI surveillance.

He was born in 1922, into a wealthy Chicago family. His father, Simon Wexler, owned Allied Radio Corporation of America, a large company manufacturing radios and selling electronic components. Haskell's FBI file documents agency concerns over Simon Wexler donations to Chicago's Abraham Lincoln School, and sponsorship of events at the Chicago Council for American Soviet Friendship, and funding local events backed by Harry Bridges. While raised with the luxuries of privilege, Haskell came of age in Depression era Chicago, surrounded by progressives. Young Wexler befriended Studs Terkel, who he considered one of his greatest teachers. While still a student, Haskell helped organize a labor strike at his father's radio manufacturing plant, and worked for photographer Micky Pallas, photographing striking workers in Chicago. He briefly attended college at Berkeley, dropping out to join the Merchant Marine, and during the Second World War was aboard a ship which was sunk in the Indian Ocean by German torpedoes leaving him afloat in a lifeboat with other survivors for two weeks before being rescued.

Throughout the 1940s, the FBI tracked Wexler's radical politics. They recorded his membership in the Convoy Club of the Young Communist League and his wartime membership of the Seamen's Branch of Communist Party, New York City. In 1948, the Bureau considered placing him on the FBI's Security Index; the FBI catalogued various political activities and otherwise mundane activities (“he operates a photographic laboratory in the apartment”) with suspicion, and filed reports on Wexler for decades.

Reports of communist involvement led to wartime FBI investigations. One inquiry to previous landlords produced assurances that Wexler and his wife Nancy were “communists because they had a large picture of Stalin in their room talked along Communist lines.” The FBI tracked he and his wife Nancy attending meetings of various communist front organizations, like the American Youth for Democracy, and his subscription to *The Daily Worker*, *New Masses*, and other Communist Party linked publications.

After the war, his father provided substantial funds to equip his own film studio in Illinois, and he began making films in earnest. His early works included commercial projects as well as some with leftist political messages—working on union documentaries and a film supporting Henry Wallace's presidential bid. During this period the FBI tracked Wexler's car being parked at various leftist political events in the Chicago, including Communist Party meetings (1948, 1950), Progressive Party meetings (1949-50), the 1951 World Peace Congress, and the 1952 meeting of the Veterans of the

Abraham Lincoln Brigade.

When Wexler applied for a passport in 1954 to travel to England and France for work on a documentary film on Shakespeare, the State Department denied his request because of allegations that he had been a Communist—advising him that he had 30 days to respond to these charges. He did not challenge this finding, then four years later he reapplied for a passport for a leisure trip to Europe, and the passport was issued.

A January 1961 State Department Passport Division report notified the FBI of Wexler's plans to travel to Brazil to work on a film. An FBI agent telephoned Wexler Brothers Productions, Inc. in Hollywood and used a fake name and pretext to gather information on his planned trip to Brazil, to work on the (1961) film *The Fisherman and His Soul*. The FBI profiled Wexler Brothers Productions, Inc., detailing its 1958 incorporation, stock value, capitalization and assets, office locations, and the corporate accounts held at the Chicago National Bank. The FBI's dossier reported:

Haskell 'Pete' Wexler is a motion picture cameraman who belongs to Local 666, Chicago, Illinois. He comes from a very wealthy Chicago family, and is rumored to be a millionaire in his own right. However, he has a burning desire to be a first cameraman and has threatened to sue Local 659 for a million dollars since the Local has denied him first cameraman status. He does, however, work out of the Chicago Local as a first cameraman on motion picture productions which are made in areas not under the jurisdiction of Local 659, Los Angeles.

He is allowed to work out of Local 659, Los Angeles, as an assistant cameraman or operator. His most recent motion picture assignments as a cameraman were "Studs Lonigan," a motion picture which was photographed in the Midwest and completed at Hal Roach Studios, Culver City, California, and one other picture the name of which was unrecalled by [REDACTED]. Wexler has not as yet, produced a motion picture, but has no hesitancy in investing money in motion pictures on which he can serve as a cameraman.

One FBI informer claimed "Wexler's father left his sons a large number of shares of Superior Oil Company valued at \$30.00 per share, which they later sold for \$1800.00 per share." The FBI learned the Wexler brothers inherited ownership of the family business, describing it as "one of the largest electronic firms in the United States." Another FBI informer reported the Wexler brothers had "terrific" financial connections throughout the United States and have no difficulty in obtaining funds for investment in motion pictures." FBI memos noting Wexler's financial independence highlight this freedom removed the normal constraints facing others in the film industry. The FBI's interest in Wexler's wealth exemplifies the FBI's long history of investigating left-leaning elites in ways that right-leaning, even openly fascist, elites were seldom monitored.

After FBI informers in Hollywood's Professional Cultural Section of the Southern California District of the Communist Party reported they didn't know Wexler, the FBI called Wexler's mother, pretending to be a former Merchant Marine shipmate passing through town, to gather information about his activities. In July 1961, the FBI contacted Wexler and requested an interview "to determine his nationalistic sympathies, and if he merits consideration for placement on one of the Bureau indexes." Wexler told the FBI that he was upset by this contact, and told them he wanted to speak with his attorney. Days later Wexler contacted Special Agent Parker, and saying his attorney advised him to not speak with the FBI without his attorney being present. Parker reported that despite the attorney's advice, he kept Wexler on the phone chatting, telling Wexler about:

the confidential nature of much of the Bureau's work and the matter to be discussed with him did involve internal security, and for this reason it was felt it would be best that he and the Agent talk privately. Eventually as a result of discussion, Wexler agreed to discuss the matter with [the] Agent with the provision that it would be kept confidential and that his attorney [REDACTED] would never be told that he had talked with the FBI against his wishes and without his being present. Wexler was assured that the entire contact was confidential insofar as the FBI was concerned, and he stated he knew this was true, and he likewise would keep it confidential.

On July 27, 1961, Wexler told the FBI he joined the Communist Party in 1943 or 1944, and resigned near the end of the war "because he could not withstand the regimentation." The FBI concluded, "Wexler stated that he is opposed to Communism, is a loyal American, and would fight for this country against the Soviet Union or any other country. He stated that if information came to his attention regarding the CP or CP members, he would voluntarily furnish this information to the FBI."

Some of what Wexler told the FBI was demonstrably false and appears as an effort to reduce the FBI's perception of him as dangerous. Wexler told the FBI that;

when he was a young boy his father was an ultra-conservative and this caused him to rebel and assume the position of a radical. He stated probably this had something to do with his joining the Communist Party. He stated that while he realizes Communism is wrong and it stands for everything he abhors, he still considers himself a person wanting other[s] to have a better life too. He stated that he was appalled at some of the poverty which exists in Latin-American countries, and pointed out that while he was in Brazil he let his beard grow and some of the peasants when they saw him would cheer him and call him "Fidel." Wexler stated that it is things like this which make him concerned because our country is not doing enough to assist the Latin-American people and he is afraid unless something is done, they will go Communist.

Wexler told the FBI that “he would like to maintain contact with them” in case he came across information the FBI should know about, stating that he “considered espionage a very serious crime”—and admitted he knew Martha Dodd and Alfred Stern (convicted Soviet spies who in 1957 had fled the U.S.), and that he had been in their home and even introduced their son to the woman he would eventually marry. These admissions suggest Wexler feared the FBI falsely suspected him of having connections to espionage.

If Wexler’s admissions of past Communist connections and limited contacts with known radicals like Dodd and Stern were efforts to reduce FBI suspicions, this approach worked. The FBI report concluded that “no recommendation is being made that Wexler be placed on any of the Bureau’s indexes” and his case was closed in the L.A. office; the FBI made no further inquiries about Wexler for three years.

In April 1964, the FBI noticed a story in the UCLA Daily Bruin about Wexler’s work on the film *The Bus* (1965), documenting civil rights activists bus trip from San Francisco to Washington, D.C. for the 1963 March on Washington. They later recorded Marlon Brando and Harry Belafonte were “promoting the group from Hollywood.” One FBI informer reported Wexler had “so much film that he did not know what to do with it” that he was considering making three films from the trip. The FBI’s opposition to the Civil Rights movement spawned more surveillance of Wexler, and the Bureau’s usual decision to file these reports under the heading “SECURITY—C” (C for “Communist”) demonstrates the FBI’s belief that the civil rights movement was a Communist threat to American security.

Internal FBI reports described Wexler’s 1968 masterpiece *Medium Cool* as “anti-establishment and anti-law enforcement in nature,” and the Bureau files reported news stories in Daily Variety on the film. The Bureau monitored Wexler’s involvement and financial support for the Hollywood group, Entertainment Industry for Peace and Justice (EIPJ), which the FBI described as dominated by Jane Fonda and Donald Sutherland.

In 1972, the FBI finally placed Wexler on the ADEX security index, under the subversive designation “Category IV,” identifying him as “potentially dangerous because of background, emotional instability or activity in groups engaged in activities inimical to U.S.” Wexler’s placement on ADEX followed a visible shift in the political orientation his films, moving away from edgy but mainstream works like *The Loved One* (1965), *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Wolf* (1966), *In the Heat of the Night* (1967), to more radical works—the three films he completed before being placed on ADEX were *Medium Cool* (1969), *Interviews with My Lai Veterans* (1971), and *The Trial of the Catonsville Nine* (1972). Edward Albee’s critique of Twentieth Century marriage was one thing, but presenting the Barrigan brothers’ radical views in a sympathetic light was another thing altogether.

In 1974 the FBI collected reports that Jane Fonda, Thomas Hayden, and Wexler planned to travel to North Vietnam to film a documentary eventually released in November 1974 as, *An Introduction to the Enemy*. FBI agents stationed in Paris, and L.A. tracked Wexler as the cameraman traveling with Fonda and Hayden to film in North Vietnam. After Hayden, Fonda, their infant son, and Wexler returned from North Vietnam, the FBI pieced together the steps of their trip; learning they first claimed they were traveling “to Thailand and Japan for purpose of filming for three weeks,” but instead traveled from Bangkok to North Vietnam.

The FBI routinely develops short biographical summaries of individuals that are recycled repeatedly in future reports; these often contain sensationalist accusations or quotes. Hayden’s recycled-summary listed SDS activities, status as one of the Chicago Eight, and re-repeated an interview quote: “when the time comes for bombings, when people can understand bombings, I will be the first one to load a truck full with explosives and drive it into a building. . . I am not kidding and you can quote me so that you can remember this day.”

A May 1974 memo to FBI Director Kelly justified ongoing investigations into Wexler, Fonda and Hayden traveling to North Vietnam, arguing this constituted advocating the overthrow of the Government, insurrection, seditious conspiracy, or violations of the Internal Security Act of 1950 and the Communist Control Act of 1954. Prior to the release of *Introduction to the Enemy*, FBI headquarters advised the New York Bureau that they should “should be alert to any press reviews concerning this production, reporting same in form suitable for dissemination, if such press reviews indicate the nature of this production is contrary to the best interests of this nation.” The film received mixed reviews and political attacks in the mainstream media, the FBI took no further action in this matter, and Wexler continued working on both independent and mainstream Hollywood projects.

In 1975 Wexler began work as cinematographer on *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, and he later claimed he was fired after the FBI made inquiries on the set about him and his politics. But there are no indications in Wexler’s released FBI file the Bureau made inquiries with anyone associated with *Cuckoo’s Nest*.

This absence raises two possible, conflicting, interpretations. The first explanation is that the FBI did not release all files pertaining to investigations of Wexler. The second is that no FBI intrusion on the set occurred, and that Wexler was fired for his well-documented strongly expressed artistic differences and clashes with the director. This would not be the first time he’d have been fired for such clashes. He was fired two years earlier as cinematographer on Francis Ford Coppola’s *The Conversation*—with all of Wexler’s footage reshot except for the amazing multi-camera complicated central surveillance shot in San Francisco’s Union Square. In

Pamela Yates' documentary *Rebel Citizen*, Wexler admitted having provided acting directions, and rewriting dialogue for Jack Nicholson and others off set on *Cuckoo's Nest*, because of what he saw as the failures of director Milos Foreman—acts supporting the likelihood that he was fired for these intrusions, as producer Michael Douglas claimed. Perhaps the best evidence supporting the FBI story as a face saving explanation, comes from director Irving Kershner, who said he never heard the FBI story at the time of Wexler's firing—despite his own political alignment and friendship with Wexler.

Whatever the cause of this firing, the FBI certainly had investigated Wexler's work filming fugitive members of the Weathermen for the then forthcoming documentary, *Underground*. Filming with director Emile de Antonio, Wexler shot *Underground*, interviewing five Weathermen Underground fugitives hiding at a safe house at an undisclosed location, filming in ways obscuring their faces. Wexler's released FBI file includes few references to this, and given Wexler's later lawsuit against the FBI alleging illegal surveillance and theft, the FBI likely withheld these files when they originally processed the files released to Wexler. These reports have yet to be released under FOIA.

In 1981, former FBI agent Wesley Swearingen disclosed that an employee of the sound studio editing the film *Underground* had surreptitiously copied the film's audio track and provided a copy to the FBI, who tried to use it to locate the filmed fugitives. In the early 1980s Wexler and de Antonio brought suit against the FBI, though they failed to get the courts to make the FBI release these allegedly stolen materials; and no record of these tapes appeared in Wexler's released FBI files.

According to Emile de Antonio's biographer Randolph Lewis, de Antonio was aware of ongoing FBI surveillance after filming *Underground*, and he later recounted that in May 1975, after being followed by FBI agents, he called the FBI office and asked, 'Would you get your fucking gumshoes off my back please[?]' As if in reply to his comment, two FBI agents appeared several days after at his Manhattan offices. The agents asked him where they could serve a subpoena on his wife, Terry—'A graveyard on Long Island,' he told them." The following month de Antonio was subpoenaed, and told to surrender all shot footage, sound recordings, working copies that Wexler and he had shot on the Weatherman. Fortunately, they had already preemptively burnt all the footage and sound that had not been used in the final cut.

President of the Screen Directors Guild Robert Wise, and the ACLU, opposed the subpoena as a violation of first amendment freedoms. Hollywood stars, including Mel Brooks, Sally Field, Rip Torn, Shirley MacLaine, Jack Nicholson, William Friedkin, Terrence Malick, Arthur Penn, Peter Bogdanovich, and Elia Kazan issued statements of support. The confluence of shady legal ground, a strong team of defense lawyers, and high-profile supporters led the gov-

ernment to withdraw its subpoena, and de Antonio was not required to testify.

When *Underground* was finally released, it received mixed reviews, many reviewers stressed the undeniable plodding unchallenged narrative, though most lauded the daring will of the filmmakers. Yet, it mostly remained an unseen film, having great difficulty getting distribution, with film festivals fearing getting involved in the controversies surrounding it. A 1981 LA Times article covering Wexler the de Antonio's suit against the FBI for theft and copyright infringement, is the final entry in Wexler's released FBI file, yet Wexler continued to make provocative political films until his death in 2015.

Even without a lifelong involvement in radical political causes, the FBI might have monitored such a genius of *cinéma vérité*. Wexler's vision often feels ethnographically raw, missing an artificial luster that dominated American film, his audiences see more of the poverty, inequality, and injustices of our world. Such unvarnished visions seem bound to attract the attentions of a Bureau maintaining American power relations of injustice. Yet, with Wexler, it was his primacy activist insistence of this unglossed vision of an unjust world that so anchored him in his cinematic approach, the stories he chose to tell, and decades of FBI surveillance. CP

DAVID PRICE a professor of anthropology at Saint Martin's University in Lacey, Washington. He is the author of *Weaponizing Anthropology: Social Science in Service of the Militarized State* published by CounterPunch Books.

The Big Chill 21st Century Fascism

BY DAN GLAZEBROOK

It is the contention of this article that we are entering into a new fascist epoch. Movements with outright fascist roots are winning elections and referendums in Britain and the USA, and mainstream electoral parties too are being 'fascized' in the process. Even the left are being fascized, with the movements against war and neoliberal globalization increasingly falling under the hegemony of the new fascists. And yet, the term 'fascism' has for so long been used as a byword for any kind of brutality or state control to which one takes exception, that many seem not only to have forgotten what it means, but also to be failing to notice it how it is unfolding before their very eyes.

Part of the problem is that fascism has too often been conflated with particular elements of one or other of its historical manifestations, or even with perceived elements that have never, in reality, existed. Many, for example, conflate fascism with military dictatorship. Yet, dictatorships existed for centuries—if not millennia—before fascism, and, as Robert

Paxton has noted, “most military dictatorships have acted simply as tyrants, without daring to unleash the popular excitement of fascism”: fascism, unlike most military dictatorships, is a genuine mass movement. Furthermore, fascist movements can still properly be described as such before they have established any dictatorship. Hitler was a fascist for long before he became a dictator.

Others confuse fascism with ‘totalitarianism’: total state control of all aspects of social life. The very term is a deliberate piece of Cold War propaganda, brought into scholarly use by imperialist strategist Zbigniew Brzezinski in 1956 in order to besmirch communism by drawing a superficial—and, in my view, unsustainable—parallel with fascism. Yet not only is the term an anachronistic piece of propaganda, it, on closer inspection, cannot even be said to apply to fascism at all: fascist governments never gained ‘total control’, but rather, as Paxton has pointed out, “jostled with the state bureaucracy, industrial and agricultural proprietors, churches and other traditional elites for power”.

Even worse, some seem to think that to use the term fascist for anything less than industrial genocide is somehow an insult to the victims of the Nazi holocaust. This definition of fascism, therefore, excludes from its scope not only the entire pre-governing period of the Nazi party, but also the first nine years of Hitler’s premiership: fascism, by this definition, began not with the establishment of Mussolini’s party in 1919, nor with his coming to power in 1922, nor with Hitler’s ascendancy to the German chancellorship in January 1933, but on 20th January 1942, with the advent of the “final solution” at the Wannsee Conference in Berlin. This definition is the most dangerous, as it effectively serves to give a free ‘non-fascist’ pass to anything below the level of mass extermination.

Furthermore, whilst fascism is necessarily anti-liberal, it is not strictly ‘anti-democratic’. Dylan Riley has described fascism as ‘authoritarian democracy’, noting “the paradoxical incorporation of democratic themes into the fascist project”. Riley argues that democracy fundamentally boils down to “a claim that a certain type of political institution ‘represents’ the people.” Fascists certainly made this claim, arguing that their institutions represented “the people” more perfectly than those they replaced. Indeed, the use of referendums and plebiscites by both the Italian and German fascist governments demonstrated that they took the claim seriously.

So what is fascism then? Let me offer a definition. Fascism is a mass movement, predominantly rooted in a middle class whose privileges are being undermined by capitalist crisis, and whose ‘national pride’ has been wounded by national decline and military defeat and humiliation. It is based on a promise to restore these privileges and national pride through, on a domestic level, purging ‘impure elements’ within the polity blamed for national weakness, and on an international level, restoring military prowess and ‘great power’ status. It is a ‘pseudo-revolutionary’ movement inas-

much as, whilst it adopts much in the way of imagery and policies from the radical left, it does not threaten fundamental property relations: rather, it redirects popular anger away from the capitalist class and towards vulnerable scapegoats in a way that actually serves the ‘elites’ it claims to oppose. It is sponsored and helped to power by powerful elements of the dominant political and economic classes. It opposes liberalism on the grounds that liberalism is unable or unwilling to deal effectively with those internal and external enemies deemed responsible for weakening the national polity.

Yet, first and foremost, as Mussolini’s magazine *The Fascist*, put it, fascism is “less a policy than a state of mind”. For communist theoretician Rajani Palme Dutt, “there is no theory of fascism, there is only its practice”. But what is the fascist state of mind, and what is its practice? Its’ state of mind is one of hatred towards those deemed responsible for ‘national decline’, however defined, and for the declining privileges of the (racially or nationally defined) ‘in-group’. And its practice is attacking these people. As Mussolini put it, “The democrats of [left-liberal newspaper] *Il Mondo* want to know our programme. Our programme is to break the bones of the democrats of *Il Mondo*”.

Italy’s fascist movement was founded in Milan on March 23rd 1919. Its first ‘action’, three weeks later, was to attack the offices of the socialist newspaper *Avanti*, destroying its printing press, injuring 39 people and killing 4. Said Mussolini, the fascists had “declare[d] war against socialism...because it has opposed nationalism”. This war went into full throttle in 1921, when fascist squadristi went on a countrywide rampage against trade unions, farmers’ co-operatives and the socialist party, attacking their premises and beating—or killing—their members. These gangs, in an early demonstration of the complicity between fascism and the conservative establishment, were often hired by landowners and businessmen to destroy the wave of land and factory occupations that had gripped Italy in the aftermath of the first world war.

The German Nazis, too, considered the eradication of socialism—and specifically Marxism, “the fiercest enemy of all German and European culture” according to the Nazi professor H. Ludat—to be their principal aim. “I wished to be the destroyer of Marxism” Hitler told the jury in his trial following the failed Munich putsch, “and I will achieve this task”. Nine years later, on the eve of his accession to power, he reiterated this commitment at a meeting of leading German industrialists in Dusseldorf: “Yes,” he told them, “we have taken the unalterable decision to tear Marxism out by its roots”. The Nazis, like the Italian fascists, regularly indulged in the killing of communists, particularly in drive-by shootings, long before controlling the levers of power. Fascism, then, first and foremost, means the crushing of proletarian revolution by any means necessary.

On February 8th of this year, Guadalupe Garcia de Rayos, a 36-year old mother of two who had lived in the US for 22

years, was arrested during her standard bi-annual check-in with immigration officials. She was immediately deported, leaving her two children (both US citizens) stranded. “I don’t think it’s fair that she was taken away from us,” her 14-year-old daughter Jacqueline said. “Her only crime was to work here so she could support us”. Of course, working in the US of itself is not a crime; it is only criminal for certain nationalities. Her real crime, committed when she herself was a 14-year-old in Mexico, was to have refused to accept the diktat of modern-day feudalism: that those born into high-unemployment, low wage economies ravaged by imperialism must also be condemned to die there. In this sense, the 14-year-old Guadalupe was committing a revolutionary act. And it is a revolution which Trump is determined to crush at any cost.

In Reece Jones’ excellent book *Violent Borders: Refugees and the Right to Move*, he argues that ‘illegal’ migration constitutes a refusal “to abide by the global border regime... in the same way that Harriet Tubman refused to abide by the system of slavery and fugitive slave laws, Mahatma Gandhi refused to abide by the laws of British colonialism, and Nelson Mandela refused to abide by the South African system of apartheid”. For what are borders, after all? For Jones, they are nothing more than “artificial lines drawn on maps to exclude other people from access to resources and the right to move”. “One day,” he writes, “denying equal protection based on birthplace may well seem just as anachronistic and wrong as denying civil rights based on skin color, gender or sexual orientation.” Moreover, it is precisely the system of state borders that creates the wage differentials underpinning the extreme levels of global inequality in the world today, in which, for example, a taxi driver in London is paid around 50 times a taxi driver in Delhi, whilst the average wage in Norway is around 300 times that in the Congo: “Restricting the movement of workers creates artificially low wages. If workers could move, wages would stabilize between the high wage in the US and the low wage elsewhere. This would allow the economy to produce goods based on the real value of work, without a low wage subsidy artificially produced by borders” (Jones, 140). Put another way, the global border regime sustains the split in the global working class, with that section ‘contained’ in the third world forced to subsist on artificially low wages, whilst the section in the western world are able to preserve their monopoly access to high-paid work. This divide has become so pronounced, argues professor Zak Cope, that we can no longer legitimately speak of a ‘proletariat’ amongst the citizenry of the western world at all, but rather a “middle class working class” which is paid well above the value of its labor power (that is, the cost of reproduction of labor power) and “which benefits materially from imperialism and the attendant super-exploitation of oppressed nation workers”.

Yet the proletariat—that section of the working class paid subsistence wages: that is to say, the working class of the

global South—are revolting. They are revolting by refusing to accept the global border regime which keeps them in subjection, and they are doing so on an unprecedented scale: the UN estimated that there were 244 million international migrants in 2015, a 41% increase as compared to 2000. Around 350,000 attempt to cross the Mexican border into the US each year, and around one million tried to reach the shores of Europe in 2015. This, then, is a mass proletarian revolutionary movement, driven—like all revolutionary movements—by a realization that playing by the existing rules will not put food on the table or allow a dignified peaceful future for one’s children. Yet, just like it did the middle classes who flocked to fascism in Italy and Germany, proletarian revolution disgusts the “middle class working class” of the West, who see it as a threat to their privileged monopoly of high waged work. That is why they elected Trump to crush it.

Garcia de Rayos’ arrest came about following an executive order stepping up the deportation of undocumented immigrants in the USA signed by Donald Trump two weeks earlier. This was his third executive order targeting immigrants, the others banning immigration from seven Muslim countries and ordering the construction of a wall between the US and Mexico, along with a further 15,000 border staff to patrol it. “We are living in a new era now,” said Garcia de Rayos’ lawyer, Ray Maldonado, following her arrest: “an era of war on immigrants.”

To be fair, today’s neo-fascists did not start this war. Deportations reached new heights under Obama, who deported a record 2 million undocumented immigrants. The much-hyped ‘wall’ between the US and Mexico effectively already exists, at least in the sense of a hard border, enforced with violence. And it was Britain’s Theresa May, along with her chancellor Philip Hammond, who played the major role in pressuring Italy to terminate its successful search and rescue program in the Mediterranean in 2014 to ensure that refugees were left to drown as a message to others. Around 10,000 men, women and children have so far been drowned as a result of the policy—which was, significantly, first advocated by the British National Party, Britain’s main overtly fascist party, some years earlier. In total, Reece Jones estimates that no less than 40,000 people have been killed—shot, drowned or starved in the desert—at the borders of Europe and North America over the past ten years. This already marks the beginnings of a descent into fascism, which can also be viewed as a collapsing of indirect structural violence (in this case the structural violence of poverty wages imposed by the global border regime) into direct, physical violence (shooting, drowning and starving migrants at the border) under pressure of proletarian revolution. Yet what Obama and the ‘mainstream’ parties did shamefacedly, ‘on-the-quiet’ and to the embarrassment of their supporters, Trump does openly, brazenly and with gusto, to the untrammeled delight of the movement that brought him to power.

Again, this is fully in line with classical fascism, which did not, after all, invent the purging of communists, Jew-baiting, rule by decree and so on, but rather turned all of this into a mass movement, stepped it up and systematized it—marking a qualitative difference in what had gone before in so doing.

Once we understand that all citizens of the western world are effectively bourgeois—net beneficiaries of (global) exploitation living, at least in part, off the labor of others—the parallels with fascism become clear. If the working class of the west is, properly speaking, a section of the global middle class, as Cope argues, then for all the ‘workerism’ espoused by Trump and his European bedfellows, their electoral basis is, just like the classical fascists, primarily middle class. Fascism has always had a special appeal to the middle class in periods of capitalist crisis, as it promises redemption from both the threat from ‘below’—proletarian revolt threatening their privileged class position—and the threat from ‘above’—the big capitalist industries and finance capital. Hitler chose the Jew as a very specific symbol designed to represent both of these threats simultaneously—the poor ghetto Jew representing the communist threat, and the wealthy Jew symbolizing the ‘greedy banker’. By the same token, the Jew also represented both the internal enemy, ‘weakening the enemy from within’, as well as the external enemy—the Soviet Union, standing in the way of German lebensraum, and the ‘Jewish-controlled’ capitalist victors of Versailles—responsible for Germany’s decline. For today’s neo-fascists, the Muslim plays the same role. Whilst the poor Muslim immigrant represents the unwanted intrusion of the global proletariat into the white westerner’s monopoly of privileged access to jobs and services, the wealthy Arab sheikh represents the (foreign) capitalist responsible for pushing up house prices and rents etc. Likewise, the internal threat posed by the ‘jihadi terrorist’ is mirrored by the external threat of the rising global South, freeing itself from western domination, and both symbolized by the Muslim other. The promise to root out this impure ‘other’ internally—whilst reasserting dominance over it abroad—is at the heart of fascism’s appeal.

But also fundamental to fascism is that all of this comes dressed in pseudo-‘left wing’, ‘anti-establishment’ drag. The Nazis were forever railing against what Gregor Strasser called “the degenerate economic system” which would supposedly smashed by the fascists, who would “restore honest payment for honest labor”. Their 25-point program promised the abolition of unearned income, the “nationalization of all trusts”, the “breaking of interest slavery”, the “death penalty for usurers” and on and on—but in power, of course, none of this came to fruition. Just like Trump, far from executing the ‘usurers’, he brought them into his government: whilst Hitler made the head of Deutsche bank his economics minister, Trump has now broken the record for the number of former Goldman Sachs officials in Cabinet. For the Nazis, it was only the promises to smash Marxism and round up Jews, in the

end, to which they were seriously committed, just as Trump’s anti-immigrant program is the only major plank of his manifesto that has survived actually taking office. As Slavoj Zizek succinctly put it; “Hitler staged a spectacle of revolution so that the capitalist order could survive”. It is supremely ironic that Zizek now provides ideological cover for the neo-fascists himself, parroting their ‘threat to Europe’ rhetoric on immigration.

For Willie Thompson, fascism is defined as “pseudo-revolutionary populist nationalism”; and a more precise definition of today’s European far-right, Trump and Brexit movements would be hard to find. But the neo-fascist electoral model which has been so successful for these groups—immigrant-baiting, pseudo-workerism, plus a faux ‘anti-establishment’ presentational style—has now been established as the electoral formula across the entire ‘western’ world, with mainstream parties seeking to maintain their position playing the same game. The UK Conservative party is a prime example, and it looks set to win a landslide by using this formula. The fascist epoch is indeed well underway. History shows us the direction in which it is headed. **CP**

Dan Glazebrook is a political writer and journalist. He writes regularly on international relations and the use of state violence in British domestic and foreign policy.

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CULTURE & REVIEWS

Money For Nothing

BY LEE BALLINGER

"I think money will lose its value in about ten years and that's going to be a very interesting period in history. I have no idea what will replace it, either, but it seems like all systems are going to break down."

—Chrissie Hynde of the Pretenders

I'm obsessed with money and so are you. Money is the only thing that stands between us and a life in the streets. In the short run, money may be the only thing that stands between you and I and death. So why do I advocate getting rid of it?

Let's examine our love affair with money. We are living in the greatest debt bubble in world history. According to the Federal Reserve, credit card debt now stands at \$779 billion, while auto loan debt is at \$1.16 trillion. The average U.S. household carries \$129,579 in debt, \$15,355 on credit cards. Forty per cent of Americans spend more than they earn while more than half of all Americans take on debt to pay for basic needs. Nearly one in five consumers has medical debt that has gone to a collection agency. Student loan debt now totals \$1.3 trillion, nearly triple what it was a decade ago.

According to writer Tyler Durden, "we are facing a subprime auto loan meltdown. The average size of an auto loan is at a record high of \$29,880." Will this lead to a subprime crash such as happened in 2008? Auto loan delinquencies are rising rapidly and Ford and GM set aside \$1.3 billion in just the first half of 2016 to cover credit losses.

How has such a huge debt bubble been created? Each year, credit card

companies send several billion solicitations to consumers trying to get more plastic into our hands. The website for Visa's Hello Kitty credit card aimed at ten to fourteen-year-olds urges youngsters to "shop til you drop!"

But the rapid expansion of credit and debt rests upon something more fundamental: The lowering of the standards of living of the American people. The extreme polarization of wealth in America puts a shiny veneer on the economy but cannot hide its hollow center. The ultra-rich who make up the Forbes 400 list, a group small enough to fit into a nightclub, now has more wealth than the bottom 61 per cent of American society (194 million people). Real wages have declined nearly 25 per cent over the past two generations.

Where I live in Los Angeles County, 13,000 additional people become homeless every month. An Associated Press study of census data revealed that 80 per cent of Americans are already in poverty or near-poverty. A minimum-wage job is no longer a temporary stop on the way to something better. Only 12 per cent of minimum wage workers today are teenagers, compared to 27 per cent in 1979. The typical fast food worker in 2017 is 29 years old and is supporting two children. Researchers at the University of Wisconsin found that one third of community college students go hungry and 14 percent are homeless. All of this downward mobility makes it hard to pay bills and has led to the explosion of credit.

The current debt bubble is nothing like the first upsurge of consumer debt in the 1950s and 1960s, when most people were working at jobs that were stable and allowed them to make car, house, and other payments indefinitely. Decades ago when I got out of the military, I put in applications at every

factory and warehouse in town. The next week, even though I was an unskilled high school dropout, I received thirteen job offers in one day, each of which paid enough to support my family. Our debt? A monthly mortgage payment of \$188. The economy was stable. Trump claims we can go back to this. We cannot.

As Lisa Servon puts it in her new book, *The Unbanking of America*, today "An overwhelming sense of financial insecurity tears at the very fabric of society."

That torn fabric is more than a feeling. Servon notes that "There are more payday lending stores than there are McDonalds and Starbucks combined."

In order to write her book, Servon worked at both a payday loan center and a debt collection agency. She discovered first hand that the customers at payday lending outlets are increasingly middle class. The payday loan industry calls these folks "the new non-prime."

"Seven years ago," Servon writes, "the people in the massive database of Clarity Services, a subprime credit bureau, experienced a 'destabilizing event,' such as loss of a job, a medical issue, or a car breakdown, every 87 days. Now it's every 30 days."

"The more stable, higher-earner segment that is the new non-prime has increased by over 500 per cent. A 2015 study found that more than 20 per cent of small-dollar borrowers had a net income of over \$50,000, 43 per cent had a college degree, and over a third owned their homes."

Money which is used to pay off payday lenders is money which can't be used for the basic necessities of life, further stifling the economy. Meanwhile, banks have become de facto loan sharks themselves. "Americans paid \$38 billion in overdraft fees in 2011, more than they

paid to payday lenders.”

In response to the crisis, there is a lot of talk (and some action) today about going off the grid of money to a system of individual or small group barter—I give you this, you give me that. Beyond the micro level, this cannot work. Most people have nothing to exchange but their willingness to work and the opportunities to exchange that for something else are dwindling rapidly. The classic barter stereotype—I give you a bushel of apples and you do my plumbing—just isn’t viable in the mega-cities which dominate the world today. How would bartering work in New York City? What would you exchange for heart surgery or a house?

An op-ed piece by editorial cartoonist David Horsey in the March 31 Los Angeles Times gives a more realistic picture of possibilities.

Horsey begins by stating the obvious—robots, not immigrants, are taking American jobs. He cites a 2016 White House report which says that 83% of U.S. jobs in which people make less than \$20 per hour are now, or soon will be, subject to automation, not to mention the 3.1 million drivers of all kinds—cabbies, truckers, chauffeurs, bus drivers—who likely will soon be made obsolete by technology. Horsey references Venture for America CEO Andrew Yang’s warning that we are headed for an era of 60% unemployment [In the first half of 2017, 42 Sears stores, 138 J.C. Penney outlets, 552 Radio Shacks, and 1,000 Payless stores are scheduled to close. 3,500 stores will shut down in malls alone, which will lead to the closing of dozens of malls.]

“There will be plenty of wealth to go around,” Horsey points out, “but not that much work. So our society will need to guarantee a minimum income for everyone by letting all citizens share in the vast wealth created by robot labor.”

Horsey doesn’t shy away from the earth-shaking transformations that must take place to get to that destination. He asks:

In a country built on self-reliance, the Protestant work ethic and meritocracy, can we adjust to a very different idea about how we spend our lives?

Can the antigovernment philosophy that infuses and informs much of American politics ever accept the redistributive mechanisms that would be necessary to provide a minimum income to all?

But redistribute what? Money?

Money isn’t money anymore. At one time, money was backed by something tangible such as gold. More fundamentally, money was backed by an entire world of buying and selling tangible goods and services, a world in which almost everyone participated. That is so twentieth-century. In this millennium, there are several quadrillion dollars worth of financial transactions each year in the United States. Ninety-five per cent of them are pure speculation, betting on everything from currency prices to the value of art objects. Speculation now dwarfs the financial activity linked to actual production and services.

In an economy based on speculation, debt is the new money. Debts are sold and re-sold for potential collection. As was dramatized in the movie *The Big Short*, debts are combined and then re-combined into financial instruments called derivatives for sale and re-sale, for gambling in an electronic casino. It gets to the point that often no one knows who actually owns a given house or car. This means there is actually nothing backing up the debt except the further expansion of debt.

With such a flimsy basis to this casino economy, it is bound to crash on a scale that will dwarf the 2008 meltdown or the Great Depression.

Our access to money or our ability to go into debt will be negligible in a world of sixty per cent unemployment. The demand for payment, sanctified by law and custom, will make it impossible for us to survive, as it is already doing in a world where 35,000 children die of hunger every day. The alternative

is not to get off the grid but to get rid of the grid, to get rid of money. Not debt forgiveness, but the end of debt.

We went head to head
Over the idea of money
The idea of money
And that’s the way it’s done
That’s the way it’s done
—“Johnny Damas and Me,” John Trudell

The very “idea of money” drags our thinking back in time, just where Donald Trump wants it to be. As Trudell knew, for most of human history there was no such thing as money. Money is a medium of exchange and in a hunter/gatherer society where everything is shared, there is no exchange. Money emerged with the advent of agriculture. Today exchange is possible mostly by taking on more debt, creating an ever-expanding Ponzi scheme which may be huge but is definitely not too big to fail.

But all is not lost. As David Horsey points out, “There will be plenty of wealth to go around.” But not wealth in the form of money or debt, which will evaporate when the economy implodes, as it must when most people are permanently out of work and won’t have money or access to debt. Wealth in the form of housing, food, medical care, education, transportation, etc. already exists in tremendous abundance. There is more than enough for everyone. Clean out the pipes in our distribution system that are clogged by finance and let it go, let it flow. **CP**

“I envision a world where water, electricity, food, and education would be for free in the next 25 years for everyone on this planet.”

—Carlos Santana

Lee Ballinger is editor of Rockrap confidential.

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