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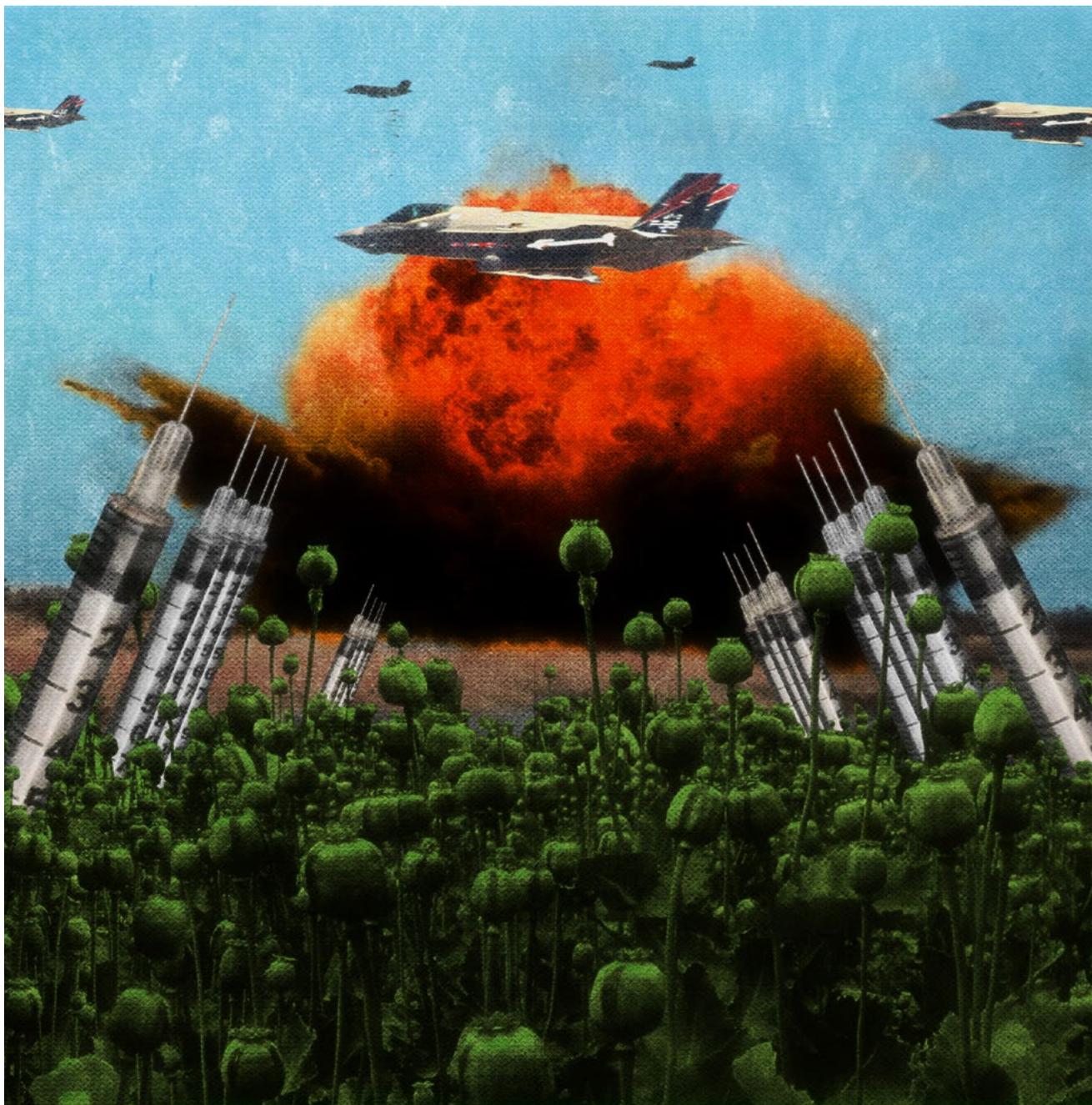
THE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE AMERICAN LEFT BY PAUL STREET

WHAT'S DRIVING TRUMP'S OBSESSION WITH MEXICO? BY LAURA CARLSEN

CAN NATO STILL MAKE AMERICA GREAT? BY RON JACOBS

THE FIRES OF NEOLIBERALISM BY KENNETH SUREN

THE BLOODBATH OF VIETNAM WAS US BY MICHAEL UHL



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Cover Image

"Addicted to War" by Nick Roney

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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.

Janet Lee Beatty

Paul's Missing Links

Sorry, Paul Street, but you do not know what you are talking about. Obama is far from being hollow. That is your interpretation based on viewing Obama through a distorted lens with unrealistic expectations of the nation's first black/biracial president. The fact that you even compared Obama to Martin Luther King Jr. reveals your biased approach, which reflects unrealistic expectations that Obama should be compared to King. No, Obama should be compared to other white male presidents -- not to King. In rightfully being compared to other U.S. presidents, Obama is far from being a tragic figure. I so tire of white liberal males who think they have a clue when their liberal perspectives actually lack conscious awareness of how racist ideology plays out on multiple levels. I bet you will immediately discount the full impact of how systemic racism affected Obama's presidency on multiple levels. All I can say to you, Paul Street, is that you wear blinders about how sys-

temic racism. This means you operate as a white man could never fully understand all the variables regarding President Obama's trailblazing role and his real impact on a historical level. A series of articles on the psychology of racism can clue you in, if you even have interest in exploring missing links: <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/author/fannie-leflore>

*Fannie LeFlore
Milwaukee, Wisconsin*

Heroin Epidemic?

Every day we read about the so-called "opioid crisis." Nonsense. There is no more an "opioid crisis" than there is an "alcohol crisis." By the metrics, alcoholism causes far, far more deaths, family crises, and ruined lives than opioids. Yet the same forces that would have favored prohibition are now favoring the banning of opioids.

Just as most people who drink alcohol aren't alcoholics, most people who have taken opioids after surgery or for chronic pain aren't addicts. Banning alcohol didn't work. Banning opioids for people who suffer from chronic and debilitating pain isn't sensible health policy, it is cruel. But Puritan America is short on empathy and high on moral judgment for things it knows nothing about.

Why not treat the cause of addiction—some of which may be genetic, but most of it is people trying to self-medicate due to emotional pain and suffering. America's economic woes for the poor and working classes have added stresses that have caused people to self-medicate as well. But we refuse

to deal with the causes of addiction because these things get to the heart of America's inequalities. It would mean enacting real structural change, which the millions of temporarily embarrassed millionaires would never favor.

We live in a society based on unhealthy competition, "pull yourself up by your bootstraps," "I've got to get mine" mindsets that are inhuman. People grow up in violent neighborhoods and whose futures offer nothing economically in terms of jobs, yet we are surprised when they turn to alcohol and drugs to take the edge off? Or how about millions of people who suffer from PTSD? Or simply people who grew up in emotionally or physically abusive homes and carry the lingering scars from their childhoods?

You can ban alcohol, drugs, gambling, whatever. But people in pain will always find another means to medicate their pain. You can help them treat the root of the problem, or you can let them find another way of coping. But don't be surprised when the consequences aren't what you wanted.

Denis Kucharski

Cockburn Chic

Once upon a time, visiting Alexander Cockburn at the Tower, he called me over for a chat about current events, all the while cutting the tongues from several brand new pairs of Puma shoes—his fave, that he'd stocked up on from some Puma outlet store just at the Oregon-Califa Border, where evidently, he'd buy several pair at a time. So while he's giving me hiking advice, never miss-

ing a lick at slicing the tongues from perfectly good shoes, I get a shot": "Man, why you cutting up all them good shoes?" He looks at me like...well, I don't know squat about shoes, or camping, and says "It makes them lighter." I relate this tale to Doug Peacock, who ups the ante by regaling me with stories about traversing the deep desert in Southern Arizona with Mr Cockburn, wearing a pair of those tongueless Pumas: "D, I had to pull cactus spines from his feet with my teeth." Sheryl and I were embarking on hike from the Tower. Well prepared we were. Alex intercepted us, toasted our grand plan with a great white, and another, then called his next door neighbor to tell him we were coming his way and "to look "after us when we arrived, completely changing our plan for the afternoon. We were headed toward Mattole Beach and the Lighthouse--in the opposite direction, and it did not matter to Alex that we were prepared for an entirely different adventure. He hands us a beautiful canvas bag containing another bottle of a great white and a quart mason jar of water, some fine cheese and a baguette. Totally grand adventure of totally different nature. Just last week, while visiting the Tower for the first time since Alex died, I told Daisy that her Dad was the most least dead I'd ever known. He was. Alexander Cockburn was one helluva man.

Deryle Perryman

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ROAMING CHARGES

The War That Time Forgot

BY JEFFREY ST. CLAIR

If it's Independence Day, then you can count on John McCain to be bunched down in a remote outpost of the Empire growling for the Pentagon to unleash airstrikes on some unruly nation, tribe or gang. This July the Fourth found McCain making a return engagement to Kabul, an arrival that must have prompted many Afghans to scramble for the nearest air raid shelter.

From the press room at NATO command, McCain announced that "none of us could say we are on a course to success here." The senator should have paused for a reflective moment and then called for an end to the war. Instead, McCain demanded that Trump send more US troops, more bombers and more drones to terrorize a population that has been riven by near constant war since the late 1970s.

McCain's martial drool is now as familiar as the opening notes to the "Law & Order" theme song. What may surprise some, however, is the composition of the delegation that signed up to travel on his frequent flier program, notably the presence of two Democratic Senators with soaring profiles: Sheldon Whitehouse and Elizabeth Warren. Whitehouse, has lately taken a star turn in the role of chief inquisitor of suspected Russian witches in the Senate intelligence committee hearings. Perhaps he finally located one selling AK-47s to the Taliban.

For her part, Warren largely echoed McCain's bellicose banter that Trump needs to double down militarily to finish off the Taliban, the impossible dream. No real surprise here. To the extent that she's advanced any foreign policy positions during her stint in the senate, Warren has been a dutiful supplicant to the demands of AIPAC

and the Council on Foreign Relations, rarely diverging from the neocon playbook for the global war on Islam. Warren's Afghan junket is a sure sign of her swelling presidential ambitions. These days "national security" experience is measured almost exclusively by how much blood you are willing to spill in countries you know little about.

Most Americans have no idea why we are in Afghanistan. Some, as many as 20 percent according to a Gallup Poll, have no idea that we are still in Afghanistan. Osama Bin Laden and Mullah Omar are both long dead. The shattered remnants of Al Qaeda have fled to Pakistan. For the last six months, the US hasn't even troubled itself to send an ambassador to Kabul.

A kind of convenient cultural amnesia has set in, abetted by a compliant press corps that has largely decamped from the Hindu Kush and now treats Afghanistan as if it is some kind of interstellar region, where photographers are occasionally dispatched to snap eerie debris clouds from the detonation of MOAB bombs. It's no wonder that the few Americans who continue to support the war cling to the delusion that Afghanistan orchestrated the 9/11 attacks. It is the War that Time Forgot.

Nothing better illustrates the eclipse of US global power than the fact that Afghanistan refuses to be subjugated or even managed, despite 16 years of hard-core carnage. Since the first US airstrikes hit Kandahar in October 2001, more than 150,000 Afghan civilians have been killed. Still Afghanistan resists imperial dictates. Even after Obama's shameful troop surge in 2010, an escalation that went almost unopposed by the US antiwar movement, the Taliban now retains almost as much

control of the country as it did in 2001. And for that Afghanistan must be punished. Eternally, it seems.

As for Trump, in his quest to privatize as much of the federal government as possible, he is apparently entertaining the idea of turning over much of the Afghan operation to military contractors. As McCain and Warren were issuing their war cries from Kabul, Trump and Company huddled with Erik Prince, founder of Blackwater Security, and billionaire financier Stephen Feinberg, owner of DynCorp, on how to replace US troops with mercenaries from their training camps.

Give Trump some credit. His war plan is refreshingly vacant of moral posturing. Instead he views the war through a greedily focused economic lens: Afghan War as commodity. Over the course of 16 years, the cratering American operation in Afghanistan has consumed more than \$1 trillion, a huge and nearly unchallenged benefaction to military contractors. In 2016, the Pentagon spent \$3.6 million for each US soldier stationed in Afghanistan. A surge of 4,000 to 10,000 additional troops, either as "private military units" or GIs, will come as a welcome new infusion of cash to the dozens of defense corporations that invested so heavily in his administration.

If that living monument to the Confederacy Jefferson B. Sessions was serious about confronting the rising scourge of opiate addiction in the US, he would start by calling for an immediate end to US military operations in Afghanistan. Forget marijuana, the real gateway to heroin abuse is war. Since the start of Operation Enduring Freedom, opium production has swelled, now accounting for more than one-third of the wrecked Afghan economy. In the last two years alone, opium poppy yields have doubled, a narcotic blowback hitting the streets of American cities from Amarillo to Pensacola. With every drone strike, a thousand poppies bloom. **CP**



EMPIRE BURLESQUE

Surrendering Our Secrets to Malevolent Powers

BY CHRIS FLOYD

*“And if my thought-dreams
could be seen*

*They’d probably stick my head
in a guillotine.”*

Thus quoth the Bard, more than half a century ago. At the time, these lines were an electrifying insight into human nature, lighting up dark corners of the psyche not usually explored in popular music. They were also a jolting reversal of the usual protest song dynamic: a righteous hero denouncing evil from a position of moral purity. Here, at the end of a long, incandescent jeremiad against a sick society, we see the “prophet” suddenly subjecting himself to the harsh judgment he had just rendered. “Yeah, this place is Hieronymus Bosch on stilts—but you should see what’s howling in my head!”

We all have a night mind, we all have thought-dreams which, if exposed, perhaps might not get us guillotined but could well kill the image we present to others—and to ourselves. And this is true even for the most liberated, hip or “woke” among us. (Like Dylan’s own sheepish confession in his memoir, *Chronicles*, that back in the day he’d harbored a secret liking for Barry Goldwater because the politician reminded him of Tom Mix, the movie cowboy. Now that’s perverse!)

So imagine if there were a magic machine that let us explore our own guillotined notions—or indeed, to range through the night-mind of the whole human race, encountering lurid thought-dreams beyond our previous imagining. A magic machine where every forbidden thought or fear or desire, even things abhorrent to our own daylight mind, could be approached,

encountered, explored—and this in deepest privacy, in the safe confines of our homes, our normal daily reality. Who could resist dipping—or plunging—into such a dream-world? Yes, of course, we speak of the internet.

And these explorations need not be anything inherently aberrant or illegal, but simply retrograde to what we think of as our truest, essential self. The pastor with his porn. The pacifist strangely drawn to videos of beheadings. The staid bank manager trawling trans sites. The anxiety victim obsessively chasing irrational fears down dark alleys of unseemly horror. The kindly liberal with an inexplicable fascination with the swamplands of racist bile. The bored office worker idly following links into fields of lurid fantasy. The permutations are endless. Every dark impulse, every passing fantasy, every perverse or unsettling notion thrown up by the imp of the mind: all of this available, in endless profusion, 24/7, all over the world.

Now imagine if all of these self-exposing thought-dreams were being recorded by the magic machine. Imagine if this compromising material could be made instantly available to the security organs of an overweening nation-state or the overlords of a rapacious corporate power. What you would have then is an apparatus of repression, blackmail and control beyond the wildest dreams of the most tyrannical regimes, religions and ideologies in all of human history. Any dissident, any heretic speaking out against the power structure could be undermined politically, if not destroyed psychologically, by the exposure of their night-mind, their guillotine-worthy thought-dreams, by those who hold the

keys to the magic machine.

And this need not apply only to those who had roused themselves to denounce publicly the crimes and rapine of the powers that be. No, even that quiet bank manager, that suffering obsessive, might draw back from making waves—or supporting any wave-makers—in the knowledge that their personal strangeness could potentially be exposed. This fearful but not unreasonable assumption is, in part, the fruit of the many whistleblowing revelations about the surveillance state and the incredibly pervasive reach of our hi-tech behemoths (Google, Facebook, etc.) in recent years. We have all been taught to assume that everything we do and say and show on-line is being watched, stored and laid open to state and corporate scrutiny. And we are right to do so.

Yet because this magic machine has tapped into our most primal impulses, because it offers the ever-alluring but ever-elusive promise of filling the holes torn in our psyches by our individual upbringings and by the cruelties, chaos and contradictions in any and every social, political and cultural milieu we find ourselves caught up in, we keep exploring—and recording—our thought-dreams with it. We can’t stop feeding it with kompromat against ourselves, can’t stop giving malevolent forces—who care nothing for us beyond what they can wring from us for their own power and profit—the key to the inner sanctum of our souls.

There is also the fact these malevolent forces have made it virtually impossible to carry out daily life without giving them access to your lives and thoughts. In order simply to function in the modern world, you must tell them who you are, where you are, what you are buying, reading, watching, listening to.

So the Laureate’s lyrics are no longer metaphorical lights cast into our secret darkness. They are the literal truth: our thought-dreams can be seen. And they can be used, should the powerful wish it, to put our heads in a guillotine. **CP**



EXIT STRATEGIES

Here Comes Kamala

BY YVETTE CARNELL

In November of 1996, Texaco settled a discrimination lawsuit which revealed that senior executives at the company had referred to African-American employees as black jelly beans. Transcripts disclosed that company brass at the oil giant had joked that “all of the black jelly beans seem to be glued to the bottom of the bag.” The remoteness with which these executives denigrated Blacks as objects rather than humans who are inherently equal to whites is what sticks out the most in that comment. Executives at the company also seemed totally disconnected from the role they play in ensuring—through policies, hiring practices, and bias—that Blacks don’t rise within the ranks of corporate America. Shockingly though, there was a half-truth embedded in that comment: While most blacks don’t rise within the ranks of corporate America, those who do usually rise in proportion to their willingness to placate the Black community with empty symbolism.

Enter U.S. Senator Kamala Harris. The recent *Observer* headline “Clinton Donors Have Picked Their 2020 Democratic Presidential Nominee” fueled speculation that the growing consensus among Democratic donors is that Harris is next in line for the presidential nomination. Harris has certainly been a dutiful tool of the moneyed class. Steven Mnuchin probably wouldn’t head up Trump’s Treasury Department were it not for Harris’s decision not to prosecute OneWest bank, a bank which Mnuchin headed, and one with over 10,000 foreclosure violations, according to *The Intercept*.

The con game we’re watching repeat itself with the rise of California’s former top cop is formulaic. The Black political class has all but anointed Harris, with

Cory Booker gushing like a schoolboy about how he “revered” Harris. Then President Obama was caught shamefaced when in 2013 he called Harris “the best looking attorney general in the country”. And the corporate media is taking its rightful position as the fourth branch of the feudal hierarchy with headlines like “Kamala Harris Went to Prison So Others Won’t have to” from *Mother Jones* and “Inside the Legislative Fight for the Rights of Incarcerated Women” from *Slate*.

Like Obama, Harris is substituting Black culture for Black politics. Harris recently released a Spotify playlist which included such immensely popular acts A Tribe Called Quest, a favorite of Black Gen-Xers, Childish Gambino, a Black millennial artist whose single “Redbone” is blowing up the charts, and “What’s Going on by Marvin Gaye” for old soul aficionados. Similarly, Obama perfected using music and other cultural queues to supplant himself in the Black community, a community that, according to *Rising Star: The Making of Barack Obama* author David J. Garrow, Obama had no organic relationship with prior to running for public office. *Double Down: Game Change 2012* authors wrote that Obama had little patience for “professional blacks” and even less for the Congressional Black Caucus. Yet during his eight years in office, he was able to build and maintain historic levels of support in the Black community by, at least in part, adding Lil Wayne to his playlist and singing Al Green and “Amazing Grace.”

Harris actually has a few more pages in her playbook than Obama did. She attended my alma mater—Howard University, an HBCU (Historically Black College or University).

“At Howard, you had the ability—if you hadn’t known before—to know you can do whatever you want. Everyone’s perspective of themselves and others is based on the limitations of their exposure,” Harris told Elle in a 2015 interview. Harris, born of a Jamaican father and Indian mother, lacks understanding that the material condition of African-Americans in this country is based on systemic racism and oppression, not a limited perspective.

“Whereas the New Deal had paved the way for homeownership for white Detroiters and its new immigrants, it imposed steep obstacles for black residents. Red lining and restrictive covenants limited potential homeowners to certain areas,” reported the Washington Post. But the politics popularized by Obama and Harris is void of history, and marked by mostly performative superficiality. It’s the politics of racial spectacles, a pageantry politics which allows Harris to speak effusively of Howard University, but remain silent as Obama decreased federal grant funding to HBCUs and implemented PLUS loan changes that cost the schools over \$300 million in two years. It’s this politics that allows Harris’s star to rise based on making. Attorney General Jeff Sessions feel “nervous” during a hearing, or because she got cut off by white Republicans.

This uncomplicated rendering of African-Americanness, which groups African-Americans based on skin color and commoditized Black culture, rather than a shared history of oppression, and the loathsome way in which Democrats employ it to get elected, is emblematic of who liberals really are.: tools of not only the super-rich, but the top 20 percent as well, and their job is to keep us under heel as they redistribute wealth from the bottom to the top. Kamala is preparing to finish what Obama started. Get ready. Kamala’s coming. **CP**



GRASPING AT STRAWS

Let the Buybacks Begin

BY MIKE WHITNEY

On June 28, the Federal Reserve concluded its annual “stress tests” and gave all 34 of the nation’s biggest banks a clean bill of health. The Fed’s announcement was greeted with riotous applause on Wall Street where all three major stock indices skyrocketed into record territory. By approving the capital plans of all 34 firms, the Fed gave the banks a green light to boost dividends and repurchase more of their own shares essentially paving the way for another orgy of corporate looting aimed at lining the pockets of incentives-driven CEOs and their uber-rich shareholders.

According to the Seattle Times: “financial firms unleashed a windfall of repurchases that single-handedly reversed a year-to-date decline in overall stock-buyback authorizations. At \$390 billion, planned buybacks are 3 percent above the amount at this time last year, a turnaround from the previous week, when the total was down 9 percent.”

Yipee. So the Fed’s little “Punch and Judy” show was a rousing success. Investors gobbled up bank shares like they were going out of style, the public was duped into believing the banking system is safe, and all the main stock indices climbed back into record territory. Mission accomplished!

Naturally, the Fed’s calculations were based on “smoke and mirrors” accounting methods that would never pass muster internationally, but that’s neither here nor there. (The Fed pegs the capital held by the 34 U.S. banks as 14 percent of assets, while, according to international accounting standards, the capital ratio is a mere 6.3 percent.) The point is the Fed passed all these undercapitalized zombies with flying colors so they could pump up stock prices and fatten the

bottom line. It’s just another example of the Fed doing what the Fed does best, feather the nests of its primary constituents, the Wall Street behemoths.

Of course, there is a downside to all this stock manipulation, which is that overall production suffers, wages stay low, and the economy remains mired in a permanent funk due to the fact that 4 percent of GDP is being regularly diverted from research and development, employee training, and new factories and equipment into a financial black hole that sucks money out of companies to reward corporate bosses and their avaricious shareholders. That’s not how you build a strong economy.

The amount of money that is earmarked for stock buybacks and dividends is simply staggering. Check out this clip from the Wall Street Journal:

“On average, the group of firms taking part in the stress tests requested payouts that are near 100% of their expected earnings over the next year, up from 65% last year, senior Fed officials said. That means banks in some cases will be able to start whittling away at capital buffers that many bank executives say are well in excess of what is needed to absorb potential losses.” (WSJ)

Think about that for a minute: 100% of projected earnings will be devoted to shareholder payouts that weaken the business, put a lid on future growth, and curtail employment. How is that good for the economy?

It’s not good for the economy or the country. And some banks plan to spend even more than 100 percent on buybacks and dividends. According to the same WSJ article, Citigroup plans to spend “132% of what Wall Street analysts expect the bank to earn” in the next year.

This is why stock prices keep rising. It has nothing to do with the strength of the economy which is barely trading water at a measly 2 percent GDP. It’s all due to the more than \$7 trillion that’s been dumped into the repurchasing of shares since 2004. Absent that surge of capital, the markets would still be limping along at half-speed.

Deregulation has produced an incentives structure that encourages bad behavior, that is, CEOs are pressured by greedy shareholders to direct more of their capital into buybacks to juice stock prices and increase their wealth. That, in turn, reduces the amount of money available for investment which puts a damper on growth and employment. The net result is that stock prices become detached from the underlying economy while the gaping chasm between rich and poor continues to widen.

Is there a remedy?

Yes, there is. Congress needs to work with the President to put the genie back in the bottle. That will require more activist and principled leaders at the SEC, leaders who don’t mind locking horns with the corporate bigwigs who are going to scream “bloody murder” when their golden goose is threatened. It’s a tall order, but it can be done.

Keep in mind, that buybacks were illegal before 1982 because they were seen as a form of stock market manipulation. Now that they have become a critical revenue stream for corporate America, it’s going to be much harder to ban them. But that doesn’t make it any less necessary. Stricter regulations can eliminate the negative effects of financial engineering so that less money flows into paper assets and more money goes into business investment, higher wages and productivity. Banning stock buybacks may not noticeably grow the middle class or raise standards of living, but it’s a good place to start. **CP**

BORDERZONE NOTES

What's Behind Trump's Obsession with Bashing Mexico?

BY LAURA CARLSEN

Donald Trump deflected part of the global spotlight on the G20 to engage in one of his favorite sports—publicly bashing Mexico. As he and Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto spoke to the press at their first meeting since the inauguration, a reporter asked, “Mr. Trump, do you still want Mexico to pay for the wall?”

Trump replied “Absolutely”, as seen on this CNN video clip. Peña Nieto did not respond.

That’s a torpedo aimed straight at the binational relationship. Not because the fight over the wall is what most matters in the teetering diplomacy between the two neighbors—after all, much of the wall is already built and the rest isn’t likely to happen any time soon. But the border wall is the predictable prop for the ritualized putdowns of the South by the North. It’s part of the spectacle of the bully and the sycophant that the press on both sides of the border seeks out with morbid anticipation.

An examination of the short video is revealing. In the press gaggle, we see Trump seated in typical macho stance—knees separated wide, jaw set. Peña Nieto looks meek beside him. Everything about Trump’s demeanor, from the body language to his “I would really rather not be here” delivery, are aimed at humiliating his Mexican counterpart. Trump begins by saying it’s great to be with his “friend, the president of Mexico”, who he never

looks at, and that the two countries will be renegotiating NAFTA, adding an almost threatening, “We’ll see how that all turns out.” He then offers Peña Nieto the floor as if it were an act of generosity on his part. As Peña Nieto speaks, Trump fidgets impatiently. The formal statements end with a handshake and a forced smile. The question on the wall is shouted from the press and then the dagger’s plunged.

According to reports, Mexican foreign minister Luis Videgaray went straight to the press room to do damage control. Videgaray, who was sitting next to Peña Nieto, said neither heard Trump’s comment. News of the diplomatic slam-dunk spread quickly through the international press. For Mexicans, the exchange caused the usual outrage over Trump’s latest insult, and a feeding frenzy against Peña Nieto. Using the hashtag “#absolutamente” critics slammed the Mexican president for acting like the country’s interests are best served by bending over backwards to placate an aggressively hostile opponent.

The wall comment and body language weren’t the only slights. The same day all this was happening at the G20, back home Trump released a video-taped address declaring July “Made in America” month. In the short video, he goes back to his threat to withdraw from NAFTA and rails against “jobs ripped out of communi-

ties”, and “foreign nations that got rich at Americans’ expense”.

“...We are pursuing a total renegotiation of NAFTA,” he says in a stilted, to-camera delivery as the real Donald Trump sat down with Peña Nieto and other G20 leaders in Hamburg, “and if we don’t get it, we will terminate—that is, end—NAFTA forever.”

That’s what has Peña Nieto bending over backwards.

History of Insults

This isn’t the first time Trump has used a high-profile diplomatic dialogue to denigrate Mexico and humiliate its president. And it isn’t the first time the Mexican president has failed to defend the nation or his office.

In fact, this has happened every single time the bilateral relationship is addressed formally.

Let’s look at the chronology of the most important moments in the ongoing diplomatic crisis:

June 16, 2015–November 2016, The Campaign:

Mexico was a centerpiece of Trump’s first speech, announcing his candidacy. “Believe me, Mexico is not our friend”, he told cheering supporters. He then added his infamous comment, “They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.” This continued throughout the campaign, as the chant “Build the Wall” became a rallying cry. With almost the entire Mexican population outraged, President Peña Nieto’s refusal to actively defend the country against the verbal offensive became a factor in his sinking approval ratings.

August 31, 2016, The Visit to Mexico:

Apparently a glutton for abuse, in August Peña Nieto invited trailing candidate Donald Trump to Mexico. The trip was a disaster for the Mexican president. Peña Nieto not only rolled out the red carpet—he made himself the doormat. Donald Trump as a candidate in a foreign election in dip-

lomatic terms was far beneath Peña's presidential stature, but he was given the podium as an equal and played the Mexican president like a chump. Trump got a statesman's patina when a lot of people in the U.S. still weren't taking him seriously, and Peña Nieto got universally lampooned. Adding injury to insult, Trump then flew directly to Arizona where he gave his most virulently anti-immigrant speech of the campaign.

January 25, 2017, The Cancelled Bilateral:

After the Electoral College made Donald Trump president, the Mexican government doubled down on its conciliatory strategy, scheduling a bilateral meeting for Jan. 31. On Jan 25, foreign minister Luis Videgaray arrived in Washington to plan the meeting. The same day Trump released two executive orders—one to build the wall and the other to put in place a plan for massive deportation. This time, the timing was too much. Peña Nieto cancelled the meeting. In a follow-up call supposedly to patch things up, Trump said he didn't need Mexico and would send in the U.S. Army if the country couldn't control its crime problem.

Psychology or Strategy?

It's hard to sort out how much of Trump's compulsion to use Mexico as a punching bag is visceral and how much is strategic. During the campaign, conjuring negative images of Mexico and Mexican immigrants was clearly the wedge issue that animated a racist base long known to exist in the Republican Party. But now as president the Mexico-bashing can no longer be written off as a campaign gimmick. That's scary, because although Mexico's hardly ever considered a foreign policy priority, it's arguably the bilateral relationship that most affects daily lives in the U.S.

There's still a political rationale there. Mexico-bashing plays a critical role in keeping Trump's core mobilized and distracting from his failure pushing

through domestic policies or how much Trumpcare would hurt them. It also bolsters support for his accelerating deportation program.

In the upcoming NAFTA renegotiation, Trump has to perform a tightrope walk between the pro-corporate and protectionist factions of his inner circle, while at the same time maintaining a veneer of concern for U.S. workers. He won't be able to do all this, but he'll still need a way to spin whatever comes out of the talks as a "tremendous" win for America-First and a sound drubbing of Mexico. Keeping up the Mexico-bashing beforehand helps set the stage. Trump views all international relations like a *lucha libre* ring fight, but especially when it comes to Mexico.

That said, we can't discount the psychological factor. Trump's obsessive anti-Mexico tweeting and sabotaging of the bilateral relationship doesn't always follow a plan. He really does seem to hate Mexico—his personal disdain for Peña, Mexico and migrants is evident every time he brings up the issue, which is often and with a kind of a snarky glee. Apparently, wielding overwhelming U.S. economic and military dominance is not enough for him. Trump has a deep ego attachment to being the alpha in this relationship. This is personal.

As for Mexico, the incident is another example of Peña's futile policy of trying to gain Trump's good graces. If there's one thing we know by now, Trump is never graceful. And his deeply ingrained dislike is an insurmountable wall.

It's not that the Trump Administration has no use for its southern neighbor. General John Kelly at Homeland Security has concentrated on developing a new role for Mexico with continual trips to Mexico and meetings with Mexican authorities. Kelly expects Mexico to patrol its southern border to stop Central American migrants, continue the war on drugs militarization that has killed more than 150,000 people (and led to huge spike in violence this year). Mexico has also been asked to act as a U.S. proxy in

international forums, like the recent-failed-vote to censure Venezuela in the OAS.

Videgaray stated after the presidential meeting that the leaders confirmed that renegotiation of NAFTA will begin on August 16, and also addressed the drug war, Central America, a possible temporary guest worker program for U.S. agriculture, and reducing drug demand in the United States. This is a U.S., not a Mexican or even shared, agenda. The U.S. approach to these issues, through huge increases in its presence in Mexico since the 2008 Merida Initiative began, has worsened rather than improved Mexican security and well-being.

The G20 agenda under host Angela Merkel sought to develop collaborative responses to forced mass global migration, free trade and climate change. Trump's views made him an outsider on these issues. The G20 final declaration outlines an agenda that counters the Trump Agenda explicitly (on climate change) and implicitly (on commitments to "fight protectionism", "support those countries that choose to develop pathways for migration", and underscore cooperation). More nations are looking to sideline the United States under Trump, diplomatically and economically. The UK-Japan Free Trade Agreement is just one example and it's likely we'll see many more. Peña Nieto could easily have used that to build new coalitions and take a strong stance with other nations against the now-distanced U.S. government. He should have.

But despite talk of diversifying economic ties, Mexico is still banking on the United States. Literally. The country is dependent on the U.S. for trade and investment, and the Mexican ruling elite is interwoven with U.S. interests.

It's no wonder the Peña administration won't distance itself from its abuser.

But if the relationship continues on this collision course, he may have no choice. **CP**

EUROZONE NOTES

Refugees and Mental Health: CURA TE IPSUM

BY DANIEL RAVENTÓS AND JULIE WARK

More than a hundred years ago Karl Jaspers described in *General Psychopathology* the syndrome of apathy: an “absence of feeling [...which] shows itself objectively in the patient not taking food, in a passive indifference to being hurt, burnt, etc.” A similar phenomenon has appeared in Sweden with several hundred cases over the past decade. The apparently unconscious sufferers are children and adolescents in the midst of a tortu(r)ous asylum-seeking process and the phenomenon is so clearly identifiable that the National Board of Health and Welfare has recognized this “Resignation Syndrome”. Some people see it as a singular manifestation of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Others call it Pervasive Refusal Syndrome.

Last April *The New Yorker* published a moving article by Rachel Aviv titled “The Trauma of Facing Deportation” about more than four hundred refugee children aged between eight and fifteen and mostly from former Soviet and Yugoslav states (but with no contact among them) who have “fallen unconscious after being informed that their families will be expelled from the country”. This distressing *uppgivenhetssyndrom* is said to exist only in Sweden. Doctors are at a loss when faced with this pathological expression of a general moral crisis brought on when the social contract fails: “Their illness was so freighted that the principles they embodied seemed to overshadow the particulars of their

condition.”

Investigators sent to the children’s countries of origin learned that local doctors had never heard of these symptoms, which then put the onus on Sweden. Indeed, as a 2013 Swedish Board of Health and Welfare report allowed, the only cure was a residence permit. Nevertheless, the temptation to see the syndrome as specific to Sweden may not be very helpful as many cases with comparable symptoms suggest that, throughout history and across cultures, withdrawal from the world by means of apathy, madness, and even death is a very human response to terrifying insecurity.

Sweden’s *uppgivenhetssyndrom* has focused attention on the Migration Board as the solution to the problem, and hence the duty of the state to guarantee citizen security. It has sparked debate about *trygghet* (security in the sense of belonging, trust and freedom from danger, fear and anxiety), the concept which, as the Welfare Minister put it in 1967, “is the most basic foundation of the individual”. This is exactly what refugees don’t have—have been denied—and, although their mental distress is evident, diagnosis and treatment is not nearly such a high official priority as screening for infectious diseases. The latter are easier to identify and treat while complex cultural issues and linguistic problems make psychiatric disorders more difficult to deal with, especially as serious treatment would also require critical scrutiny of the policies of host countries.

There is a general feeling of derangement in Europe, especially with the rise in violent “terrorist” (loosely defined as calculated use of violence against civilians in the name of political or religious or ideological goals) attacks. A 2017 Europol report estimates that in 2016 there were 142 failed, foiled and completed attacks in eight EU member states, more than half of them in the United Kingdom. Although the mainstream press squawks “Islamist”, Europol notes that ethno-nationalist and separatist extremists account for the majority. The attacker profile is often that of a youngish misfit: men living in marginal immigrant areas like Molenbeek in Brussels, with petty criminal records, drinkers, apparently not religious extremists but sometimes fanatically deranged. One example is Ali Sonboly, 18, of German-Iranian citizenship who, screaming profanities about foreigners, shot and killed nine people, seven of them teenagers, in Munich in July 2016. He was influenced by Anders Behring Breivik, the white supremacist who murdered 77 people in Norway in 2011. Of course this is not to deny the very real danger of ISIS terror, its symbiotic relation with western terror and the fact that there are ISIS infiltrators among refugees.

Researchers from the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism in Maryland find that the most likely targets of terrorism worldwide are Muslims but the press is not exactly gung ho when it comes to reporting this. In Germany, there were nearly ten attacks against immigrants every day in 2016. When the terrorist is a white Anglo-Saxon like Darren Osborne who, shouting “I’m going to kill all Muslims”, recently attacked people at the Finsbury Park mosque in London, semantic coyness prevails. Terrorist? No, he’s “troubled” (*The Telegraph*). Did he get “troubled” by ubiquitous headlines like “Brit Kids Forced to Eat Halal School Dinners”?

What does routine hate-mongering say about the society which passively

condones it? Answer: it's mad. Well, that's if one accepts the WHO definition of good mental health as "a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community." But the mental health of late capitalist society is sacrosanct, even when its politicians are sociopaths and examples of their sociopathy abound from, say, the troika and how it went about its austericide in Greece, through to Theresa May who wants to exempt British soldiers from humanitarian law.

Last year more than 1.4 million people applied for asylum in Europe, mostly in Germany. More than 10 percent have suffered permanent changes to their personalities because of terrible experiences in war-torn areas including Syria, Iraq and Eritrea. Half the Syrian refugees have mental health issues. The noxious nature of social stress is highlighted in a study carried out at Maastricht University, showing that social exclusion increases the risk of psychosis by changing the brain's sensitivity to the neurotransmitter dopamine. Another finding in a range of studies, which fly in the face of malicious clichés, is that few mentally-ill migrants and refugees become violent.

Mental illness is inflicted on refugees as an indirect result of past and present practices of more privileged societies. These have brought about the traumatic reasons for leaving home, loss (especially of family members), nightmare journeys, and the grueling conditions of refugee camps. Resettlement torments—being denied culture, identity, home, social standing, and language, powerlessness, having to adapt to a strange environment, unsanitary conditions, inappropriate nutrition, and general hostility, not to mention the burdens of responsibility placed on children who learn new languages and cultural norms faster than their parents—only increase the likelihood of breakdown. One Texas-based neuro-

psychologist, Dr. M. K. Hamza, finding that PTSD does not adequately describe the suffering of Syrian children, speaks of a "human devastation syndrome". To make matters worse, mental disorders can gravely affect physical health. People with PTSD are twice as likely to have heart disease because permanent fight/flight anxiety accelerates the heart rate and adrenaline production.

Some 13,000 migrants and refugees, including more than 5,000 minors have been held in awful conditions in Greek islands for over a year, with no idea of what their fate will be and under threat of deportation to Turkey. Many, including young children, self-harm and attempt suicide. In 2016, the U.K. government reported that refugee suicide attempts had reached an all-time high (nearly 400 cases) and so has self-harming. After EU's refugee-warehousing deal with Turkey in an attempt to deter people from crossing the Aegean Sea, more refugees than ever are drowning: there may be fewer attempts but desperate people are using flimsier boats. Yet European leaders remain indifferent. And, this summer, far-right activists are planning to use their own boats to disrupt the work of search-and-rescue vessels.

It's a commonplace that structural factors like poverty, inequality, homelessness, and discrimination create feelings of insecurity and thus cause and aggravate mental disorders. So, logically, solutions should be sought in the system. Lack of financial security aggravates mental health problems in countries that are not affected by war or other catastrophes but the situation is infinitely worse for refugees. State policies for social and economic protection are crucial. This is confirmed by the results of projects in several parts of the world where populations were paid something approximating to an unconditional basic income.

In 1996, the tribal council of the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Nation in North Carolina voted to distribute half the profits of its casino evenly among approximately 15,000 members.

The payouts are now about \$10,000 per person per year. Jane Costello from Duke University, who has been studying the effects of these payments on 1,420 children over twenty years, comparing the lives of those who got the payments with those who didn't, has found inter alia that, in the former group, figures for mental health complaints dropped by nearly a third. In the mid-1970s "Mincome" experiment the Canadian federal government and provincial government of Manitoba gave a basic income to every resident of the town of Dauphin. Five years later, hospitalization for mental health problems had dropped dramatically. Another project in Kenya also showed that mental health improved with cash payments while, in a poor rural area of Namibia, the results of a two-year project exceeded expectations in terms of health, school dropout rates (from 40% to almost 0%), and a much more consolidated community.

The usual humanitarian operation provides food, medical assistance and minimal shelter but doesn't offer security or enable people to build new lives. However, with a strained budget, Andrew Harper, the senior UNHCR representative in Jordan, opted to give refugees cash grants so they can fend for themselves outside the camps. After starting in Jordan, the initiative now involves 1.9 million refugees in Iraq, Lebanon, and Egypt, and especially vulnerable groups like women-headed families. In Lebanon, 87,700 families spent the money on basics and keeping children in school. At the other end of the scale, Harper has cut his per-person costs by two-thirds.

In her article about Sweden's dead-in-life refugee children Rachel Aviv cites the Canadian philosopher Ian Hacking: "What makes it possible, in such and such a civilization, for this to be a way to be mad?" As Karl Jaspers foresaw long ago, technocracy is turning humans into pawns. The world's five richest men each own nearly as much as 750 million people and are pushing things like Galvanic Skin Response

bracelets to measure the engagement of schoolchildren (Gates), or wanting people to become cyborgs (Musk). The implications for intelligence as an autonomous critical power are unnerving. Human rights have no place here. And without the security of basic human rights, people tend to go mad. But the real madness is represented by the concentrated power of those five men. If refugees are to be helped, an old principle must be applied: physician, heal thyself. Meanwhile, Pervasive Refusal Syndrome might be the only sane response to a criminally insane system which keeps churning out, blaming and punishing refugees. **CP**

The Inauthentic Opposition There is No Real Left Now

BY PAUL STREET

During the Great Depression on the South Side of Chicago a recurrent incident would occur when the police came to do the bidding of some ghetto landlord by throwing an evicted Black family's belongings on the street. "Quick" the family's mother would say, "run and get the Reds." The "Reds" were the local Communists, who would rally a crowd to return furniture to the apartment from which it had been removed. Communist labor militants at the time were in and around every one of the city's major industrial workplaces fighting to form interracial industrial unions to help workers make wages that could match rents and other living expenses. The same was true in other United States cities.

Where is the contemporary U.S. version of "the Reds"? You can find inspiring local analogies, but they are few and far between

I'm always amused when I hear some Republican politician or media commentator refer to some great and powerful "Left," as in "the Left won't like Trump's tax cut plan" or "the Left can't stop screeching about climate change." What Left are they talking about? As Noam Chomsky told David Barsamian four years ago, "there is no real left now" in the U.S. "If you are just counting heads," Chomsky elaborated, "there are probably more people involved than in the 1960s, but they...don't coalesce into a movement that can really do things."

"We're not supposed to say it," Chomsky elaborated, "but the Communist Party was an organized and persistent element. It didn't show up for a demonstration and then scatter so somebody else had to start something new. It was always there and it was there for the long haul... That mentality is basically missing [now]. And it was during the 1960s, too."

The point still holds, sadly, for the most part.

The Osoffied and Inauthentic Opposition

For Republicans and their right-wing FOX News, Breitbart, and talk radio noise machine, "The Left" refers to anything

and anyone not as radically regressive, racist, and reactionary as them. This absurdly watered-down "Left" includes such leading establishment and militantly corporatist, neoliberal-capitalist institutions and personalities as the Democratic Party, the arch-imperial New York Times (onetime fetid hatchery of the noxious corporate uber-globalist Thomas Friedman), the "Public" (Pentagon?) Broadcasting System (a de facto arm of the Council on Foreign Relations), the Washington Post (a close friend of the Central Intelligence Agency), MSNBC (which ought to change its name to "MSDNC"), and even CNN.

But calling the dismal dollar-drenched Democrats and its many media allies "The Left" is like calling the National Pork Producers Association vegan. As House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) told a young CNN town-hall questioner last January, "we're capitalist and that's just the way it is." I won't waste word count demonstrating the Democrats' corporate, imperial, and objectively white-supremacist essence under Bill Clinton and Barack Obama—and how that essence demobilizes the party's onetime poor and working-class base to open the door for the ever more reactionary Republicans to hold top elected offices. I've undertaken that depressing assignment more times than I can recall (for my most recent contribution on that score, please see my recent essay "Beyond Inauthentic Opposition," *Counterpunch* online, June 30, 2017)

Leftish liberals like the best-selling author Thomas Frank (who fell strangely under the spell of Obama in 2007–08) call for the supposed "party of the people" to abandon its "corporate and cultural elitism" and "return" to its purported grand mission of "expanding opportunity, fighting for social justice, and ensuring that workers get a fair deal." When, the plaintive progressive cry goes, will they learn how to win?

But it isn't about winning for the dismal Dems, it's about serving corporate masters. As William Kauffman recently tried to tell Barbara Ehrenreich on Facebook, of all places: "The Democrats aren't feckless, inept, or stupid, unable to 'learn' what it takes to win. They are corrupt. They do not want to win with an authentically progressive program because it would threaten the economic interests of their main corporate donor base... The Democrats know exactly what they're doing. They have a business model: sub-serving the interests of the corporate elite."

We might add two things. First, the Democrats never were "the party of the people" (a useful corrective on that historical score is Lance Selfa's excellent study *The Democrats: A Critical History* [Haymarket, 2017]). Second, (as Frank shows in his book *Listen Liberal*, saddled with the unfortunate sub-title *Whatever Happened to the Party of the People?*), the Dems are captive not just to Wall Street and corporate donors but also to the professional class. They channel the stuck-up values and meritocratic ideology of professionals, who believe (with some noble exceptions) in strict social hierarchy and do not listen to below their power-serving "circles of expertise" (Frank).

So what if Bernie Sanders would have been more likely to defeat Trump than the depressing “lying neoliberal warmonger” Hillary Clinton in the general election? The Democrats preferred handing the presidency and Congress to the Insane Clown President and the ever more radical right over letting a progressive neo-New Dealer into the White House. That was the “Inauthentic Opposition”—as the late Sheldon Wolin termed in the Democrats in 2008—doing its job.

It made sure to try to cover its tracks by concocting two convenient if empirically groundless explanations for their seeming electoral dysfunction. The first excuse points to Russia’s alleged interference in “our” purported “great democracy. The second justification claims falsely that Trump rode a great wave of white working-class support to power (for the falsity of this narrative, see my recent essay “The Notion That the White Working Class Elected Trump is a Myth that Suits the Ruling Class,” Truthdig, July 7, 2017).

The recent doomed special election Congressional candidacy of the vapid, 30-something Jon Ossoff is a case in Kauffman’s point. Ossoff “durifully punched one item after another on the checklist of neoliberalism. He wanted” Jeffrey S. Clair noted, “to end waste in government ... to trim burdensome regulations stifling the old entrepreneurial spirit... to reduce the deficit and hectored struggling black families to demonstrate ‘personal responsibility’ if they wanted to get their federal benefits ... He remained opaque on the subject of raising the minimum wage to \$15 an hour... Bernie Sanders himself questioned whether Ossoff could be considered a ‘progressive.’” (St. Clair, “Democrats in the Dead Zone,” CounterPunch, June 23, 2017)

Still, Ossoff set new fundraising records for a Democratic Congressional candidate with no small help from “progressives” across the country.

Berned

Not that Sanders (accurately described as “pretty centrist” by no less a centrist than Obama last December) was or is much to write home about from a seriously Left perspective. Consistent with early warnings from unruly radicals like the present writer, Bernie never wavered from his sheep-dogging promise to deliver his supporters to the corporate war Democrats and their dreary standard-bearer, the “lying neoliberal warmonger” (Adolph Reed, Jr.) Hillary Clinton. Sanders’ occasional and carefully hedged claim to be a “democratic socialist” was contradicted among other ways by his embrace (with some minor qualifications) of the U.S. military empire. As the principled and actual democratic socialist Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. famously warned in the spring of 1967, failure to tackle the giant U.S. war budget (a vast mechanism of upward wealth transfer) means that you can’t pay for poverty-ending progressive transformation and social justice at home. Bernie F-35 Sanders has unsurprisingly played along with the Blame Russia card, helping his putative plutocratic enemies keep control of the party.

The imperial omission has infected many of Sanders’ most passionate supporters. At “The People’s Summit” held in Chicago last June, thousands of Sanders backers came together to advocate progressive social and environmental policies. As the Iraq War veteran and left activist and writer Vincent Emmanuelle noted, they remained eerily silent on the problem of imperialism. “If you’re not talking about U.S. Empire,” Emmanuelle writes, “you’re missing half the story. Bernie’s campaign was symbolic of this disconnect. Progressives who seek domestic reforms must address Uncle Sam’s role in the world, or they shouldn’t expect to accomplish much. After watching and listening to several panels and discussions from the People’s Summit, it is clear, to paraphrase Bob Marley, that half the story still isn’t being told.”

Electoralized

Along the way, Sanders has deepened progressives’ dysfunctional attachment to the nation’s narrow and strictly time-staggered election- and candidate-centered politics. “The really critical thing,” the great American radical historian Howard Zinn once sagely wrote, “isn’t who’s sitting in the White House, but who is sitting in—in the streets, in the cafeterias, in the halls of government, in the factories. Who is protesting, who is occupying offices and demonstrating—those are the things that determine what happens.”

“The only thing that’s going to ever bring about any meaningful change,” Chomsky told Abby Martin in the fall of 2015 “is ongoing, dedicated, popular movements that don’t pay attention to the election cycle.”

Bernie, a longstanding Democratic Party company man beneath claims of “independence,” was and remains about the masters’ election cycle.

Many on the portside regularly vote (it takes two minutes) for Green Party candidates (I do), but the Greens are hardly a consistent and effective voice on the Left. They direct activist energies into the quadrennial candidate-centered electoral extravaganza yet could not even crack 1% in the 2016 presidential election. The party’s all-time water high mark is 2.7% when it ran the progressive hero Ralph Nader in 2000.

Faked

Part of how folks fall prey to the illusion of the dismal Democrats as “the Left” is that the party is often adept at leftish “movement” affectation – especially when it is out of power and feels the need to pose as a party and/or movement of the people. With MSNBC’s arch-Russophobe Rachel Madoff in the propaganda vanguard, Democratic elites responded to the Trump ascendancy by concocting a fake “Resistance” devoid of any real progressive meaning beyond “bipartisan” opposition to Donald Trump. This pseudo-left faux-movement’s leading outposts include the transparent AstroTurf outfits MoveOn, the Town Hall Project, and Indivisible, all of which function as what a correspondent calls “mechanism[s] for co-opting the anti-Trump resistance and channeling opposition

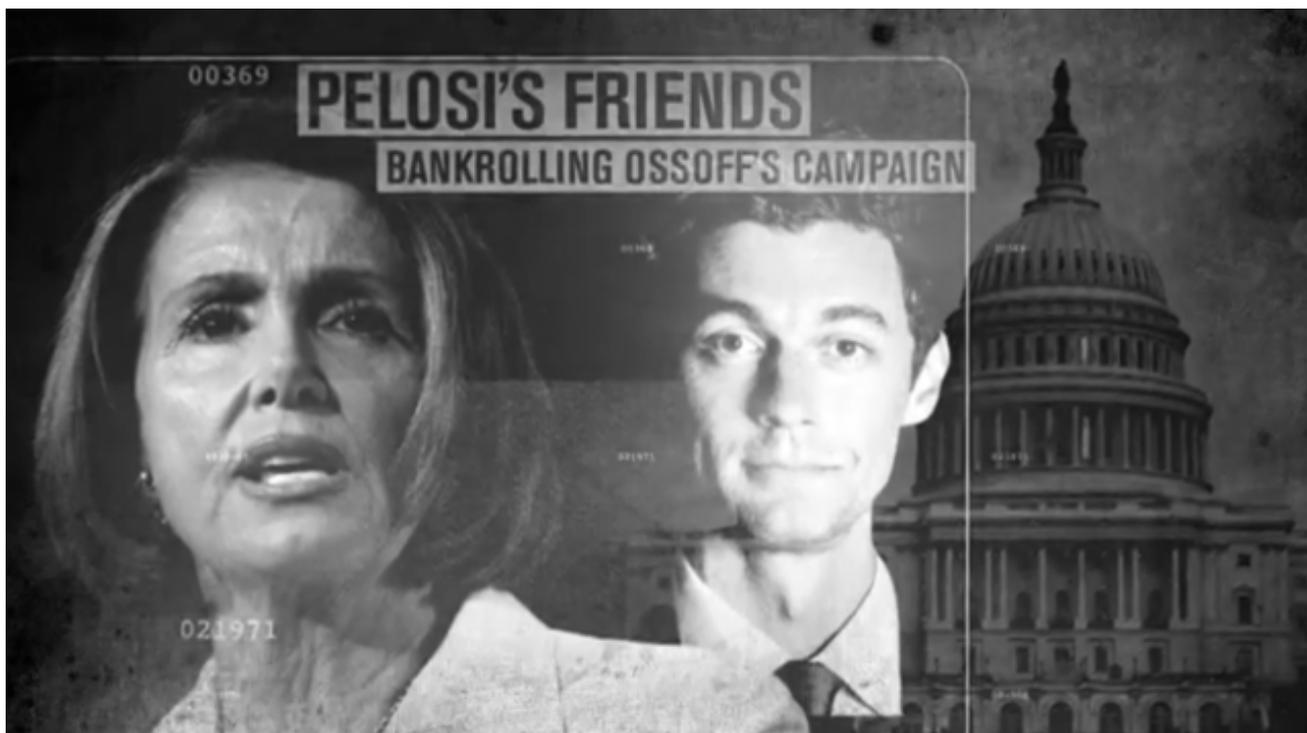
to Trump into support for the Democratic Party.”

By one activist’s account in Monterey, California, Indivisible “has had a devastating impact on local organizing. A broad-based and diverse coalition was developing here in the first few months after the election; it collapsed as soon as Indivisible appeared.” Further: “Indivisible is a well-funded AstroTurf group. It walks and talks exactly like it would if it had been deliberately designed by some joint DNC-COINTELPRO committee to channel popular outrage into support for the Democratic Party and for a war with Russia.”

I’ve received similar reports from other parts of the country. They all jibe with my own experience in and around Iowa City, where an initial upsurge of popular protest at Trump’s election and inauguration simply collapsed in the spring as

Democratic Party-affiliated uber-professional-class liberals and neoliberals.

The ivory tower’s gatekeepers tolerate only a scattered smattering of actual, Red-blooded Leftists. The last thing the money garnered from skyrocketing tuition is earmarked for is the employment of professors who would encourage students to look critically at neoliberal “higher education” regime and the broader structures of class rule and racial and imperial oppression it serves. Academic hiring and tenure committees who have any doubt about the educational authorities’ willingness to punish professors for becoming “too political” in the wrong kinds of ways can read about a growing number of cases in which Left academics (including even tenured ones like Ward Churchill) have been viciously



Still from an Anti-Ossoff ad.

Russiagate took hold. This was the Democratic Party playing its venerable role as “the graveyard of social movements.”

Mortar-Boarded

Part of what prevents the emergence of a serious Left in place like Iowa City (a classic university company town) is the soul-numbing power of academia. Among the many ludicrous things spouted on the U.S. right, few assertions are more ridiculous than the claim that the nation’s universities and colleges are leftist hotbeds. There are probably more former State Department, CIA, and Pentagon officials than serious Marxists and left anarchists holding teaching positions in U.S. colleges and universities today. The social sciences and humanities are infested with tepid, Identity-politicized

mortar-boarded: stripped of their positions and banned (like Norman Finkelstein and Stephen Salatia) from the academy for transparently political reasons.

Academia’s shift towards adjunct teaching and temporary contracts for a growing lumpen-professoriat creates a class of sub-academicians whose likelihood of openly challenging received doctrines within or beyond the classroom is reduced by the extreme tenuousness and precarity of their employment.

Not that tenure makes much difference. By the time most purportedly Left academics get it, they’ve given up the game. They’re not about to jeopardize their golden tickets by professing in seriously radical ways. Here in Iowa City, I witnessed “left” academicians respond to the rise of a local Occupy camp in the fall of 2011 with sheer classist disdain.

Union-Bossed

Things are even worse for real Leftists in the ever more marginalized U.S. labor “movement,” whose purge of its best and most radical organizers six decades ago is part of why it currently enlists less than 11% of U.S. wage and salary-earners (down from more than 40% in the 1950s), including just 6.8% in the private sector. Former Leftist trade-unionists tell horror stories about their efforts to fight for workers in U.S. unions today. The ones who haven’t quit or been fired from soul-crushing organizations like the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) require anonymity before they’ll tell you how their bureaucratic union superiors relentlessly betray the proletariat and sabotage the class struggle.

Siloed

A vast panoply of outwardly and sometimes substantively progressive advocacy, policy, and service organizations can be found across the U.S. But, as Les Leopold recently noted, they are badly crippled by single-issue-ism, related to do their budgetary dependence on private foundations

“For the last generation, progressives have organized themselves into issue silos, each with its own agenda. Survival depends on fundraising (largely from private foundations) based on the uniqueness of one’s own silo. Each needs to proclaim that its issue is the existential threat, be it climate change, police violence, abortion rights or health care. The net result of this Darwinian struggle is a fractured landscape of activity. The creativity, talent and skill are there in abundance, but the coherence and common purpose among groups is not” (Portisde, June 3, 2017).

At a much-ballyhooed “anti-Trump” gathering of young liberals and progressives I attended in Iowa City last February, one earnest young Trump resister” after another came up to speak listlessly about the little corner of the grant-funded activist and human service universe they inhabited. The meeting was an epic flop, distressing to behold as the monstrously plutocratic, racist, sexist, and eco-cidal Trump atrocity was setting up shop in Washington.

There are many multi-issue non-partisan progressive policy, lobbying, and protest groups in the Saul Alinsky and Citizen Action tradition across the nation. (An excellent example is Citizens for Community Improvement in Iowa). They tend towards a tepid reformism that carries no further than Bernie Sanders at the leftmost. Their 501c3 (non-profit) status prevents from openly identifying as Democratic Party-affiliated groups but that is what they are. Alinsky, it is worth recalling, was an anti-Marxist who told organizers to appeal to self-interest, not socialism and working-class solidarity. Real radicals who want to keep their jobs know to tread carefully when they work in the “progressive” non-profit sector.

Alphabetized

There are a large number of groups that call themselves “Marxist” in the U.S. – an alphabet soup whose various names and sectarian tendencies can be reviewed on Wikipedia. The most serious and healthy among these organizations are the ISO, Socialist Alternative, and Solidarity (I know good people in all three). Socialist Alternative has grown considerably in recent years, drawing strength from its successful campaign to elect the Marxist community-college teacher Kshama Sawant to the Seattle City Council. The ISO continues to hold a significant annual Socialism conference and boasts the often smart and informative Website Socialist Worker. But none of the nation’s officially Marxist groups have anything close to a large membership. Some of them almost seem designed to make people hate Marxism. Many of them spend more time tearing each other apart in sectarian squabbling than in organizing or inspiring anyone to fight the evils of capital.

Even the worst of these groups are healthier than the vast Internet army of unaffiliated hyper-alienated Americans (including a large and disturbing contingent of paranoid, conspiratorial, and 9/11-obsessed “Truthers”) who identify as Left as they rage, bitch, and moan online.

A number of Sanders supporters have migrated into DSA, the Democratic Socialists of America, which defines “socialism” as little more than good union contracts and civil rights. DSA pursues an “inside strategy” seeking to magically transform the Democratic Party into a champion of working people. Its online video “Thanks, Capitalism” says nothing about capitalism’s destruction of livable ecology or about its evil twin imperialism.

The nominally Trotskyist group Socialist Alternative got behind Sanders in the Democratic primaries and clung to the fantastic notion that he might run as a third-party candidate once the neoliberal Democrats defeated him. An Oakland, California comrade reported that SA leaders told members to keep their mouths shut “about his imperialist foreign policy, reactionary stance on immigration, refusal to amplify the needs/demands of people of color, etc.” (*Oakland Socialist*, November 23, 2015).

Left anarchism seems as fragmented, marginal, and sectarian as the Marxist left, though I did recently receive the following message from 63-year old Gordon Glick: “Young people are coming into the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) as societal and economic conditions deteriorate. I live in the Pacific Northwest, and we have several active Branches and many Wobblies at large...we are not restricted to one ideology except anti-capitalism.”

That’s good to hear but we have yet to see the re-emergence of a Left worthy of the label. Such a left would seek nothing less than what Dr. King called “the real issue to be faced” beyond “superficial” matters like the color or gender of a select number of people in corporate suites and elected offices: “the radical reconstruction of society itself.” It would be a highly

organized and durable through thick-and-thin movement with resilient institutions and cadres dedicated to revolutionary transformation.

Some Leftish Developments

None of the notable progressive and leftish phenomena of recent years – the Wisconsin Rebellion, Occupy, the Fight for \$15, Black Lives Matter (BLM), the Sanders phenomenon, Standing Rock – were hatched by any established and organized part of “the Left.” Assorted anti-capitalist Leftists led many of its campsites, but Occupy was called into action by the vaguely anarchist Canadian magazine *Adbusters*. Occupy left no real lasting movement infrastructure behind. We have no idea if the Occupy moment might have become a movement without the repression it faced in late 2011, but Occupiers’ excessive reluctance to building lasting institutional structures and to formulate concrete demands were certainly significant factors behind its rapid disappearance.

The Wisconsin uprising earlier the same year arose from public sector unions’ and Democratic legislators’ defensive response to ultra-right-wing Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker’s assault on public workers’ collective bargaining rights. Leftists flocked to the giant marches in Madison, Wisconsin in the name of the working class, but union officials and the state’s Inauthentic Opposition party cancelled the popular rebellion after a few weeks, crushing its radical potential. They defanged the struggle by channeling popular energies into a doomed major party-electoralist effort to recall Walker and replace him with the same dismal Democrat (Tommy Barret) he’d already crushed in 2010.

BLM emerged as heavily Identity-Politicized Black Queer online activists’ response to the racist murders of Trayvon Martin and Mike Brown. It has inspired and engaged many Leftists but it has been sadly subject to taming by (neo)liberal foundations and to working supinely with Democratic politics. Its primary presence seems to be on the Internet, not in Black communities. It shows few signs of becoming a militant force for multiracial working-class solidarity, Black revolution, or revolutionary change.

The Standing Rock struggle arose from North Dakota Sioux leaders’ struggle to protect water safety and ancestral rights against the eco-cidal Dakota Access Pipeline. It became an inspiring symbol both of Native American solidarity and of environmentalist opposition to the fossil fuel industry. But its Sioux leaders demonstrated no interest in building anything like an anti-capitalist movement. They stood down and dismantled their resistance camp before Donald Trump could try to clear it by force.

The Sanders phenomenon was set off by, well, Sanders, with some nudging perhaps from the left-liberal group Progressive Democrats of America). And it wasn’t all that left. Neither is the Fight for \$15’s main sponsor the SEIU, a top-down union that is close to the Democratic Party and a longtime dedicated enemy of single-payer health insurance

The Fight for \$15 had significant origins in the sparkplug activism of anti-capitalists who organized Starbucks and fast-food workers in major U.S. cities. It was championed effectively by Socialist Alternative and Ms. Sawant in Seattle. But the movement appears to have been largely hijacked by the SEIU and it’s not all that radical given the fact that full-time year-round work at \$15 an hour garners an annual income less than half the minimally adequate basic family budget for a single parent with one child in every U.S. city today.

An Ironic and Deadly Void

The relative (not absolute) Left void is disconcerting amidst a New Gilded Age in an ever more openly plutocratic nation where: the top tenth of the upper 1 Percent owns as much wealth as the bottom 90 percent; 15 million children (21% of all U.S. children) live at less than the federal government’s notoriously inadequate poverty level (more than 1 in 10 U.S. children ages 0–9 is living at less than half that level); half the population is either poor or near-poor and without any assets; millions drink from poisoned water systems; an imperial military devours more than half of all discretionary federal spending and accounts for nearly half the world’s military spending; more people are incarcerated (in extremely racially disproportionate ways) than in any nation in history (a curious achievement for the self-described homeland and headquarters of “liberty”); an unelected “deep state” dictatorship of money and empire is leading planet over the environmental cliff through the championing of endless growth and attendant “anthropogenic” (really capitalogenic) climate destruction.

The top thing missing in the “U.S. Left” isn’t a positive policy agenda or a vision of an alternative society. You can find both of those on the American portside, contrary to the standard sneering claim that lefties are only “against” things and not “for” anything. The main deficit is organizational and institutional.

In the year marking the 100th anniversary of the Russian Revolution, it is worth remembering that Lenin’s famous 1902 pamphlet *What is to be Done?* said nothing about reforms under capitalism (or under Russian Tsarist rule) or on what an alternative, post-capitalist society might look like. It was focused entirely on the question of revolutionary organization. You don’t have to be a Leninist to take heed.

This gap must be addressed in what is still the world’s most powerful and destructive capitalist state, in a time when five absurdly rich people now possess as much wealth as the bottom half of humanity, and the still U.S.-headquartered global profits system is speeding humanity to extinction. The looming specter of extinction through geocide may give ironic validation to Fukuyama’s notion of (neo)liberal capitalism as “the end of history.”

“If there is not future for a radical mass movement in our time,” Istvan Meszaros rightly argued 15 years ago, “there can be no future for humanity itself.”

Some good news: there’s no shortage of potential recruits

for a real Left. A recent Harvard University survey finds that 51 percent than half of U.S. Millennials (18-to-29-year-olds) “do not support capitalism,” intimately related to Harvard’s finding that half of the cohort thinks “the American Dream is dead” for them. Imagine. **CP**

PAUL STREET’S latest book is *They Rule: The 1% v. Democracy* (Paradigm, 2014)

The Military Beast Can NATO Still Make America Great?

BY RON JACOBS

Like so many other children of the Cold War, I grew up accepting the definition of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) provided by the U.S. government and its pliant media. In other words, I believed that NATO was a mutual defense treaty; a joint endeavor mutually agreed to by neighbors helping neighbors with a common goal of making the world better. According to this propaganda, NATO was created from a joint and equally shared desire to keep Europe free and democratic, just like we were told the United States was. The first time this understanding of NATO was challenged was when I attended a protest in Frankfurt am Main (where my father the Cold Warrior was stationed as part of the U.S. military’s NATO commitment) against the U.S. war on the Vietnamese. A German college student with a protest sign handed me a leaflet written in German. Using my intermediate skills with the German language, I figured out that the writers of the leaflet considered U.S. forces stationed in Germany to be occupation forces. This new perspective led me to begin reconsidering the nature of the military beast called NATO.

During his May 2017 state visit to several European nations Donald Trump managed to embarrass the U.S. power elites with his boorish and ignorant behavior. Whether it was his rather bizarre photo session with the Pope or his appearing to shove the Macedonian minister out of the way during another such session, the establishment media wags could not express their embarrassment often enough. It appeared that Donald Trump was the modern personification of the so-called ugly American. In a culture often driven by the obnoxious personality, Donald Trump was continuing his long-running act, only this time it was on a global stage and supposedly reflected on the rest of his fellow citizens. More interesting and potentially more historically important however, were Trump’s series of contradictory messages about the future of NATO.

Foremost among those comments was this: “I said a long time ago that NATO had problems. Number one it was obso-

lete, because it was designed many, many years ago.... We’re supposed to protect countries. But a lot of these countries aren’t paying what they’re supposed to be paying, which I think is very unfair to the United States.”

In one regard, Trump’s statement echoes a fundamental misunderstanding of what NATO is now and of the fundamental reason it was originally created, both of which are the same yet manifested somewhat differently. The American Interest—a primarily neocon journal dedicated to projecting their version of what the interests of the U.S. are—suggested in a January 2016 article that opponents of NATO included the following political views.

First, there are those who support an active U.S. international security role but view NATO as obsolete, and even as an obstacle to building a more relevant alliance structure. Second, there are of course those on both the Right and the Left who, for different reasons, believe that the United States should pull back from its international commitments and global responsibilities. Third, there are hawkish internationalists who believe that NATO unnecessarily constrains U.S. international freedom of action.

If I were to place the Trumpists inside these categories, it would be a mix of those with isolationist tendencies and those who are hawkish internationalists. If one is to believe Trump’s “America First” rhetoric, it would seem to locate Trump himself well within this latter group. After all, it’s not like he thinks U.S. forces should not be fighting wars around the world; it’s more that he thinks U.S. forces should be leading the charge and be able to invade, murder and occupy at will without any constraints from previous agreements reached by the United Nations or NATO.

Like the Monroe Doctrine written to declare US dominion over the western hemisphere, NATO is a child of the United States’ self-manufactured belief in its specialness. That is, NATO is but one more spawn of the conceit of American exceptionalism. Coming into being around the same time as the United Nations and the Marshall Plan, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization was designed with the intention of projecting US military power in western Europe and as a bulwark against the Soviet Union—the other big winner in World War Two. In 1948, when NATO was first established, a wave of anti-colonialism was sweeping the world. Furthermore, any anticolonial movement in the former colonies of Washington’s new allies was considered to be under Soviet influence. Consequently, that meant they were an enemy of the United States and its new alliance. In addition, other movements in non-colonial nations—like the Greek partisans fighting to overthrow the monarchy—were also considered part of the perceived Soviet drive to rule the world. In actuality, these movements were usually leftist and anti-imperialist, but not necessarily Soviet pawns. There was no way Washington and London were going to allow an anti-imperialist movement to sweep the planet, especially when Washington was planning

on becoming the new imperial power. Among other manifestations, this is clear from both nations support for the royalist and fascist elements of the Greek civil war; some of which had actively supported the Nazis during World War Two. Further manifestations of this anti-communism were the various covert operations like those undertaken by the newly instituted Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in the Italian election of 1947; elections which the communists would have otherwise won.

It may be difficult for some modern readers to understand just how deeply and intensely anti-communism informed the foreign and domestic policy of the United States after World War Two. Even comparing the current fear of “Islamic terrorism” with the anti-communism of the period in question fails to do the communist-phobia of that era in question justice. This fear of communism was institutionally driven by corporate America, which saw the appeal anti-capitalism might have on an exploited workforce. Driving the institutional fear were certain individuals: men like Richard Nixon, Joseph McCarthy, and John Foster and Allen Dulles come immediately to mind. The inclusion of the Dulles brothers in this shortlist is directly related to NATO’s construction as an anti-Soviet alliance. Even though career diplomat Dean Acheson is most often cited as a primary architect of NATO, it was the Dulles brothers who imprinted their anti-communist/anti-Soviet template on the organization.

Most of NATO’s western press coverage from its inception until the early 1990s speaks of a mutual agreement by several western European nations, Canada, Britain and the United States to defend one another if one of them is attacked. As noted previously, any attack that might have taken place was assumed to come from the Soviet Union. After all, it was that nation which was the biggest threat to Washington’s dreams of world hegemony. Even under this guise of mutual and equal commitment, however, it becomes clear that any such defense was certain to be under the direction and command of the leaders in Washington DC and the Pentagon. This was apparent in the postwar arrangements in the command hierarchy that was established within the organization and in the nature of its funding. Another telling point was the denial of membership to the Soviet Union, which first suggested just such a move in 1955. Perhaps most telling was the alliance’s insistence on opting for a nuclear defense instead of a conventional one. This meant that those nations with nuclear weapons would dominate the alliance; in other words, the United States and the United Kingdom would be in command. Of those two nations, it would be the U.S. that controlled the nuclear trigger.

Despite the clearly imperialist intention and practice of NATO in its original incarnation, NATO’s reinvention after the dissolution of the Soviet Union made that intention even clearer. Instead of searching for a way to end the mutual defense pact known as NATO, its leaders began searching for a new rationale for its continuation. After a speculative discussion in the media and various western legislatures in the

immediate period following the end of the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact, NATO leadership began to expand its reach. Newly autonomous nations of the former Soviet Union and member nations of the defunct Warsaw Pact were considered for inclusion in the organization. When eastern and western Germany reunified in 1990, NATO began its new envelopment of Europe in earnest. This was despite a well-publicized statement from U.S. and German officials that there would be no further NATO expansion towards Russia’s borders; a statement which was quickly ignored. It soon became obvious that the descendants of the Dulles brothers in Washington still considered the role of NATO to be the containment of Moscow, even if their ideological enemy was gone from that capital. In fact, the true nature of its purpose unveiled it as part of the machinery designed to prevent Russian influence from encroaching into Europe. Despite the eventual full-throttled turn to NATO expansion in the later 1990s, there were those in defense and diplomatic circles opposed to the move. Their main argument was that doing so would make Russia uneasy and possibly precipitate a new rivalry and consequent military buildup and arms race. Just like in 1955 when the Soviets suggested they be allowed to join the organization and were denied, it was the anti-Moscow element of the West’s foreign policy establishment that once more decided a military rivalry with Moscow was preferred to some kind of agreement focused on making peace. Given this, Russia’s request to join the alliance even as a partial member was denied again.

Another aspect of the post-Soviet expansion of NATO was graphically and bloodily displayed in the lands of the former Yugoslavia in spring 1999. After a series of demands from Washington and NATO that were considered ultimatums to surrender by the government of Serbia, NATO forces led by the United States began an aerial bombardment of Serbian and Kosovar installations, towns and cities. This attack was part of a new mission for NATO; using its member militaries to attack enemies of the United States under the pretense of humanitarian intervention. Although the first such foray was inside Europe, the subsequent military actions took place in nations quite far from Brussels’ NATO headquarters. The first was in Afghanistan, where NATO troops continue to occupy and fight in parts of the country. The second was in Libya, where a multi-sided war rages in the wake of the NATO removal of its leader, Muammar Gaddafi. All three of these engagements involved the murders of civilians and other non-combatants. All three of them met varying degrees of opposition from Moscow and Beijing, along with other nations.

Anti-imperialists and other opposed to NATO can dream that the Donald Trump White House will end NATO. However, they would most likely be deluding themselves. Trump’s criticism of NATO is centered on who pays for the maintenance of the militaries involved and the alliance’s administration. His calls for greater contributions from other signees to the alliance do not indicate a lesser participation from the United States. Instead, they presume (and are a call

for) an increase in military spending on the part of all nations involved. Given that the U.S. defense industry remains a primary (if not the primary) element of the U.S. economy and if one accepts the argument that it is the defense industry that guides U.S. foreign policy, the true motivation for Trump's demand becomes clearer. Trump and those who think other NATO member nations should contribute more money and armaments to NATO are merely pimping for the defense industry; the war machine that continues to drive the US economy. If Trump gets his way, and every NATO member nation were to meet Trump's call for a contribution equal to two percent of their national budget, overall European

by Trump and two days before the G20 Summit in Hamburg, Germany, is an indication of the U.S. defense industry's role in NATO's continued existence. An earlier agreement had already established an arms sale program that permitted NATO members to acquire and share U.S.-made military hardware with other members of the alliance. This latter initiative, signed into being on January 30, 2015 under the Obama administration, is known as the SmartDefense program and was designed in large part to ensure that the US arms industry "remains a major player in the European defense market." (DefenseNews, 2/4/2105) As of late 2016, at least two NATO member nations—United Kingdom and Italy—were among



NATO summit. Photo: NATO

defense spending would increase by at least \$100 billion annually. If Trump and his administration want to get more than their share of that money for the U.S. defense industry, he can do little but encourage NATO to continue. Otherwise, the U.S. share of those funds might shrink, with European and Chinese weapons manufacturers gaining the difference. Trump seems to have realized this fact and is acting accordingly.

Indeed, on July 6, 2017 the Associated Press reported that the Polish defense minister and Donald Trump had agreed to an eight billion dollar sale of Patriot missiles to Poland. The announcement, made the day before a state visit to Poland

the top thirteen purchasers of U.S. manufactured armaments.

Donald Trump is known for making contradictory statements, often within the same speech. His remarks concerning NATO are no exception to this pattern. As I write this, Trump just completed a visit to Poland to begin his second visit to Europe since his January 2017 inauguration. As noted in the opening of this article, Trump's first visit was marred by various controversies. Beyond the etiquette miscues and unusually boorish behavior in certain instances, there was Trump's failure to restate Washington's commitment to the mutual defense commitment stated in Article Five of

the NATO Charter. This failure, intentional or not, set off alarm bells, especially amongst the liberal/neoconservative establishment, whose dependence on the status quo is what informs their entire political and economic existence. When stacked atop Trump's friendly comments during the campaign about Russia and its leader Vladimir Putin, what appeared to be his lackluster support for NATO stoked fears of a major realignment in the way the powerful run the world.

As if to allay those fears, one of the first things Trump said in Poland during his most recent European visit was quite explicit in this regard: "The United States has demonstrated not merely with words, but with its actions, that we stand firmly behind Article 5, the mutual defense commitment." In this same speech, he also echoed the neoliberal/neocon conceit that Russia needs to stop meddling in other nations' affairs. Among the other nations he listed were at least a few that the United States has been "meddling" in for at least as long as Russia—Syria, Ukraine, and Iran. Essentially calling the U.S. intervention in those nations a civilizing force, he called on Russia to join the U.S. and other such "responsible nations" in their fight to "save the West." Besides the disturbingly chauvinistic appeal to some kind of western supremacy, the expressed sentiment certainly sounds like a continuation of Washington's ongoing battle of words and intent with Moscow. Given this, it does not sound like much will change in terms of the historic relationship between these two capitals. Furthermore, if NATO is to be the projection of US power in the world and Russia is to be its primary opponent, then it would be pointless to fundamentally alter that.

Much was made about the meeting between Trump and Putin at the G20 summit in Hamburg, Germany. While anti-imperialist, anti-fascist, pro-immigrant, and other protesters were attacked by heavily armed police outside the Red Zone created by security forces to keep the people away from the rulers of the capitalist world, those rulers discussed how to maintain their control. The contradictions of this endeavor are plenty, with different power blocs and individual nations vying for domination over the rest. While the United States continues to hold on to its role as the leading capitalist economy, the truth of the matter is that that hold is considered tenuous. However, it has minimal concern over losing its place as the largest and most lethal military power. NATO remains one of the numerous means created to ensure this dynamic continues.

Despite the interconnectedness of the world capitalist economy, the nation-state is not dead. In fact, it seems to be experiencing a rebirth in this second decade of the twenty-first century. The Russian assertion of its territorial and national aspirations, the British exit from the European Union, the rise of nationalist political parties, and the occupancy of the U.S. White House by "America-First" Donald Trump are all indicators of this. Donald Trump's campaign promise to "make America great again" certainly includes the maintenance and expansion of the U.S. Empire. as part of the "greatness." This

remains true no matter what his isolationist supporters might hope. That being so, the question then is not whether the U.S. military will be stationed around the world, including in the NATO countries, but under what guise that presence will be maintained. Will NATO continue to be the military vehicle for the Empire in Europe and elsewhere or will Trump and his group of imperial bureaucrats come up with a different model to accomplish a similar end? In other words, will they re-invent the wheel if that wheel is still functioning how it was designed to function? No matter what happens—and at this writing it looks like NATO will remain—Washington's drive for world hegemony in Europe and beyond will continue. **CP**

RON JACOBS is the author of *Daydream Sunset: Sixties Counterculture in the Seventies* published by CounterPunch Books.

Skin Problems & That Old Time Religion

White Supremacy, Not Jesus, May be Your God

BY LAWRENCE WARE

Recently I decided to visit a popular, contemporary church that tried earnestly to be neither a 'black church' nor a 'white church.' After being conspicuously silent about race and racism after the Charleston shootings some time ago (the church did not so much as post on their social media sites that they were praying for the victims. Instead, they posted videos about their upcoming sermon series), the black pastor of this multicultural church decided to tackle the issue of race in a sermon series—I had to attend.

After a praise and worship session that took great care to be neither overly black in the singing style nor song selection, the pastor began the sermon by saying something I've heard many times before—something I hoped I would never hear come out the mouth of a person whose lived experience of race in America provides a lens through which to read the Bible critically. He said, "Racism isn't a skin problem, it's a sin problem."

By this he meant that it could be remedied by interpersonal interactions with people of different ethnicities. He went on to provide possible solutions to racism. He suggested that people of different races should have dinner together and engage in conversation about their lived experience. White folks in the crowd clapped their hands approvingly. Black folks in the audience shook their head as if they had just heard words from on high.

Many people go to church to get prayer. Yet, as a philosopher and ordained minister who tries to use my two callings to push people to address racism and inequality in this

country, I left church needing someone to pray be back into a peaceful place—especially when I saw the make up of the church. It was full of black Christians. This was clearly not a “black church.”

The Black Church

Historically, black churches have played a unique role in American life. More than any other institution, these houses of worship were where black folks could consistently go to find comfort, affirmation, and community. Hymns and spirituals gave voice to our cries as they soothed our souls. Loving embraces and words of kindness buttressed us against a culture that communicated hostility toward our lips, hips, and skin pigmentation.

In the words of W.E.B. Du Bois, it is the only black institution that remains “unbought and unbosomed.” Therefore, it is no surprise that these places of worship were ground zero for black movements seeking positive social change, and it is this activism that made the physical spaces that house black congregations targets of white supremacist violence.

What is colloquially called ‘The Black Church’ is actually many communities of faith that share a cultural heritage and has historically been populated by people of African descent. There is neither formal connection nor intentional structure to these tangentially connected, mostly protestant churches.

What all of these churches do have in common is that their very existence speaks to the ability of black people to persevere despite a white supremacist culture—but let’s not sanitize history.

Historians put the percentage of churches that actively supported Martin Luther King, Jr. at around 15%. Many clergy were critical of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. There were concerns that King was moving too quickly, and that he was only interested in publicity. There were also conservative parishioners in certain churches who did not want their middle-class existence (and lives) endangered by the actions of “radical” clergy. When King started to focus on the North by asking hard questions about economic inequality and the war in Vietnam, divisions in the black community only deepened.

There has never been a unified, holistic position taken by ALL black churches on the issue of civil rights. Yet, while there were always secular elements in civil rights movements, it has rarely been almost exclusively secular. The philosophical rationale for these movements was expressed with religious language, and the black church played a pivotal role as a place to meet and organize. Why, now, when a new civil rights movement is gaining momentum as a result of highly publicized police murders of unarmed black men and women, is there relative quiet from some black churches? Why are these churches reactive in the face of social injustice instead of proactive? Why does it appear that black pastors are hesitant to support the #BlackLivesMatter movement? I think there are three reasons.

1: The Prosperity Gospel

Part of what’s so insidious about capitalism is its malleability. In prosperity theology, the notion of communal liberation from social oppression has been combined with capitalistic notions of individualized wealth creation. As a result, liberation now means access to wealth and social status.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Kenneth Copeland, Frederick Price, and Kenneth Hagin used the burgeoning platform of televangelism to popularize a problematic conception of the gospel. Contemporarily, preachers like T.D. Jakes, Joel Osteen, and Creflo Dollar articulate a version of the prosperity gospel grounded in a postmodern, self-help hermeneutic to millions of people.

When oppressed people are told that God wants them to be “blessed and highly favored” or that they need to “take back what the devil stole from them,” they are being fed the idea that capitalistic gains are the goal of religious life. Grace is measured by the size of one’s bank account, and faith is determined by one’s ability to attain creature comforts. Creflo Dollar has gone so far as to say that the only way one can have influence in America is through signs of wealth, and that is part of the reason why he needed a new multimillion-dollar jet. (God would clearly be displeased if a preacher flew coach.)

Thousands of black preachers saw the success of this type of preaching, and were influenced by its message. As a result, many black churches are so tied to an understanding of blessedness and liberation grounded in personal success that they have difficulty galvanizing collective social action. On any given Sunday, a version of the prosperity gospel is preached from hundreds of black pulpits. This mishandling of the gospel keeps many black Christians from thinking productively about communal social liberation.

2: Adoption of Church Growth Models

Adopting the church growth model of ecclesiastical operation undermines progressive social action as well. The church growth model, popularized by conservative religious think tanks like The Barna Group and The Francis A. Schaeffer Institute, emphasizes making the worship experience palatable and entertaining. This model prioritizes growing a church numerically and financially, not organizing for social action or political advocacy. The goal is to create as large a church as possible. There is a focus on providing “cradle to the grave” services for your membership, treating the church like a business enterprise. You rarely look outside the walls of the church. The few times you engage your community, you do so for either evangelical efforts (that is, to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ) or to engage in brief moments of charitable outreach. Whereas the church was a place for people to be pushed to confront the harsh realities of race and racism in America, it is now a place where you go to hear an encouraging sermon that will help you achieve your personal (often economic or romantic) goals.

This approach leads to pastors that are concerned about pushing their people too far. If there is too much talk about topics that are unpleasant, they risk losing members (and their economic base). This leads to black pastors who preach entertaining sermons lacking in prophetic critique and sociological depth. We emphasize how to achieve God's blessings and overcome personal difficulty, but fail to confront systemic injustices. This leaves black Christians ill equipped to respond to assaults upon black dignity from a white supremacist culture.

3: Patriarchy

Today's activists are intersectional. They seek links in systems of oppression. As a result, many are unwilling to work



Trump and the evangelical leaders. Photo: White House.

with institutions, like some black churches, that they see as morally compromised.

Many black pastors decry racism and economic injustice while supporting ecclesiastical policies grounded in patriarchy. They think the Bible supports their position. Indeed, Paul uses masculine language in 1st Timothy 3: 1 and 2 when he says “if a man desires the position of a bishop, he desires a good work” and “a bishop then must be...the husband of one wife” (NKJV). These passages appear to endorse marginalizing women in the church. That is a misreading of the text. Paul is expressing his personal preference in this pericope, a preference shaped by a viciously patriarchal culture. Further, many scholars argue that Paul was addressing an issue specific to the congregation that received the letter. In any case, we misread the text if we infer that all women are precluded from working in ministry.

In the 1980s, after being taken to task by womanist theologians, James Cone admitted he made a mistake by placing an emphasis on men in *A Black Theology of Liberation*. In the 20th Anniversary edition, he courageously includes essays from Delores Williams and Rosemary Radford Reuther that critique his silence about misogyny in the church. Like Cone, many black clergy need to confront their patriarchy.

In *The Exodus Project: Why Some Black Women are Stepping Out on Religion—and Others Should Too*, Candace L. M. Gorham notes that women are the lifeblood of black ecclesiastical communities, but men hold most positions of power. She points out that there are still many pulpits that women cannot enter. She is right. If black churches want to be morally consistent, they must be intersectional. One cannot demand justice in one arena and perpetuate injustice in another. In other words, many black churches have allowed the damaging influence of white supremacy to damage their prophetic witness. In order to understand that influence, we need to turn our lens toward the ‘white church’—especially in light of the rise of Donald Trump.

White Evangelicals and Donald Trump

Two weeks into Donald Trump's presidency, I had to turn off the news alerts on my phone.

Each time I received a news alert, I would get anxious because I did not know what the hell 45 was going to do next. He had already tried to ban folks from coming into the country, and his inner circle of advisors were looking more and more like characters out of an episode of *24*—so I decided to engage in self-care. I deleted all the news apps off my device.

In the past few months, America has had a constitutional crises because of the attempted expansion of executive privilege with, lets call it what it is, the ‘Muslim ban.’ We have seen a stark increase in ICE raids targeting ‘illegal immigrants.’ Further, we have seen a failed attempt to strip millions of Americans of their health coverage. This, ironically, was happening during the MLK holiday, even though King once said: “Of all the forms of inequality, injustice in health care is the most shocking and inhumane.”

All this points to a clear fact: Donald Trump is an evil man who engages in evil behavior and was put in office by evil people.

I don't know how anyone can see what he is doing and judge him as either competent or working for the best interest of everyone in this country. To see his actions and approve of them uncovers a deep moral deficiency. No one thinking clearly should see what is happening at 1600 Pennsylvania Ave and be pleased.

That's why I was confused by what I heard from a leader in the white evangelical community.

“I think evangelicals have found their dream president,” Jerry Falwell, Jr., president of Liberty University, said on the Fox News show “Justice With Judge Jeanine.”

Falwell said “reuniting Israel with America” and placing “people of faith” in the administration were reasons evangelicals were supportive of Trump. “In fact,” said Judge Jeanine “78% of white evangelicals said they approved of the Job Trump is doing in the White House.”

That took me by surprise—but it shouldn't have. According to the Pew Research Center, 78% of white evangelicals—that

is to say, white folks who say they love a brown skinned, first century Palestinian radical, approve of Trump's first 100 days in office.

For all of their talk about embodying the love of Jesus Christ, the actions of white evangelicals drown out their words. They may say 'love the sinner but hate the sin,' yet, how they treat gay, queer, and trans folks let me know there is nothing but hate in their hearts for people they claim to love. They may say they are 'pro-life,' but the way they vote and who they support informs me that they are hypocrites comfortable with stripping away healthcare from people ravished by illness while they turn a blind eye to the way the police take black life with little more than a slap on the wrist as punishment. They may say they are not racist, but they, as a block, approve of a man who is unapologetic in his racist rhetoric and white supremacist policies. This represents a hallmark of the 'white church' historically. In many cases, there is an ungodly level of comfort with discriminatory practices.

Differing Lens

There are nuanced differences between black and white approaches to Christianity in America. A person who has lived on the underside of the American democratic experience because of their race is likely to understand the Bible and God differently from those who have reaped its benefits. In the same way that both the slave and the slave owner prayed to a divine being but their understanding of God differed radically from one another, black churches and white churches have historically had very different understandings of what it means to be a Christian. Black churches have historically been on the cutting edge of social justice movements as it relates to race and economic inequality. It is this black interpretive lens that explains why people like Nat Turner, Bishop Henry McNeal Turner, Richard Allen, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. felt so strongly about social injustice. Their understanding of God was of one who is not interested in merely having people of different ethnicities be nice to one another—black folks see God as a person who is interested in liberation.

That is why that pastor angered me so. He was asking those who have access to whiteness and the privilege it brings to merely tolerate black people. That does not bring justice; it does not bring liberation. To liberate those who are marginalized because of racism is to commit to a fundamental change to the structure of this country. Those who are racially profiled and sentenced under mandatory minimums because of the war on drugs are in need of liberation. Black and brown folks who are disproportionately in poverty relative to white folks are in need of liberation. Black children who disproportionately attend decrepit and underfunded schools are in need of liberation. Black women raised in a culture that sees them as unattractive because their skin is dark and their hair is coarse are in need of liberation. Even older Black men who constantly wear wind-suits with dress shoes and leather baseball hats are in need of liberation—and saying racism is

a sin problem that we can solve by being kinder to each other serves the purposes of white supremacy because it does not force white folks to come to terms with the way they may contribute to institutional racism in the decisions they make at work and the way they vote at the polls.

If you attend a Christian church, black or white, that has little to say in support of the movement for black lives, if your pastor has called for prayer in regard to unity but has not pushed the congregation to engage in social protests to address the systemic nature of racial injustice, then white supremacy, not Jesus, may be your god. If racism is, indeed, a sin problem and not a skin problem, then someone needs to repent. And by someone, I mean America. **CP**

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The Fires of Neoliberalism The Thatcherite Roots of the UK's Social Housing Crisis

BY KENNETH SURIN

The massive fire which engulfed London's Grenfell Tower causing several dozen fatalities (the official death toll has not yet been released) opened the eyes of countless Brits.

Somewhat accustomed to hearing or reading about such conflagrations in (say) Lagos or Dubai, but not London or Doncaster, some Brits saw the fire and its aftermath as an opportunity to shine a broad-beamed spotlight on the hitherto overlooked UK housing crisis.

This crisis has been decades in the making, as have the conditions which led to the immolation of Grenfell Tower. At the time of writing, *The Independent* reports that "at least 181 high-rise buildings in 51 different local authorities have now failed fire safety tests". Buildings at three hospitals have also been found to have combustible cladding.

As with so many of the U.K.'s current problems—the housing crisis, growing socio-economic inequality, a broken welfare system, a crippled and underfunded health service, an education system on its knees, a lightly regulated and largely out of control banking and financial sector, massive cuts to the public sector including the emergency services, deregulation of building-inspection protocols, the creation of a "business-friendly" climate and all that this entails, a ramshackle railway system, over-priced utilities, the virtual destruction of the legal-aid programme, the hollowing-out of local government, and so on—we must look to this or that policy introduced by Margaret Thatcher for its (and their) origin.

Some of what Thatcher did was symbolic—she made a point of never using the National Health Service (being able to afford private health insurance after marrying the multi-millionaire businessman Denis Thatcher) or public transport—but the rest was the outcome of cold and deliberate calculation.

Even Blair and Brown's New Labour shared the Conservative party's relish for slashing regulations. In 2005 New Labour passed the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order which ended a requirement for government inspectors to certify that buildings had met fire codes, replacing such inspections with a policy of self-policing.

Given the age-old and worldwide catastrophic record of this thing called "self-policing", one must howl with sadness or laughter, or both.

Why not let motorists "self-police" the speeds at which they drive? Or let restaurants "self-police" their safety standards?

The Tory government of the previous prime minister "Dodgy Dave" Cameron decreed that at least one regulation had to be removed for each new one adopted, and officials in charge of fire safety quickly toed Dodgy Dave's line. To quote *The New York Times* in its illustration of this policy shift:

"If you think more fire protection would be good for U.K. business, then you

should be making the case to the business community, not the government," Brian

Martin, the top civil servant in charge of drafting building-safety guidelines, told an

industry conference in 2011, quoting the fire minister then, Bob Neill. ("Should we

be looking to regulate further? 'No' would be my answer," Mr. Neill added.)

Even after the Grenfell fire, the government's Cabinet Office website continues to reflect this hostility towards meaningful regulation: "Businesses with good records have had fire safety inspections reduced from 6 hours to 45 minutes, allowing managers to quickly get back to their day job".

The crux here of course is that with inspections cut to a mere 45 minutes, we can be damn certain that in a very short time just about any business could prove itself to have a "good" safety record!

The U.K.'s housing crisis began with Thatcher's decision to sell-off social housing. In August 1980, her first government produced a Housing Act whose aim was "to give ... the right to buy their homes ... to tenants of local authorities".

Social housing was sold off at deeply discounted prices, while tenants who continued to rent faced steep rent increases and a deliberate loosening of security of tenure, all intended to give existing tenants a big incentive to purchase their rental properties.

Thatcher's decision led to the U.K.'s current housing crisis and helped lay the ground for the 2008 financial crisis. It fed the U.K.'s growing economic inequality, worsened housing market affordability, and caused housing supply deficits. All

these were magnified by an austerity policy and welfare cuts which continue to this day.

Over two million properties were sold-off by local councils because of Thatcher's policy.

Housing experts, city planners, some economists, and social policy analysts, warned of a future housing disaster from the beginning.

Most of the properties sold under Thatcher's "right to buy" policy would not remain in the hands of their original purchasers. In those boom years for the housing market, property ownership invariably translated into rising equity, which enabled many owners to "trade up" in the housing market. Moreover, in time, an owner's old age, illness and death would also place properties on the market.

Once on the market, these properties were snapped up by commercial landlords eager to enlarge their property portfolios, who of course had the financial resources to outbid those in need of housing, but who lacked the capital to compete on an equal footing with wealthy commercial landlords.

Almost inevitably, a housing crisis ensued, accompanied by burgeoning economic inequality.

The U.K. economy has grown since 2010, but, according to the *Guardian*, 7.4 million Brits, among them 2.6 million children, live in poverty despite being from working families (constituting 55% of these deemed poor)—an increase of 1.1 million since 2010–2011 (i.e. the first year of austerity).

The same *Guardian* article discusses a report produced by the highly regarded and independent Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF), which shows that the number living below the Minimum Income Standard—the earnings, defined by the public, required for a decent standard of living—rose from 15 million to 19 million between 2008/9 and 2014/5. The U.K.'s population is 65 million.

These 19 million people, or just under 1/3rd of the U.K.'s population, are its "just about managing" families (JAMs).

And here's the rub—an important contributory factor in creating this appalling and inexcusable situation for JAMs and the destitute who are even worse-off, the JRF said, was the increased number of people living in basically unaffordable private rental properties, with the number of people in poverty in private rentals doubling in a decade to 4.5 million.

"Failures in the housing market are a significant driver of poverty", the JRF study said. "This is primarily, but not entirely, due to costs". The number of rental evictions has risen by 60% over 5 years to 37,000 annually.

Many of the poor living in private rentals would not be in this situation if adequate social housing existed—they are poor because they must pay rip-off rents to commercial landlords if they want a roof over their heads.

While the U.K.'s poor are being shovelled into a bottomless pit, a massive upwards transfer of wealth from lower-tiered income earners to the top has been occurring. According to the Social Market Foundation, in the U.K.:

"... the average wealth of the best-off one-fifth of families



Trump and the evangelical leaders. Photo: White House.

rose by 64 per cent between 2005 and 2012–13.

“However, the SMF found the poorest 20 per cent are less financially secure than they were in 2005, with their net wealth falling by 57 percent and levels of debt and use of overdrafts increasing. Homeowners have raced ahead of people in rented accommodation...”

The Equality Trust, citing 2014 data from the Office for National Statistics, said the majority of the U.K. population (66%) hold no positive financial assets at all, while the remaining 34% hold £9trillion in such assets.

According to the Guardian, U.K. household income is now falling at its fastest rate since 1976.

As was the case in the U.S., the 2008 financial crisis in the UK was preceded by the bursting of a housing-market bubble. Thatcher’s flooding of the U.K. housing market with sold-off social housing was accompanied a few years later by her overnight “Big Bang” deregulation of London’s financial sector in 1986.

As was the case in the U.S., deregulation involved abolishing the firewall between high-street commercial banking and investment (i.e. speculative) banking, as well as the introduction of electronic trading.

Files released by the U.K.’s National Archive show that

Thatcher was warned beforehand of the consequences of this deregulation: “Sir Robert Armstrong, the Cabinet secretary, expressed fears of “unscrupulous” money-making and “a bubble that will be pricked in a year or two”.

The sage Sir Robert was proved correct by what followed.

Private landlords, and foreign speculators, with ample holdings of cash, bid-up real estate prices. Rising property “values”, and the foolhardy expectation that this rise would continue “forever”, coupled with a decade-long central bank policy of artificially low interest rates and easy credit, added oil to the fire. To quote from a 2008 article in *The New Statesman*:

“Fuelled by irresponsible bank lending, U.K. house prices nearly tripled in the decade to 2007—a more lunatic rise even than in America. British prices have been running at nearly eight times average earnings against a historic average of 3.5. This was never going to be sustainable. But right at the moment the bubble burst, in August 2007, a combination of related events conspired to turn this boom into an epic bust that is likely to consume the British economy and lead to a depression. You may think the credit crisis is over, but the real crisis is just beginning.”

The New Statesman continues:

“Believing that house prices would rise for ever, and that even if they faltered the Bank of England would cut interest rates to reinflate the bubble, the banks began to lose any sense of financial risk, and started to relax credit standards and lend irresponsibly. Private-equity firms were allowed to borrow huge multiples of their real assets. Banks started to hide their lending in off-balance-sheet devices such as structured investment vehicles.

“As house prices fall, this all turns into reverse. Loans de-leverage, derivatives degrade, margin calls are missed. The total value of British residential property is about £3trn. Nearly £1trn of this will now disappear over the next few years if prices fall by 30 per cent.”

Thatcher and her followers were determined to fight a class war, albeit under such disingenuous slogans as “putting the ‘great’ back in Great Britain”. Her party continues this war to this day.

In 2017, one in three Tory MPs are private landlords.

72 Tory MPs, including Theresa May’s new Minister for Policing and Fire Services Nick Hurd (himself a landlord), voted against recent legislation requiring that rental properties be “fit for human habitation”.

The U.K.’s housing market is one colossal racket, providing an enormous trough at which bankers, commercial landlords such as Nick Hurd, and Tory politicians such as the self-same Nick Hurd, gorge themselves while the inadequately housed and homeless look on.

When it comes to the U.K.’s housing crisis, and the dreadful Grenfell Tower fire, there is a royal road leading from Margaret Thatcher (whose mansion in Dulwich was registered offshore so she didn’t have to pay tax on it), via Tony Blair (himself a multimillionaire landlord) and Gordon Brown, to Theresa May and her shameless sidekick Nick Hurd.

Why, oh why, do so many Brits continue to vote for these self-serving bastards? **CP**

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The Bloodbath in Vietnam Was Us Hue Back When

BY MICHAEL UHL

For Mark Bowden, author of *Hue 1968*, the pivotal battle of the War in Vietnam did not follow the script most Americans were used to scanning in their newspapers or visualizing on the evening news. The war Americans followed at home was like a humongous hunting expedition. U.S. forces seemed engaged in an endless chase over a lush boondocks inhabited by peasants and dotted with rice paddies or trailing the rugged forested highlands in search of the Viet Cong, a

cunning and elusive enemy whose tactics were hit and run, not stand and fight.

When an atypical fixed battle developed, it was typically well-removed from the population centers that hugged the coastline off the South China Sea. Vietnam was, after all, a guerrilla war, or more broadly understood, a people’s war fought to reunite a nation, artificially divided into North and South by fiat of the United States in the service of geopolitical brinkmanship. Accused of fermenting the southern insurgency, North Vietnam was mercilessly bombed, but spared the carnage of a ground war. Not so the south where, by whatever foul means, the idea was “to isolate the population from the Viet Cong,” notwithstanding that, as Mark Bowden readily concedes, “in most instances they were one in the same.” The resistance was popular and widespread, and its idea was to drive the American invader out, and overthrow a despised ruling clique of Vietnamese compradors which survived only because the invader had committed hundreds of thousands of its own troops and billions of its taxpayers’ dollars to sustain it.

Americans were consistently assured that bit by bit the tumultuous countryside was being pacified, and the guerillas attrited, both politically and as a fighting force. In late 1967 Americans were told they were winning the war. When Tet—the Luna New Year—dawned on January 31, 1968, that illusion was irreparably shattered. The vastly superior forces of the United States and its southern catspaw, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), were caught virtually flat footed when thousands of regular troops of the People’s Army of North Vietnam seemingly materialized from thin air, and in coordination with local units of the southern resistance, launched up and down the length and breadth of South Vietnam what was quickly branded the Tet Offensive. The most stunning blow for Americans, war managers and citizens alike, was an assault on the South Vietnamese capital of Saigon taken right to the walls of the American Embassy.

For several weeks thereafter, media attention in the U.S. and throughout the world focused primarily on the shock of Saigon’s vulnerability, overplaying its significance. A thousand kilometers north, at first scarcely noticed, even by the Commander of U.S. forces, General William Westmoreland, a battle had commenced that would become the “longest and bloodiest” of the war, not waged over the—till then—familiar rural topography, but house to house, street by street, culminating in one of the most intense chapters of urban warfare in the annals of American military history. Observers today might liken it to a more recent urban free-for-all entangling American troops in Fallujah, Iraq. Or, better yet, recall a U.S. military fiasco in downtown Mogadishu that Mark Bowden had crafted into an earlier best seller. To the extent comparisons hold, the Battle of Hue was like Black Hawk Down on steroids.

Hue 1968 is a comprehensive account of that battle written

in the page-turning style of popular narrative non-fiction. The author has assembled a cast of eyewitnesses who participated in the action, Vietnamese and Americans, and the battle unfolds in recollections mined from their interviews, and, for the departed, from other primary sources at his disposal, such as lengthy wartime correspondences. Bowden has properly set the strategic stage for his action in the context of the war's two most relevant contemporaneous developments. There was the very fact of Tet, simultaneous attacks with varying degrees of effectiveness on virtually every population center and military base in the South. The Year of the Monkey came in like Armageddon, catching General Westmoreland, for one, completely off guard even though he later claimed he knew those crafty commies were planning something.

To draw attention away from their true intentions, the North Vietnamese had executed a feint, keeping a remote Marine encampment under heavy bombardment at Khe Sanh near the border with Laos, and just below the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). Taking the bait, and just two weeks before Tet, Westmoreland weakened his coastal enclaves by detaching troops to reinforce the beleaguered camp. The American general believed he was luring the North Vietnamese into a repeat of the battle of Dien Bien Phu, which in 1954 brought French colonial control of Vietnam to an end but inadvertently opened the door to an American invasion. This time, Westmoreland fantasized, "he was determined to prevent history from repeating itself." That battle never developed, and several months later, Khe Sanh was abandoned by the Americans.

Westmoreland's obsession with Khe Sanh apparently prevented him from fully grasping that Hue, South Vietnam's third largest city, and former Imperial capital, had fallen to the Liberation Front in less than twenty-four hours. This pattern of disbelief was moreover pervasive up and down the American chain of command. At Phu Bai, a Marine base less than fifteen miles south of Hue, the commanding general, with improbable symmetry named Forster LaHue, repeatedly ignored reports on the size of the force his counterattack would face, and insisted that, instead of thousands, their number couldn't possibly exceed more than a few hundred. Could a force as large as the one being reported enter and occupy the entire city that quickly and virtually undetected? Through some of his most original reporting Bowden reconstructs exactly how that occurred.

Shifting the action in his account from one adversary to the other, Bowden begins with the attack, describing how four regiments totaling roughly four thousand uniformed NVA soldiers managed to infiltrate the border between North and South Vietnam, rendezvous with local guerrillas in a force of equal size, and ultimately bivouac on the outskirts of Hue. "It was the kind of troop movement," comments Bowden, "that could remain secret only if the citizenry supported it, or didn't care enough to sound the alarm."

Certainly in Hue there were many Catholics who, in general, were partisans of the Saigon regime, not to mention a contingent of elite ARVN soldiers stationed there, who would have sounded the alarm if they'd been aware of any imminent threat. On another side was a strong current of anti-Americanism among the Buddhists and the student body at Vietnam's prestigious Hue University, who two years earlier had combined and rioted against the repressive South Vietnamese government, and burned the library of the United States Information Service. But by early 1968, Hue was being little frequented by the war's violence, and hopes were stoked that the city's rich stock of architectural treasures, not least the palace of Vietnam's last royal dynasty, might avoid destruction. Compared with the rest of the country, life in Hue was reasonably good, and reasonably safe. A degree of political complacency had set into what remained a functional commercial entrepot where trade and traffic on Hue's iconic Perfume River remained brisk.

Even though a majority of Hue's population of 140,000 could not be considered pillars of the revolution, an underground resistance network was well-entrenched in the city and highly motivated. And Bowden, having tracked down a small cast of survivors, gives us affecting sketches of, among others, the Village Girl who guided the troops through the darkness and pointed them toward their targets; the VC commander who stood up to the hero of Dien Bien Phu, General Vo Nguyen Giap, and revised the battle plan; the college boy who worked with his fisherman landlord to smuggle arms into the city by sampan; the Buddhist poet turned what we would call 'information officer,' and Bowden—who holds many conventional opinions—calls "propagandist;" but my favorite was the balsy little guy who was given the task to create a giant new flag for the victors to raise once they'd taken the city.

The flag detail merits a special nod to illustrate the contrast between the high tech m.o. of the Empire's war machine, and the endless improvisation of those in the Front who used gumption, imagination and stealth to their advantage in the face of overwhelming fire power from air, land and sea. The task to create a flag to be seen, not as "an invasion or occupation, but rather as a liberation," fell to Sargent Cao Van Sen, an old war horse who'd fought with the Viet Minh against the French, joined the northern Army, and was then ordered back to his native Hue to organize among the Viet Cong. The idea of the flag, Bowden says "was to recognize real political differences between North and South," with a design that represented, not only the liberation forces, but also "the intelligentsia and the city's religious factions—Buddhists and Catholics." Hanoi's political objective at that stage was transitional, "to establish a neutral, independent South Vietnam," leaving reunification to future negotiations." Sgt. Sen's job was to line up the material, a sewing machine and a seamstress to produce a single flag, which, when completed, required two

men to carry it. After being “run up the 123-foot flagpole... that stood just outside the royal palace before the Citadel’s southern wall... it was visible all over Hue” when the city’s denizens awoke January 31st on the first morning of Tet.

Metropolitan Hue spread over both sides of the Perfume River, and the Front’s objective was to occupy the zone on the south bank called the Triangle, and, on the north, the Citadel, an “enormous fortress that enclosed nearly two square miles... its walls twenty-six feet high and impenetrably thick,” and enclosing the neighborhoods of Hue’s most affluent residents. Primary targets, included the air strip inside the Citadel, the province headquarters, the treasury, the post office, the prison, the radio station and “the sole American

to unleash a “popular uprising,” it was General Kinh’s opinion, according to Bowden, that no such uprising would occur, not even in subdued and occupied Hue, given the certainty of an overpowering American counter-attack. Kinh knew his forces “could take the city, but... not hold it for long. Achievable goals... were to destroy the ARVN division, and... round up... those who represented the Saigon regime... who were marked for arrest and punishment.”

The subsequent executions of many of these Saigon officials is thematic in Bowden’s text, an overly eager retailing of the ex post facto justification among the war’s apologists for the American decision to rescue their allies by destroying their city. More informed observers might counter that for an



Battle of Hue. Photo: DoD/National Archives.

base, the [Military Assistance Command, Vietnam] MACV compound.”

The Commander of the Front, General Dang Kinh watched from high ground to the west, anxiously awaiting the assault to begin. Finally, “throughout the city arose the sound of gunfire... scattered at first, and then as if touched off by a fuse, it rose rapidly to a din.” By the time the shooting stopped, the attacking force, having “suffered only a few casualties, had dealt Hue’s defenders a crushing surprise blow.” The only major targets not overrun were a fortified redoubt occupied by the 1st ARVN Division inside the Citadel, and the MACV compound on the opposite side of the river, both heavily under siege.

Notwithstanding the loud cheerleading from Hanoi for Tet

American writer of Bowden’s stature to lay charges of mass murder at the Vietnamese resistance—in this instance taking blood retaliation on enemies considered legitimate military targets—demonstrates a highly hometown cast of mind, and a failure to do the math on the infinitely less selective assassination orgy of the U.S. Phoenix Program, not to mention the war’s vastly unbalanced human death toll perpetrated upon the Vietnamese population by the invader.

Kinh’s prediction proved correct. And much of what Bowden encapsulates in Hue 1968 is devoted to a ground level view on just how the city was retaken. Bowden fully examines first January 31st, the day Hue fell, from a variety of vantage points including civilians and combatants on both sides, then moves the battle forward in week long blocks until the

Front, faced with annihilation, is forced to withdraw. Had the U.S. command acted more swiftly, the lives of many marines might have been spared, but the city faced devastation in every scenario as long as the occupiers remained. The initial counter-thrust came from the nearby Marine base at Phu Bai when General LaHue, still doubting his adversary's vast numerical superiority, initially dispatched so few marines that, on one of few occasions during the war, the U.S. was seriously out-gunned. When a marine captain already in Hue called for air and artillery strikes to dislodge the entrenched enemy, General LaHue told him "rather strikingly that he was over-reacting." LaHue "saw no reason on earth why the more than four hundred men in the [MACV] compound, reinforced with well over three hundred U.S. marines," assorted tanks and heavy weaponized vehicles, "should not be able to flatten anything between them and the fucking Citadel." Bowden aptly titles this episode *An Idiotic Mission*.

Three hundred men represented one understrength marine battalion, but only a single unit, Alpha Company of the 1st Battalion of the 1st Marine Division was dispatched at first to test the enemy strength. This proved a disaster, and the best account of the action on the ground I've found was not Bowden's, but in *Vietnam-Perkasie*, a memoir by W.D. (Bill) Ehrhart. When Alpha Company left Phu Bai just as the sun was coming up, Bill Ehrhart was given the option of staying behind. He was short, meaning only a few days remained on what had already been a harrowing thirteen month tour. But since the unit was just going to check things out, and were told they'd be back by evening, Bill threw caution to the wind.

Alpha Company, moving to relieve the assault on the MACV compound passed a gas station on the city outskirts, and then, Ehrhart writes, "all hell broke loose... The shock of the ambush caught the whole column completely by surprise... We knew the compound lay straight up the road... seven blocks ahead... We fought our way up the [first] block. And the one after that. All day long we inched up the street. Casualties were appalling. Wounded and dead Marines lay everywhere." Ehrhart, wounded in action, was in the thick of it the whole time. His memoir is a compelling, heart wrenching read.

From there Bowden covers the fighting chapter and verse. And if battle action is your genre, it's a read that's hair raising enough to fix your attention. The killing went on for 26 days, and by the end, 80% of the city lay in rubble. Bowden devotes a last chapter to Hue's human toll. "Two-hundred and fifty American marines and soldiers were killed, and 1,554 wounded ... The Front's losses are estimated at between 2,400 and 5000 ... A conservative guess at those executed would be two thousand... [which] brings us to a combined civilian death toll of about eight thousand ... not an exact figure, but to the degree it's off, it's off by being too low."

That the civilian death toll was enormous, cannot be doubted, and is by most accounts I've read over the years attributed to the terrible pounding the city took from naval

off-shore guns, and from American and ARVN air power and artillery intent on expelling the Front whatever the human cost. As for "those executed," it appears as if Bowden may have that figure "off" by a factor of ten. Writing in *The New York Times* in October 1972, Richard Barnet, a former State Department official and co-founder of the Institute for Policy Studies, quotes what the Hue Police Chief told a correspondent of *The Times* of London in March 1968 just days after the battle. The Chief, "Doan Cong Lap estimated the total number of executions at 200." Moreover, "the local Catholic priest reported that none of his clergy or parishioners were harmed by the N.L.F. [National Liberation Front]," who had been given instructions to be on their best behavior. Even if these two eyewitnesses under-counted the reprisal deaths, it's still unlikely that Bowden's figure holds water, given his reliance on official U.S. sources.

Richard Barnet took up this topic at a time when voices in the Nixon administration were claiming that mass executions at Hue were proof there would be a bloodbath if the U.S. withdrew and the communists came to power. When questioned on this in Hanoi, Premier Pham Van Dong retorted, "There is nothing in recent Vietnamese history to suggest that a government bent on killing hundreds of thousands of people in South Vietnam can keep peace." In any case the bloodbath was us. As Barnet dryly quipped, "In the Orwellian age, the daily saturation bombings of Indochina are defended as missions of mercy."

Mark Bowden seems to bend over backwards throughout this voluminous and valuable book to provide a two-sided perspective on a particularly tragic moment in the Vietnam War. But there's something distastefully familiar in his throw-away rhetoric of the Cold War bias that got us into Vietnam in the first place. Bowden demonstrates how truth is betrayed by the words he chooses, for example, that "antiwar activists in the States romanticized Ho Chi Minh, and his cause, emphasizing his nationalist character... [but] Hanoi was Communist, authoritarian to the core... ruthless and doctrinaire." Yet even this phobic reflex to honor the thought police in the mainstream where he prospers doesn't cause Bowden to ignore that it was the Stalinists who hoped to come to power through the ballot box and the Americans who made war to prevent that.

By consensus in the school of conventional wisdom the Tet Offensive of 1968 was the turning point of the Vietnam War, after which the American war aim was not to win, but how to get out. Mark Bowden makes an excellent case that the fulcrum of that turning point was the Battle of Hue. But what if there was no turning point? In Vietnam the protracted war to expel a powerful foreign invader had its roots in millennia past; the American invasion was just another bump in the road. **CP**

Michael Uhl is the author of *Vietnam Awakening*.

CULTURE & REVIEWS

Give And Take

BY LEE BALLINGER

“One of the most surprising facts of charity in America is that the people who can least afford to give are the ones who donate the greatest percentage of their income,” wrote Ken Stern in *The Atlantic*. “In 2011, the wealthiest Americans—those with earnings in the top 20 percent—contributed on average 1.3 percent of their income to charity. By comparison, Americans at the base of the income pyramid—those in the bottom 20 percent—donated 3.2 percent of their income.”

This may speak to the milk of human kindness flowing through the veins of those who don't have much else to share, but it definitely doesn't mean America's ultra-wealthy aren't interested in charity, even if it's only for reasons that are hardly charitable.

“From 2003 to 2013, itemized charitable donations from people making \$500,000 or more increased by 57 percent,” David Callahan writes in *The Givers: Wealth, Power, and Philanthropy in a New Gilded Age*, “while itemized contributions from people making \$10 million or more increased 104 percent. One study has predicted that nearly \$27 trillion will be donated to charity by American estates from now until 2061.”

There has been a great increase in riches at the pinnacle of the American pyramid. The wealth of the Forbes 400 has grown by 2,000 percent since 1984. Nestled among the 400 are many of America's most active philanthropists. Between 2005 and 2015, just the increase in their fortunes has been phenomenal. For instance:

Koch brothers: \$76 billion
Walton (Walmart) family:
\$70 billion

Warren Buffet: \$25 billion
Nike's Phil Knight: \$17 billion

These people, whom Kenneth Saltman, author of *The Gift of Education*, terms “venture philanthropists,” prattle on endlessly about how they want to help the world, about their own selflessness. But their selves are doing just fine.

Billionaire and former New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg has given away hundreds of millions of dollars, yet he still owns a private jet and some thirteen properties around the world—estates in London, Bermuda, the Hamptons, and Westchester County. Bloomberg spent \$103 million of his own money on his final race for office, or about \$183 per vote.

Pete Peterson, a billionaire banker who, in his role as philanthropist, generously funds attacks on Social Security and Medicare, lives in a \$38 million “apartment” in Manhattan.

Bill Gates has promised to give away most of his \$80 billion fortune. The Gates Foundation is the largest grant giver in the world and employs 1,400 people. Yet Gates has a little something left over. He lives in a 66,000 square foot house worth over \$100 million.

In 2015, Mark Zuckerberg and his wife Priscilla Chan pledged to use 99 percent of their Facebook shares to make the world a better place. The shares were worth \$45 billion, yet Z&C will never have to want for anything—they will always have a ten (or is it eleven?) figure financial cushion to fall back on.

While all billionaires are presumed, at least by the mass media, to be hardworking Horatio Algiers who've pulled themselves up by their bootstraps, the reality is that to give, the philanthropist must first take. Take from employees (some of whom are sweatshop workers

or incarcerated prisoners), take from the public treasury (tax breaks and subsidies), or take from the earth. Texan George P. Mitchell, dubbed “the father of fracking,” became a billionaire from that parentage. He gave away hundreds of millions of dollars during his life and, when he died in 2013, he left over \$800 million to a foundation he named for himself.

Why do the VPs (Venture Philanthropists) give so much money away? First of all, to keep more of it. “Google and Facebook—companies that were founded by active philanthropists and that also engage in extensive corporate charity—have both engaged in elaborate tax avoidance schemes using offshore subsidiaries,” writes Callahan. “Apple, which has lately been celebrated for its big turn toward philanthropy under CEO Tim Cook, is an even worse offender, pioneering new forms of tax avoidance that have allowed it to stash billions in profits in foreign tax havens.”

ProPublica's Jesse Eisenberg, writing in the *New York Times*, blasted Zuckerberg and Chan's creation of an LLC as an umbrella for their foundation, which allows them to avoid taxes as well as oversight since LLCs don't have to disclose their activities. According to Kenneth Saltman, for every ten dollars given by the Gates Foundation, four dollars is lost from the public wealth in taxes.

Many VPs make big donations to right wing foundations (and get a tax deduction for doing so). Ditto for JP Morgan's \$10 million gift to the New York Police Department.

But tax avoidance reflects only the financial shenanigans of fat cats and corporations individually. The main action in the philanthropy game comes from the top tier as a whole acting in its class interest.

As the *New York Times* recently

noted, science has become “a private enterprise.” And that private enterprise is increasingly determined by what philanthropists will fund. UC Berkeley’s Energy Biosciences Institute is the unholy spawn of a \$500 million deal with British Petroleum. In return for its money, BP gets to decide which research projects get funded. At MIT, the university’s Energy Initiative is almost entirely funded by fossil fuel companies. MIT has also taken \$185 million from oil billionaire and climate denial fanatic David Koch, who is a Life Member of the university’s board.

Philanthropists often decide who lives and who dies. David Callahan contrasts New York Presbyterian Hospital, with its dizzying array of specialized care centers funded by billionaires, to the situation “a few miles north in the Bronx, where men have the lowest life expectancy of nearly anywhere in New York State—often dying from causes that could have been prevented if only they had access to basic health care.” Callahan summarizes: “Helping out the hospitals and health clinics in the city’s poor neighborhoods has never been of much interest to wealthy donors.”

Venture capitalist Tom Perkins has given away millions of dollars to medical institutions, universities, and the San Francisco Ballet. Perkins also likes to point out that he has been knighted in Norway for his “remarkable” humanitarian feats. What’s more remarkable is that Tom Perkins has compared the media’s focus on income inequality to the Nazis’ perpetration of Kristallnacht. While this loathsome characterization may be offensive to Perkins’ fellow VPs, none of them disagree that income inequality must be maintained.

John Arnold was a trader in derivatives at Enron who was so good at his job that he received an \$8 million bonus from the company in 2001, the year Enron collapsed. Arnold dodged that bullet, started an energy hedge fund, and became America’s youngest billionaire in 2007. You might think that his personal lifetime security and

his experience at Enron—destruction of \$2 billion in employee retirement savings—might have made young John sympathetic to retirees. Nope. Arnold started a foundation, named it after himself, and pursued pension “reform” (cutting pensions) with a vengeance.

“David Sirota, a writer for the tech website *PandoDaily* revealed that PBS and its New York affiliate had accepted \$3.5 million from the Arnold Foundation to help produce ‘The Pension Peril,’ a series that echoed Arnold’s dire pension prognostications,” Benjamin Soskis wrote in *The Atlantic*... A few weeks later, Sirota brought to light a \$500,000 grant that the foundation had made to the Brookings Institution that helped support a report that laid out possible political strategies toward cutting pension benefits. Sirota also highlighted a \$4.85 million grant the foundation made to the Pew Charitable Trusts that underwrote a report on the public pension system focusing on the need to reduce retiree benefits.”

Universities, once regarded as citadels of reason, bastions of critical thinking, are becoming little more than pawns on the chessboard of the one per cent. In the past six years, with the state of Michigan under the control of governor Rick Snyder, the man who poisoned the water in Flint, the budget for Wayne State in Detroit has been slashed by \$75 million. The school then accepted a \$40 million donation from Mike Illitch, owner of the Little Caesar’s pizza empire and of the local pro hockey and baseball teams. There were strings attached. Illitch and his wife Miriam were formally given input on curriculum and on “aspects of the educational experience.” Forty million dollars wasn’t much to Illitch, not when you consider that he had already received hundreds of millions of dollars in subsidies from Detroit taxpayers for his businesses. Billionaire Charles Koch made a large donation to Florida State on the condition that he could decide who was hired and fired by the school’s economics department.

The most popular recipient of philanthropy money for schools is education “reform,” a nice way of describing the privatization of public schools. Fueled by an ocean of cash from philanthropists, a nationwide push has resulted in the establishment of the Common Core curriculum with its mania for rigid testing, not to mention an epidemic of charter schools. The results of education becoming just another investment opportunity have been predictable, at times almost comical. There are now ads for Oreo cookies in math textbooks at the same time that Microsoft attorney Joel Klein became the head of New York City Schools, which then coincidentally got a large grant from the Gates Foundation.

The adoption of Common Core unified what had been a fractured fifty state mess into a single national market for education, providing a standard to evaluate students at every school in the country. This market was estimated to be worth \$18 billion a year at its inception. Microsoft and other corporations immediately jumped in to grab the cash.

Among the top funders of education reform efforts are Bill Gates, the Walton family, and Eli Broad. Broad, the only person to have created two Fortune 500 companies, was once America’s biggest homebuilder. L.A., where Broad lives, is ground zero in the nationwide battle over education reform. The *Los Angeles Times*’ education coverage is funded in part by grants from a number of foundations, including the Broad Foundation.

The ultra-wealthy are no longer content with simply buying influence. They want direct control. According to marketwatch.com, just 62 people own as much wealth as half the world’s population. Those 62 people are not about to let the impoverished masses have any say over what happens in society. Our democracy has always been stunted, partial, and corrupt. Now we live as best we can under the autocratic rule of a democracy for billionaires and billionaires only.

Is this an exaggeration? Consider that from the mid 1960s until 1981, Congress appropriated an average of \$626 million per year for the Land and Water Conservation Fund, which was charged with financing the creation of parks throughout the country. Between 1982 and 2007, that average fell to \$62 million per year. In 2015, Congress moved to eliminate the program altogether, under pressure from the likes of the Heritage Foundation, which receives \$100 million annually from so-called philanthropists, who in turn receive a tax deduction.

Meanwhile, media mogul Barry Diller and his wife, fashion designer Diane von Furstenberg, have been working to build a “public” park on Pier 54 in lower Manhattan (the pier where Titanic survivors landed in New York). Dubbed “Diller’s Island,” the park will be controlled by Diller himself. He and his wife will kick in the majority of the money in return for a tax deduction but the project, located in an area that includes multimillion dollar condos and fancy office buildings (including von Furstenberg’s business digs) and already has two major parks, will also require \$40 million in public money for completion. “In New York’s poorer neighborhoods,” David Callahan writes, “hundreds of parks have fallen into disrepair and badly need upgrades.”

Warren Buffett’s son Peter questioned capitalism itself in a 2013 *New York Times* op-ed piece. Buffett the Younger expressed outrage over how “lives and communities are destroyed by the system that creates vast amounts of wealth for the few” and the fact that the “charitable-industrial complex” works to perpetuate such inequities. The real goal of giving, says Peter Buffett, should be to “shatter current structures and systems that have turned much of the world into one big market.”

But the people who are in a position to give away enough money to move the needle have that money precisely because of society’s “inequities.” They are the people who not only financially and politically benefit from the

“charitable-industrial complex” but created it in the first place. Those in a position to benefit from turning the world into “one big market” are not about to “shatter current structures and systems.”

Even the most worthy exceptions to philanthropic sleight of hand prove the point. Rap mogul Dr. Dre recently gave \$10 million to help fund a new performing arts complex in his hometown of Compton. That’s all well and good, but what about all the cities which need performing arts complexes and don’t have connections to a billionaire like Dr. Dre?

Philanthropy is not the answer. The answer is a society where charity is unnecessary because everyone’s needs are met by a “structure and system” of universal prosperity, one guaranteed by law, custom, and daily fact. **CP**

Where everybody’s affording the necessities

Nobody’s hungry, thirsty, or roofless

Where the old and toothless got dental benefits

Benefit concerts not necessary because we’re all rich

Even regular folk can survive off of being broke

Soak up soap operas and novellas

Cause that’s the only drama

—Cory Cofer aka Besskepp

LEE BALLINGER’S new book, *Love and War: My First Thirty Years of Writing*, is available as a free download at loveandwarbook.com. You can listen to his podcasts at <http://feeds.feedburner.com/LoveWarPodcast>

Dunkirk: Bodies. Rest. Motion.

BY ED LEER

Christopher Nolan’s *Dunkirk* is perhaps the filmmaker’s most pure iteration of all his cinematic vision thus far.

I walked out of the theatre feeling like I’d just taken an intimate photochemical bath with the lush, 70mm print and emerged a new man. Light years from the Dark Knight Trilogy, *Dunkirk* is lean, yet fierce, no doubt a mirror of Nolan’s headspace after years of building up good credit with Warner Bros., the studio he’s worked exclusively with since *Insomnia*. He’s finally taken the baby gloves off and gotten back to the formal fun of *Memento*, set within the constructs of a wartime epic. However flawed Nolan’s larger work has been, what’s important, like the soldiers trapped on the *Dunkirk* beach, is that he survived with enough courage and spirit to deliver a powerful reaction to today’s middling blockbusters.

The film opens mid-action, the young soldiers rising from what can only be assumed was a German air strike. They wander the empty streets of *Dunkirk*, looking for water in old hoses and a secluded place for a bowel movement. One starts to realize how young these boys are in their oversized army uniforms when the bullets start picking them off. A young private, Tommy, (Fion Whitehead) makes it past the English barricade and onto an overcast beach with a long pier. This is...

The Mole: A land of British and French servicemen trapped and easy prey to any Germany fighter plane. Not ideal for an hour, a day let alone an entire week.

The Sea: Over the course of the final day of the siege, A civilian boat captain heeds Churchill’s call and heads out across the English Channel to rescue the soldiers, along with his son and a local boy.

The Air: In the final hour of the siege rescue, three RAF pilots head their Spitfires to battle the Luftwaffe over *Dunkirk*.

With these three different story strands, Nolan weaves a temporal tapestry that expands and contracts, giving it the feel of a living organ, accelerating to its last breath. There is a similar trick in *Inception* wherein time functions differently depending how many levels

deep into the dream world one goes. The difference being he has done away with any auspice of science fiction, instead using the conceit to show the subjectivity of time. Life moves slower for those on land, a bit faster at sea, and breakneck when up in a WWII fighter plane.

While the effect is thrilling, what is

concern itself with much dialogue or character history. It is a film of physical process, like *A Man Escaped* or *Pickpocket*, the simple act of opening a door plays a crucial role in survival for hundreds of drowning soldiers.

And survival is what *Dunkirk* is all about. It is a moment of military defeat, but becomes transcendent in this loss.

didn't matter, as long as the hero cared about it. This becomes obvious in such no-brainer action films like *Taken* wherein Liam Neeson's daughter is only as important as how many people we see him kill to get her back. She is the helpless sheep and he is the sheepdog, a man of unseen aggression and violence who acts in the service of good.

In *Dunkirk*, Tommy is the center of the film, but he's also the McGuffin, which the sea captain Mr. Dawson and BAF pilot Farrier race towards trying to save. On their way to Dunkirk, Mr. Dawson picks up a soldier stranded on the wreckage of a boat, shell-shocked and despondent. Later in the film, but earlier in the narrative, the same soldier is shown in a position of authority, barking orders at Tommy from a lifeboat. Not only does this orient the audience to the sequential order of events. This helps the audience understand the timeline of each story, but it also shows



photo: Ford Foundation

Nolan trying to say, that each duration receives the same amount of real estate? Is one hour in the life of a fighter pilot worth as much as a week for the soldiers below? This was probably not the intention, but these questions arise in cinema, where time is such a valued commodity. This is especially true of larger-scale films, where the more active, in-motion the on-screen figure is, the more the audience is captivated. In this way, *Dunkirk* is subverting the Hollywood Blockbuster.

Nolan has stated that he was heavily influenced by the work of both Hitchcock and Bresson, two filmmakers whose work seems a bit incongruous at first glance. Hitchcock's chubby fingerprint is all over *Dunkirk*, with each set piece generating a new round of high-wire suspense. It is not immediately apparent how Bresson's brand of spiritual minimalism shows itself. Like Bresson's films, *Dunkirk* does not

There is a line in film where a soldier says, "All we did was survive." To which an old blind man responds, "That's enough." This, more than anything else is where *Dunkirk* owes its greatest debt to Bresson. The heroes of *Mouchette* and *Au Hazard Balthazar* are not active protagonists, but they do exist, suffer, and endure, all building up to a single, beatific moment of transcendence. It is rare to find a film of as massive as *Dunkirk* with such empathy about how hard it is to simply live. This is not to say the ground forces merely sit around. In fact, their struggle turns inward, as one group becomes trapped in an even smaller enclosed space, bringing out paranoia and ugly mob mentality near the climax.

Going back to Hitchcock, who famously introduced the idea of the McGuffin, the narrative mechanism that drives the action forward. For Hitchcock, whatever the McGuffin

how fluid power structures can be. The strong become weak, and vice versa.

In spite of this dynamic, or perhaps because of it, Nolan presents his fellow countrymen as one, unified front. Although the soldiers stranded on the beach today are the ones who need rescuing, they will also be the ones who go back into battle tomorrow to defend the Commonwealth. There's a reason why the enemy has no human face in the film, as if the true antagonist aren't the Germans, but the fear, paranoia and desperation that festers in a world void of hope and compassion. These are familiar ideas in Nolan's oeuvre, but with *Dunkirk*'s stripped down style, never before has such a slick, studio product felt so human and personal. **CP**

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