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**TREATING CIVILIANS AS EXPENDABLE** | Norman Solomon  
**TAKING A STAND AGAINST 24-HOUR ECONOMY** | Rebecca Gordon  
**LIFE ON THE MISSISSIPPI, 1969** | Dell Franklin

Issue 230

# ColdType

WRITING WORTH READING ■ PHOTOS WORTH SEEING

January 2022



**WHALES COULD  
SAVE THE CLIMATE  
(UNLESS THE MILITARY  
KILLS THEM FIRST)**

**PLUS - JOHN PILGER AND JONATHAN COOK ON THE AGONY OF JULIAN ASSANGE**

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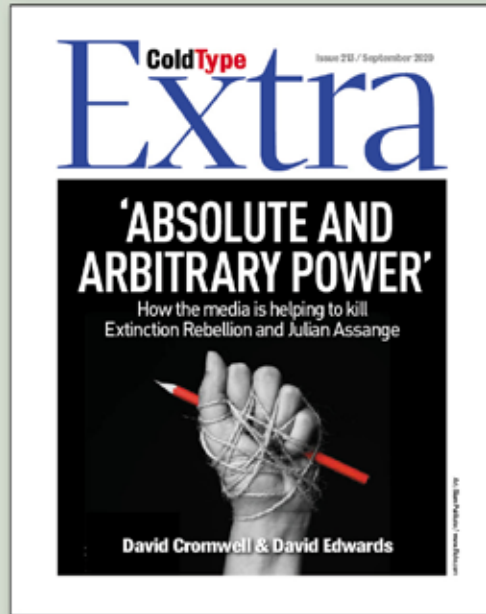
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# THE TRIALS OF JULIAN ASSANGE



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NEWS | VIEWS | OPINIONS

# INSIGHTS

NORMAN SOLOMON

## Pentagon's 20-year killing spree has always treated civilians as expendable

Top US officials want us to believe that the Pentagon carefully spares civilian lives while making war overseas. The notion is pleasant. And with high-tech killing far from home, the physical and psychological distances have made it even easier to believe recent claims that American warfare has become “humane.”

Such pretences should be grimly laughable to anyone who has read high-quality journalism from eyewitness reporters like Anand Gopal and Nick Turse. For instance, Gopal’s article for the *New Yorker* in September, “The Other

Afghan Women”, is an in-depth, devastating piece that exposes the slaughter and terror systematically inflicted on rural residents of Afghanistan by the US Air Force.

Turse, an incisive author and managing editor at TomDispatch.com, wrote this fall: “Over the last 20 years, the United States has conducted more than 93,300 air strikes – in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Pakistan, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen – that killed between 22,679

and 48,308 civilians, according to figures recently released by Airwars, a UK-based airstrike monitoring group. The total number of civilians who have died from direct violence in America’s wars since 9/11 tops out at 364,000 to 387,000, according to Brown University’s Costs of War Project.”

Those deaths have been completely predictable results of US government policies. And in fact, evidence of widespread civilian



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# INSIGHTS

casualties emerged soon after the “war on terror” started two decades ago. Leaks with extensive documentation began to surface more than 10 years ago, thanks to stark revelations from courageous whistleblowers and the independent media outlet WikiLeaks.

The retribution for their truth-telling has been fierce and unrelenting. WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange is in a British prison, facing imminent extradition to the United States, where the chances of a fair trial are essentially zero. Former US Army intelligence analyst Chelsea Manning spent seven years in a military prison. Former US Air Force analyst Daniel Hale, who revealed murderous effects of US drone warfare, is currently serving a 45-month prison sentence. They had the clarity of mind and heart to share vital information with the public, disclosing not just “mistakes” but patterns of war crimes.

Such realities should be kept in mind when considering how the *New York Times* framed its blockbuster scoop the weekend before Christmas, drawing on more than 1,300 confidential documents. Under the big headline “Hidden Pentagon Records Reveal Patterns of Failure in Deadly Airstrikes”, the *Times* assessed US bombing in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan – and reported that “since 2014, the American air war has been plagued by deeply flawed intelligence, rushed and imprecise targeting and the deaths of thousands of civilians, many of them children.”

What should not get lost in all the bold-type words like “failure”, “flawed intelligence” and “impre-

cise targeting” is that virtually none of it was unforeseeable. The killings have resulted from policies that gave very low priority to prevention of civilian deaths.

The gist of those policies continues. And so does the funding that fuels the nation’s nonstop militarism, most recently in the \$768-billion National Defense Authorization Act that spun through Congress this month and landed on President Biden’s desk.

Dollar figures are apt to look abstract on a screen, but they indicate the extent of the mania. Biden had “only” asked for \$12-billion more than President Trump’s last NDAA, but that wasn’t enough for the bipartisan hawkery in the House and Senate, which provided a boost of \$37-billion instead.

Actually, factoring in other outlays for so-called “defense”, annual US military spending is in the vicinity of \$1-trillion. Efforts at restraint have hit a wall. This fall, in a vote on a bill to cut 10 percent of the Pentagon budget, support came from only one-fifth of the House, and not one Republican.

In the opposite direction, House support for jacking up the military budget was overwhelming, with a vote of 363-70. In December, when it was the Senate’s turn to act on the measure, the vote was 88-11.

Overall, military spending accounts for about half of the federal government’s total discretionary spending – while programmes for helping instead of killing are on short rations for local, state and national government agencies. It’s a destructive trend of warped priorities that serves the long-term

agendas of neoliberalism, aptly defined as policies that “enhance the workings of free market capitalism and attempt to place limits on government spending, government regulation, and public ownership.”

While the two parties on Capitol Hill have major differences on domestic issues, relations are lethally placid beyond the water’s edge. When the NDAA cleared the Senate last month, the leaders of the Armed Services Committee were both quick to rejoice. “I am pleased that the Senate has voted in an overwhelming, bipartisan fashion to pass this year’s defense bill”, said the committee’s chair, Sen. Jack Reed, a Democrat from Rhode Island. The ranking Republican on the panel, Jim Inhofe from Oklahoma, chimed in: “This bill sends a clear message to our allies – that the United States remains a reliable, credible partner – and to our adversaries – that the US military is prepared and fully able to defend our interests around the world.”

The bill also sends a clear message to Pentagon contractors as they drool over a new meal in the ongoing feast of war profiteering.

It’s a long way from their glassed-in office suites to the places where the bombs fall. **CT**

**Norman Solomon** is the national director of [www.rootsaction.org](http://www.rootsaction.org) and the author of many books including “*War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death*”. He was a Bernie Sanders delegate from California to the 2016 and 2020 Democratic National Conventions. Solomon is the founder and executive director of the *Institute for Public Accuracy*.

# INSIGHTS

GRANVILLE WILLIAMS

## Why is Amazon so hostile to unions?

Now we know the truth. The high-profile campaign to organise a ballot for trade union recognition at the Amazon plant in Birmingham, Alabama, was defeated back in April this year. The result was a shock, with the union, the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWD-SU), alleging the company mounted a sustained dirty-tricks campaign to sabotage support for the union ballot.

The union was right. The National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) has just ruled that the union vote was invalid. After investigating the union's assertion, the NLRB decided that Amazon interfered so blatantly in its workers' ability to vote that a second election is now in order.

The ruling detailed how, in spite of the NLRB denying Amazon's request to install a mail collection box right outside the warehouse entrance, the company did so anyway, giving workers the impression that it was involved in the vote counting.

Additionally, the company distributed "vote no" material to workers in the presence of managers, forcing them to declare their support for or opposition to the union. And Amazon held what the NLRB called "captive audience meetings" with small groups of workers, "six days a week, 18 hours a day", in order to saturate the

and said the company "essentially hijacked the process and gave a strong impression that it controlled the process."

Given this anti-union assault, it's not a surprise that the election turnout was low and that ultimately only about 12 percent of eligible voters cast ballots choosing to unionise.

However, this isn't the end of the story. It's clear that Amazon anticipated the NLRB ruling. According to a Reuters report in early November, "Amazon has ramped up its campaign at the warehouse, forcing thousands of employees to attend meetings, posting signs critical of labour groups in bathrooms, and flying in staff from the West Coast."

Amazon also seems to have neutralised another union ballot challenge at a Staten Island warehouse that the *New York Times* investigated. Just two weeks ahead of an NLRB hearing on whether there was sufficient interest to form a union there, workers mysteriously withdrew their petition.

The basic question is why a fabulously profitable company like Amazon continues its relentless drive to

maintain union-free operations in the United States and UK?

There is a massive credibility gap between what the company claims is going on inside its warehouses and the cumulative evidence we have about working practices, the mistreatment of workers and the continuous surveillance of



approximately 6,000 employees who were eligible to vote with anti-union messaging over the course of the voting period.

Lisa Henderson, an NLRB regional director who made the decision for a second vote, denounced Amazon's "flagrant disregard" for ensuring a free and fair election

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work performance.

The company claims that workers don't need a union because they benefit from a "direct relationship" with their employer. What this means in practice is explained by an UK Amazon spokesperson: "Across Amazon, including in our fulfilment centres, we place enormous value on having daily conversations with each associate and work to make sure direct engagement with our employees is a strong part of our work culture."

In some countries though, Amazon has had to concede trade union recognition and there is now a growing awareness amongst trade unionists elsewhere that they need to work more closely together across borders if they are going to be successful.

In August, Sharon Graham became leader of the UK's biggest union, Unite. She has made union organisation at Amazon one of her priorities. She wants to convince Amazon to sign a "neutrality

agreement" guaranteeing that warehouse workers can form a union without fear of repercussions. "What I would say to Jeff Bezos is he should treat workers fairly, come to the table and sign the neutrality agreement. Eventually, it will have to happen. We're not going to get bored. If this takes two years, it takes two years. Resources will be allocated", she said.

There's an old trade union song that asks the question, "Which side are you on?" As someone who has written about Amazon for several years, I'm unequivocally with Graham in the uneven power struggle by trade unions to give Amazon workers their own voice. **CT**

**Granville Williams** is the editor of the book "*It's the Media, Stupid! The Media, the 2019 Election and the Aftermath*" (2020). He is the editor of *MediaNorth* – [www.medianorth.org.uk](http://www.medianorth.org.uk) – which campaigns for strong regional media in the UK.

partisan gerrymandering. Both parties do it, but Republicans are taking it to extremes that their own voters don't even support. A majority of Republican voters, like Democrats and independents, favour independent redistricting commissions.

Instead, they're getting absurdly lopsided maps in states like North Carolina and Ohio, where Republican-controlled state legislatures drew maps so partisan that there's a good chance they'll end up in court.

In Ohio, just over 50 percent of voters went with Trump in 2020. Yet Republicans drew a map where 12 of 15 congressional seats – 80 percent – are theirs to lose. In North Carolina, where under 50 percent went for Trump, Republicans awarded themselves over 70 percent of the seats.

Gerrymandering affects every voter in the USA in one way or another, but it is especially sinister where it overlaps with the country's massive prison system. At any given time, there are around two-million Americans behind bars. And where they're held is a key piece of the gerrymandering puzzle.

Most states count their prison populations as residents of the facility where they're held rather than their home address. That practice turns out to be deeply undemocratic. The majority of prisons are located in rural areas, where they house incarcerated people who are often transferred from more urban areas. When districts are drawn, that means more representation for those rural

ROBERT P. ALVAREZ

## Harsh facts about elections and prisons

Are free and fair elections too much to ask for? Thanks to partisan gerrymandering – and its ugly cousin, prison gerrymandering – the answer is often yes.

High-stakes redistricting battles now underway will help determine

next year's US mid-term elections. In a perfect world, parties would work together to ensure fair representation for their various constituencies. In the real world, the party in power usually redraws district maps to favour itself.

This dirty little trick is called



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areas – and less for the urban ones.

This process, called prison gerrymandering, is problematic for a number of reasons.

First, it's unfair. It amounts to stealing political power from diverse urban communities and transferring it to majority-white rural communities.

Second, prison gerrymandering can result in districts that, outside the prison population, fail to meet the minimum number of residents required to satisfy the Constitution's threshold for congressional seats.

This happened in California's 20th Congressional District before the state ended prison gerrymandering in 2011, for example. And it's even more of an issue for state legislative districts today.

For example, House District 8 in Texas would lose 12.59 percent of its population if incarcerated people weren't counted. According to the Texas Civil Rights Project, that's well beyond the threshold traditionally viewed as legally allowable for state legislative districts. Oklahoma, Florida, and Idaho, among other states, also have state legislative districts that are only viable because of sizable prison populations.

Finally, it reeks of the notorious "three-fifths compromise" that once counted enslaved people toward the political representation of slaveholding states – despite the fact that those enslaved people couldn't vote. Disenfranchised incarcerated people are used the same way today.

If that doesn't fly in the face of the famed "one person, one vote"

principle and the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment, I don't know what does.

The Supreme Court has resisted attempts to fix partisan gerrymandering, let alone prison gerrymandering, and Republicans have uniformly filibustered attempts to address the problem in Congress. After all, those with power rarely give it up willingly.

Thankfully, federal action isn't the only solution. Seven states have officially ended the practice of prison gerrymandering for congressional and state legislative

districts. Another four have ended it for state legislative districts only.

Extreme partisan gerrymandering is showing voters across the country how distorted our electoral system is. In the process, voters are learning about the racist practices, like prison gerrymandering, that underpin that system.

That, at least, is a good thing. **CT**

*Robert P. Alvarez is a media relations associate at the Institute for Policy Studies. This op-ed was distributed by [www.otherwords.org](http://www.otherwords.org).*

GEORGE MONBIOT

## UK government seeks a tyrant's power

This is proper police state stuff. The last-minute amendments crowbarred by the UK government into its police, crime, sentencing and courts bill are a blatant attempt to stifle protest, of the kind you might expect in Russia or Egypt. Priti Patel, the home secretary, shoved 18 extra pages into the bill after it had passed through the Commons, and after the second reading in the House of Lords. It looks like a deliberate ploy to avoid effective parliamentary scrutiny. Yet in most of the media there's a resounding silence.

Among the new amendments are measures that would ban protesters from attaching themselves to another person, to an object, or

to land. Not only would they make locking on – a crucial tool of protest the world over – illegal, but they are so loosely drafted that they could apply to anyone holding on to anything, on pain of up to 51 weeks' imprisonment.

It would also become a criminal offence to obstruct in any way major transport works from being carried out, again with a maximum sentence of 51 weeks. This looks like an attempt to end meaningful protest against road-building and airport expansion. Other amendments would greatly expand police stop and search powers. The police would be entitled to stop and search people or vehicles if they suspect they might be carrying any article that could be used in

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the newly prohibited protests, presumably including placards, flyers and banners. Other new powers would grant police the right to stop and search people without suspicion, if they believe that protest will occur “in that area”. Anyone who resists being searched could be imprisoned for – you guessed it – up to 51 weeks.

Existing stop and search powers are used disproportionately against black and brown people, who are six times as likely to be stopped as white people. The new powers would create an even greater disincentive for people of colour to protest. Then the media can continue to berate protest movements for being overwhelmingly white and unrepresentative.

Perhaps most outrageously, the amendments contain new powers to ban named people from protesting. The grounds are extraordinary, in a nation that claims to be democratic. We can be banned if we have previously committed “protest-related offences”. Thanks to the draconian measures in the rest of the bill – many of which predate these amendments – it will now be difficult to attend a protest without committing an offence. Or we can be banned if we have attended or “contributed to” a protest that was “likely to result in serious disruption”. Serious disruption, as the bill stands, could mean almost anything, including being noisy. If you post something on social media that encourages people to turn up, you could find yourself on the list. Anyone subject to one of these orders, like a paroled prisoner, might be required to present themselves to the authorities at “particular times on particular days”. You can

also be banned from associating with particular people or “using the internet to facilitate or encourage” a “protest-related offence”.

These are dictators’ powers. The country should be in uproar over them, but we hear barely a squeak. The Kill the Bill protesters have tried valiantly to draw our attention to this tyrant’s gambit, and have been demonised for their pains. Otherwise, you would barely know it was happening.

Protest is an essential corrective to the mistakes of government. Had it not been for the tactics Patel now seeks to ban, the pointless and destructive road-building programme the government began in the early 1990s would have continued: eventually John Major’s government conceded it was a mistake, and dropped it. Now governments are making the greatest mistake in human history – driving us towards systemic environmental collapse – and Boris Johnson’s administration is seeking to ensure that there is nothing

we can do to stop it.

The government knows the new powers are illegitimate, otherwise it would not have tried to avoid parliamentary scrutiny. These brutal amendments sit alongside Johnson’s other attacks on democracy, such as the proposed requirement for voter ID, which could deter 2 million potential electors, most of whom are poor and marginalised; the planned curtailment of the Electoral Commission; the assault on citizens’ rights to mount legal challenges to government policy; and the proposed “civil orders” that could see journalists treated as spies and banned from meeting certain people and visiting certain places.

So where is everyone? Why isn’t this all over the front pages? Why aren’t we out on the streets in our millions, protesting while we still can? We use our freedoms or we lose them. And we are very close to losing them. **CT**

*George Monbiot is a columnist at the Guardian, where this article first appeared. His website is [www.monbiot.com](http://www.monbiot.com)*

BINOY KAMPMARK

## Warmongers arm up against China

Get the Marines ready. Store the supplies. Marshal the allies. The United States is getting ready for war (the preferable term in Washington is *policing*) in the Indo-Pacific region,

and is hoping to do so with a range of expanded bases across client states, or what it prefers to call friends.

On November 29, the Pentagon announced that US President Joe

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Biden had accepted the recommendations made by Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III in the Global Posture Review commissioned in February. The news might have been delivered by Austin himself, but this solemn duty fell to Mara Karlin, discharging her duties as deputy undersecretary of defense for policy. As the GPR remains classified, we are left with a sketchy performance that should make many across the Indo-Pacific seek cover and a bunker.

For the most part, Karlin's performance was gibberish, masked by lingo hostile to meaning. The review was intended to "inform" the approach of the Biden administration in terms of national defence strategy, which did not mean that it would necessarily inform anybody else. "That guidance asserts that the United States will lead with diplomacy first, revitalise our unmatched network of allies and partners and make smart and disciplined choices regarding our national defense and responsible use of our military", Karlin stated. How reassuring.

She continued in non-revelatory fashion to mention how the "global posture review assesses DOD overseas forces and footprint along with the framework and processes that govern our posture decision making." The GPR had "strengthened our decision-making processes by deliberately connecting strategic priorities, global trade-offs, force readiness and modernization, interagency coordination and allied and partner coordination to global posture planning and decisions."

The only thing to conclude from this remarkable display of non-meaning was that the US imperium was on the march, and it was keen to ensure that its allies would be marching in step with it. At one point, Karlin let the cat out of the bag. A primary focus of the GPR is the Indo-Pacific, with China proving to be the continuing fixation. Cooperation between Washington, its allies and its partners to "advance initiatives" that aid re-



Photo: US Dept. of Defence

"LINGO hostile to meaning": Mara Karlin, US Deputy Undersecretary of Defense for Policy.

gional stability and deter Chinese military aggression and threats from Pyongyang, are matters of urgency.

This puts Australia, Guam and various Pacific Islands in the spotlight, with the US keen to use them as staging grounds in any forthcoming conflict with Beijing while reducing their troop presence in other global theatres. The press conference was not quite so blunt, but the implications were clear enough. According to Karlin, the Pentagon will seek a "range of infrastructure improvements

in Guam, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands and Australia". New US rotational fighter and bomber aircraft deployments to Australia and further logistics cooperation with Canberra are promised.

When asked by a journalist why Australia and Guam had been specifically mentioned in the address, Karlin showed some rare candour in admitting that "those were notable, which is why I cited those specifically", though the US was broadly "engaged in consultations with our allies and partners across the Pacific."

The remarks pertaining to Australia simply affirmed the observations made by Austin in September, the same month the trilateral AUKUS security partnership between Australia, the UK and the US was announced. AUKUS, explained Austin at the time, would "help contribute" to the concept of "integrated deterrence in the region", an unimaginative way of saying that the US would lead a regional policing effort in the Indo-Pacific, with the assistance of Australia and like-minded partners. While Washington sought "a constructive, results-oriented relationship with the PRC, we will remain clear-eyed in our view of Beijing's efforts to undermine the established international order."

Such a clear-eyed disposition involved making good use of Australian territory, with Canberra agreeing to "major force posture initiatives that will expand our access and presence in Australia."

Access is imperial speak for US power. It sounds so much

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better than military occupation. Becca Wasser of the Center for a New American Security is well versed in that argot. “If you want to change posture – whether that is expanding or consolidating bases, or deploying new capability – you need access”, Wasser told *Breaking Defense*. “Access is something only allies and partners can provide and changes to access usually require a lengthy consultation process.” Appearances must be kept.

A sense of how the GPR has been received can also be gathered from the security think-tankers, those delightful sorts who make it their tanking business to find enemies for budget reasons. A co-authored report by John Schaus of the hawkish Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington and Michael Shoebridge of the Canberra-based US appendage, the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, praises the Review as “an enormous opportunity to signal, and demonstrate, US commitment to regional security in ways that will reassure partners and deter potential adversaries.”

There is an unabashed encouragement of greater US garrisoning and military presence in Australia. Australia would commit to investing in and expanding naval facilities in Darwin and on the west coast. This, in turn, could be “matched with a greater US naval presence at these facilities, for the purpose of joint activity through the Indian Ocean and up into Southeast Asia.”

The authors take issue with

conservative US troop numbers that had been present through Marine Corps rotations in Northern Australia during the Obama-era. It was time to roll up the sleeves and co-opt Australian real estate and resources to advance Washington’s agenda. “Specifically, the United States should forward deploy Navy surface, subsurface, and uncrewed vessels to Australia; expand the Air Force rotational presence to include larger numbers and more frequent presence of high-endurance intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance platforms; and

increase both Marine and Army presence to facilitate greater training and integration within the alliance.”

While the GPR remains under lock and key, we can be certain that many of the bellicose wishes of Schaus and Shoebridge are bound to be there. The war monger’s script is getting increasingly long and relentless. **CT**

**Binoy Kampmark** was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He lectures at RMIT University, Melbourne.



Recycling plastic waste in Hoi An, Vietnam

Photo: Global Environment Facility

JIM HIGHTOWER

## The planet is not a dumping ground

In a world that’s clogged and choking with a massive overdose of plastic trash, you’ll be heartened to learn that governments and industries are teaming

up to respond forcefully to this planetary crisis.

Unfortunately, their response has been to engage in a global race to make more plastic stuff – and

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to force poor countries to become dumping grounds for plastic garbage.

Leading this Kafkaesque greed-fest are such infamous plunderers and polluters as Exxon Mobil, Chevron, Shell, and other petrochemical profiteers. With fossil fuel profits crashing, the giants are rushing to convert more of their over-supply of oil into plastic.

But where to send the monstrous volumes of waste that will result? The industry's chief lobbyist outfit, the American Chemistry Council, looked around last year and suddenly shouted, "Eureka, there's Africa!"

In particular, they're targeting Kenya to become "a plastics hub" for global trade in waste. However, Kenyans have an influential community of environmental activists who've enacted some of the world's toughest bans on plastic pollution.

To bypass this inconvenient local opposition, the dumpers are resorting to an old corporate power play: "free trade". Their lobbyists are pushing an autocratic trade agreement that would ban Kenyan officials from passing their own laws or rules that interfere with trade in plastic waste.

Trying to hide their ugliness, the plastic profiteers created a PR front group called Alliance to End Public Waste. But – hello – it's

not "public" waste. Exxon and other funders of the alliance make, promote, and profit from the mountains of destructive trash they now demand we clean up.

The real problem is not waste, but plastic itself. From production to disposal, it's destructive to people and the planet. Rather than subsidising petrochemical behemoths to make more of the stuff, policymakers should seek out and encourage people who are developing real solutions and alternatives. **CT**

*Jim Hightower is a radio commentator, writer, and public speaker. Distributed by [www.otherwords.org](http://www.otherwords.org).*

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KOOHAN PAIK-MANDER

# Whales could save the climate (unless the military kills them first)



How the US war machine is decimating marine life and helping create climate catastrophe

**T**he US military is famous for being the single largest consumer of petroleum products in the world and the largest emitter of greenhouse gases. Its carbon emissions exceed those released by “more than 100 countries combined.”

Now, with the Biden administration’s mandate to slash carbon emissions “at least in half by the end of the decade”, the Pentagon has committed to using all-electric vehicles and transitioning to biofuels for all its trucks, ships and aircraft. But is only addressing emissions enough to mitigate the current climate crisis?

What does not figure into the climate calculus of the new emission-halving plan is that the Pentagon can still continue to destroy the natural systems that help sequester carbon and generate oxygen. For example, the plan ignores the Pentagon’s continuing role in the annihilation of whales, despite the miraculous role that large cetaceans

have played in delaying climate catastrophe and “maintaining healthy marine ecosystems”, according to a report by Whale and Dolphin Conservation. This fact has mostly gone unnoticed until only recently.

There are countless ways in which the Pentagon hobbles the planet’s inherent abilities to regenerate itself. Yet, it has been the decimation of populations of whales and dolphins over the last decade – resulting from the year-round, full-spectrum military practices carried out in the oceans – that has fast-tracked us toward a cataclysmic environmental tipping point.

The other imminent danger that whales and dolphins face is from the installation of space-war infrastructure, which is currently taking place. This new infrastructure comprises the development of the so-called “smart ocean”, rocket launchpads, missile tracking stations and other components of satellite-based battle. If the billions of dollars being plowed

into the 2022 defence budget for space-war technology are any indication of what’s in store, the destruction to marine life caused by the use of these technologies will only accelerate in the future, hurtling Earth’s creatures to an even quicker demise than already forecast.

**I**t’s first important to understand how whales are indispensable to mitigating climate catastrophe, and why reviving their numbers is crucial to slowing down damage and even repairing the marine ecosystem. The importance of whales in fighting the climate crisis has also been highlighted in an article that appeared in the International Monetary Fund’s *Finance and Development* magazine, which calls for the restoration of global whale populations. “Protecting whales could add significantly to carbon capture”, states the article, showing how the global financial institution also recognises whale health to be one of the



Photo: 123RF.com

most economical and effective solutions to the climate crisis.

Throughout their lives, whales enable the oceans to sequester a whopping 2-billion metric tons of carbon dioxide per year. That astonishing amount in a single year is nearly double the 1.2-billion metric tons of carbon that was emitted by the US military in the entire 16-year span between 2001 and 2017, according to an article in *Grist*, which relied on a paper from the Costs of War Project at Brown University's Watson Institute.

The profound role of whales in keeping the world alive is generally unrecognised. Much of how whales sequester carbon is due to their symbiotic relationship with phytoplankton, the organisms that are the base of all marine food chains.

The way the sequestering of carbon by whales works is through the piston-like movements of the marine mammals as they dive to the depths to feed and then come up to the surface to breathe. This "whale pump" propels their own faeces in giant

plumes up to the surface of the water. This helps bring essential nutrients from the ocean depths to the surface areas where sunlight enables phytoplankton to flourish and reproduce, and where photosynthesis promotes the sequestration of carbon and the generation of oxygen. More than half the oxygen in the atmosphere comes from phytoplankton. Because of these infinitesimal marine organisms, our oceans truly are the lungs of the planet.

More whales mean more phytoplankton, which means more oxygen and more carbon capture. According to the authors of the article in the IMF's *Finance and Development* magazine – Ralph Chami and Sena Oztosun, from the IMF's Institute for Capacity Development,

and two professors, Thomas Cosimano from the University of Notre Dame and Connel Fullenkamp from Duke University – if the world could increase "phytoplankton productivity" via "whale activity" by only one percent, it "would capture hundreds of millions of tons of additional CO<sub>2</sub> a year, equivalent to the sudden appearance of 2-billion mature trees."

Even after death, whale carcasses function as carbon sinks. Every year, it is estimated that whale carcasses transport 190,000 tons of carbon, locked within their bodies, to the bottom of the sea. That's the same amount of carbon produced by 80,000 cars per year, according to Sri Lankan marine biologist Asha de Vos, who appeared on TED Radio Hour on NPR. On the seafloor, this carbon supports deep-sea ecosystems and is integrated into marine sediments.

Meanwhile, giant concrete-and-metal "direct air carbon capture" plants are being planned by the private sector for construction in natural landscapes all over the world. The largest one began operation in 2021 in Iceland. The plant is named "Orca," which not only happens to be a type of cetacean but is also derived from the Icelandic word for "energy" (orka).

Orca captures a mere 10 metric tons of CO<sub>2</sub> per day – compared to about 5.5-million metric tons per day of that currently sequestered by our oceans, due in large part to whales. And yet, the minuscule comparative success by Orca is being celebrated, while the

effectiveness of whales goes largely unnoticed. In fact, President Joe Biden's \$1-trillion infrastructure bill contains \$3.5-billion for building four gigantic direct air capture facilities around the country. Nothing was allocated to protect and regenerate the real orcas of the sea.

If ever there were "superheroes" who could save us from the climate crisis, they would be the whales and the phytoplankton, not the direct air capture plants, and certainly not the US military. Clearly, a key path forward toward a livable planet is to make whale and ocean conservation a top priority.

Unfortunately, the US budget priorities never fail to put the Pentagon above all else – even a breathable atmosphere. At a December 2021 hearing on "How Operational Energy Can Help Us Address Logistics Challenges", by the Readiness Subcommittee of the US House Armed Services Committee, Representative Austin Scott (R-GA) said, "I know we're concerned about emissions and other things, and we should be. We can and should do a better job of taking care of the environment. But ultimately,

when we're in a fight, we have to win that fight."

This logic that "we have to destroy the village in order to save it" prevails at the Pentagon. For example, hundreds of naval exer-

If ever there were "superheroes" who could save us from the climate crisis, they would be the whales and the phytoplankton

cises conducted year-round in the Indo-Pacific region damage and kill tens of thousands of whales annually. And every year, the number of war games, encouraged by the US Department of Defense, increases.

They're called "war games", but for creatures of the sea, it's not a game at all.

Pentagon documents estimate that 13,744 whales and dolphins are allowed to be killed as "incidental takes" during any given year due to military exercises in the Gulf of Alaska.

In waters surrounding the Mariana Islands in the Pacific Ocean alone, the violence is more dire. More than 400,000 cetaceans comprising 26 species were sacrificed as "takes" during military practice between 2015 and 2020.

These are only two examples of a myriad of routine naval exercises. Needless to say, these ecocidal activities dramatically decrease the ocean's abilities to mitigate climate catastrophe.

The most lethal component to whales is sonar, used to detect submarines. Whales will go to great lengths to get away from the deadly rolls of sonar waves. They "will swim hundreds of miles... and even

beach themselves" in groups in order to escape sonar, according to an article in *Scientific American*. Necropsies have revealed bleeding from the eyes and ears, caused by too-rapid changes in depths as whales try to flee the sonar, revealed the article.

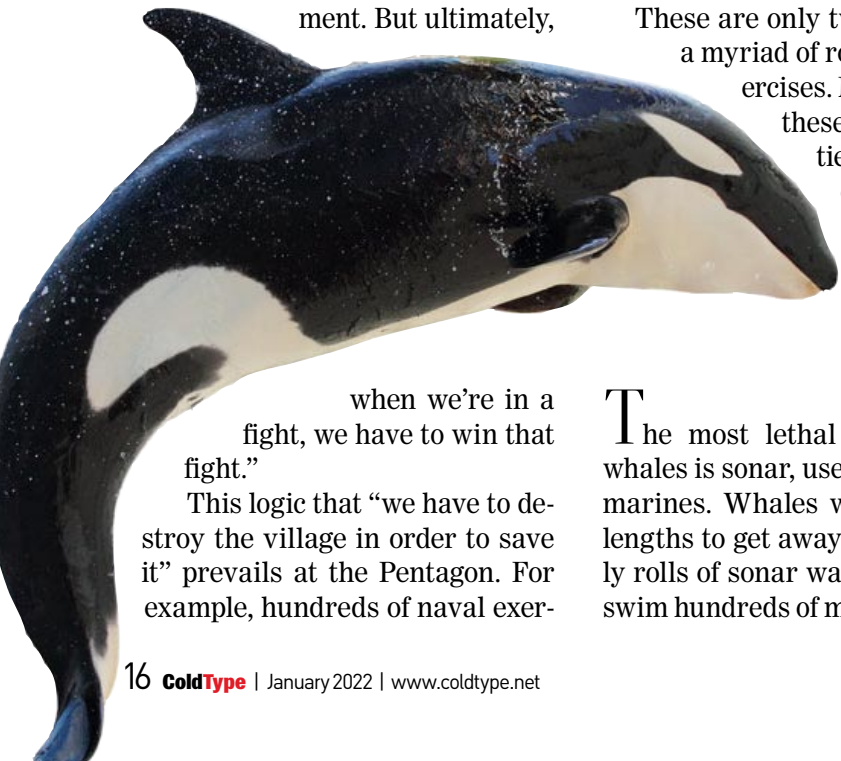
Low levels of sonar that may not directly damage whales could still harm them by triggering behavioural changes. According to an article in *Nature*, a 2006 UK military study used an array of hydrophones to listen for whale sounds during marine manoeuvres. Over the period of the exercise, "the number of whale recordings dropped from over 200 to less than 50", *Nature* reported.

"Beaked whale species... appear to cease vocalising and foraging for food in the area around active sonar transmissions", concluded a 2007 unpublished UK report, which referred to the study.

The report further noted, "Since these animals feed at depth, this could have the effect of preventing a beaked whale from feeding over the course of the trial and could lead to second or third order effects on the animal and population as a whole."

The report extrapolated that these second- and third-order effects could include starvation and then death.

Until now, sonar in the oceans has been exclusively used for military purposes. This is about to change. There is a "sub-sea data network" being developed that would use sonar as a component of undersea wi-fi for mixed civilian and military use. Scientists from member nations of the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE), including, but not limited to Australia, China, the UK, South Korea and Saudi Arabia, are creating what is called the "Internet of Underwater Things", or IoUT. They are designing data networks consisting of sonar and laser transmitters to be installed across





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vast undersea expanses. These transmitters would send sonar signals to a network of transponders on the ocean surface, which would then send 5G signals to satellites.

Utilised by both industry and military, the data network would saturate the ocean with sonar waves. This does not bode well for whale wellness or the climate. And yet, promoters are calling this development the “smart ocean.”

The military is orchestrating a similar overhaul on land and in space. Known as the Joint All-Domain Command and Control (JADC2), it would interface with the subsea sonar data network. It would require a grid of satellites that could control every coordinate on the planet and in the atmosphere, rendering a real-life, 3D chessboard, ready for high-tech battle.

In service to the JADC2, thousands more satellites are being launched into space. Reefs are being dredged and forests are being razed throughout Asia and the Pacific as an ambitious system of “mini-bases” is being erected on as many islands as possible – missile deployment stations, satellite launch pads, radar tracking

## The ongoing atrocities of the US military against whales and marine ecosystems make a mockery of any of its climate initiatives

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stations, aircraft carrier ports, live-fire training areas and other facilities – all for satellite-controlled war. The system of mini-bases, in communication with the satellites, and with aircraft, ships and undersea submarines (via sonar), will be replacing the bulky brick-and-mortar bases of the 20th-century.

Its data-storage cloud, called JEDI (Joint Enterprise Defense Infrastructure), will be co-developed at a cost of tens of billions of dollars. The Pentagon has requested bids on the herculean project from companies like Microsoft, Amazon, Oracle and Google.

Viewed from a climate perspective, the Department of Defense is flagrantly barrelling away from its stated mission, to “ensure our nation’s security”. The ongoing atrocities of the US military against whales and

marine ecosystems make a mockery of any of its climate initiatives.

While the slogan “Save the Whales” has been bandied about for decades, they’re the ones actually saving us. In destroying them, we destroy ourselves. **CT**

**Koohan Paik-Mander**, who grew up in postwar Korea and in the US colony of Guam, is a Hawaii-based journalist and media educator. She is a board member of the Global Network Against Weapons and Nuclear Power in Space, a member of the CODEPINK working group *China Is Not Our Enemy*, and an advisory committee member for the Global Just Transition project at *Foreign Policy in Focus*. She is the co-author of *The Superferry Chronicles: Hawaii’s Uprising Against Militarism, Commercialism and the Desecration of the Earth*; and has written on militarism in the *Asia-Pacific for the Nation*, the *Progressive*, *Foreign Policy in Focus* and other publications. This article was produced by *Local Peace Economy*, a project of the *Independent Media Institute*.

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JOHN PILGER

# The judicial kidnapping of Julian Assange

What is at stake is both a courageous man's life and, if we remain silent, the conquest of our intellects and sense of right and wrong

*"Let us look at ourselves, if we have the courage, to see what is happening to us"*

– Jean-Paul Sartre

Sartre's words should echo in all our minds following the grotesque decision of Britain's High Court to extradite Julian Assange to the United States where he faces "a living death". This is his punishment for the crime of authentic, accurate, courageous, vital journalism.

Miscarriage of justice is an inadequate term in these circumstances. It took the bewigged courtiers of Britain's ancien regime just nine minutes on December 10 to uphold an American appeal against a District Court judge's acceptance in January of a cataract of evidence that hell on earth awaited Assange across the Atlantic: a hell in which, it was expertly predicted, he would find a way to take his own life.

Volumes of witness by people of distinction, who examined and studied Julian and diagnosed his autism and his Asperger's Syndrome and revealed that he had already come within an ace of killing himself at Belmarsh prison, Britain's very own hell, were ignored.

The recent confession of a crucial FBI informant and prosecution

stooge, a fraudster and serial liar, that he had fabricated his evidence against Julian was ignored. The revelation that the Spanish-run security firm at the Ecuadorean embassy in London, where Julian had been granted political refuge, was a CIA front that spied on Julian's lawyers and doctors and confidants (myself included) – that, too, was ignored.

The recent journalistic disclosure, repeated graphically by defence counsel before the High Court in October, that the CIA had planned to murder Julian in London – even that was ignored.

Each of these "matters", as lawyers like to say, was enough on its own for a judge upholding the law to throw out the disgraceful case mounted against Assange by a corrupt US Department of Justice and their hired guns in Britain. Julian's state of mind, bellowed James Lewis, QC, America's man at the Old Bailey last year, was no more than "malingering" – an archaic Victorian term used to deny the very existence of mental illness.

To Lewis, almost every defence witness, including those who described from the depth of their experience and knowledge, the barbaric American prison system, was to be inter-

rupted, abused, discredited. Sitting behind him, passing him notes, was his American conductor: young, short-haired, clearly an Ivy League man on the rise.

In their nine minutes of dismissal of the fate of journalist Assange, two of the most senior judges in Britain, including the Lord Chief Justice, Lord Burnett (a lifelong buddy of Sir Alan Duncan, Boris Johnson's former foreign minister who arranged the brutal police kidnapping of Assange from the Ecuadorean embassy) referred to not one of a litany of truths aired at previous hearings in the District Court – truths that had struggled to be heard in a lower court presided over by a weirdly hostile judge, Vanessa Baraitser. Her insulting behaviour towards a clearly stricken Assange, struggling through a fog of prison-dispensed medication to remember his name, is unforgettable.

What was truly shocking at the December hearing was that the High Court judges – Lord Burnett and Lord Justice Timothy Holyrode, who read out their words – showed no hesitation in sending Julian to his death, living or otherwise. They offered no mitigation, no suggestion that they had agonised over legalities or even basic morality.

Their ruling in favour, if not on behalf of the United States, is based



Photo: duncane/flickr.com

Graffiti on a London wall calls for the release of Julian Assange.

squarely on transparently fraudulent “assurances” scabbled together by the Biden administration when it looked in January like justice might prevail.

These “assurances” are that once in American custody, Assange will not be subject to the Orwellian SAMS – Special Administrative Measures – which would make him an unperson; that he will not be imprisoned at ADX Florence, a prison in Colorado long condemned by jurists and human rights groups as illegal: “a pit of punishment and disappearance”; that he can be transferred to an Australian prison to finish his sentence there.

The absurdity lies in what the judges omitted to say. In offering its “assurances”, the US reserves the right not to guarantee anything should Assange do something that displeases his jailers. In other words, as Amnesty has pointed out, it reserves the right to break any promise.

There are abundant examples of the US doing just that. As investigative journalist Richard Medhurst revealed last month, David Mendoza Herrarte was extradited from Spain

to the US on the “promise” that he would serve his sentence in Spain. The Spanish courts regarded this as a binding condition.

“Classified documents reveal the diplomatic assurances given by the US Embassy in Madrid and how the US violated the conditions of the extradition”, wrote Medhurst, “Mendoza spent six years in the US trying to return to Spain. Court documents show the United States denied his transfer application multiple times.”

The High Court judges – who were aware of the Mendoza case and of Washington’s habitual duplicity – describe the “assurances” not to be beastly to Julian Assange as a “solemn undertaking offered by one government to another”. This article would stretch into infinity if I listed the times the rapacious United States has broken “solemn undertakings” to governments, such as treaties that are summarily torn up and civil wars that are fuelled. It is the way

Washington has ruled the world, and before it Britain: the way of imperial power, as history teaches us.

It is this institutional lying and duplicity that Julian Assange brought into the open and in so doing performed perhaps the greatest public service of any journalist in modern times.

Julian himself has been a prisoner of lying governments for more than a decade now. During these long years, I have sat in many courts as the United States has sought to manipulate the law to silence him and WikiLeaks. This reached a bizarre moment when, in the tiny Ecuadorean embassy, he and I were forced to flatten ourselves against a wall, each with a notepad in which we conversed, taking care to shield what we had written to each other from the ubiquitous spy cameras – installed, as we now know, by a proxy of the CIA, the world’s most enduring criminal organisation.

This brings me to the quotation at the top of this article: “Let us look at ourselves, if we have the courage, to see what is happening.”

Jean-Paul Sartre wrote this in his preface to Franz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*, the classic study of how colonised and seduced and coerced and, yes, craven peoples do the bidding of the powerful.

Who among us is prepared to stand up rather than remain mere bystanders to an epic travesty such as the judicial kidnapping of Julian Assange? What is at stake is both a courageous man’s life and, if we remain silent, the conquest of our intellects and sense of right and wrong: indeed our very humanity. **CT**

**John Pilger** is an award-winning journalist, filmmaker, and author. Read his full biography at [www.johnpilger.com](http://www.johnpilger.com), and follow him on Twitter: @JohnPilger.

JONATHAN COOK

# Assange case is warning to honest journalism

The message sent to journalists could not be clearer or more chilling: what happened to Assange could happen to you, too

It is no accident that Julian Assange, the digital transparency activist and journalist who founded Wikileaks to help whistleblowers tell us what western governments are really up to in the shadows, has spent 10 years being progressively disappeared into those very same shadows.

His treatment is a crime similar to those Wikileaks exposed when it published, just over a decade ago, hundreds of thousands of leaked materials – documents we were never supposed to see – detailing war crimes committed by the United States and Britain in Iraq and Afghanistan.

These two western countries killed non-combatants and carried out torture not as they claimed in the pursuit of self-defence or in the promotion of democracy, but to impose control over a strategic, resource-rich region.

It is the ultimate, ugly paradox that Assange's legal and physical fate rests in the hands of two states that have the most to lose by allowing him to regain his freedom and publish more of the truths they want to keep concealed. By redefining his journalism as "espionage" – the basis



for the US extradition claim – they are determined to keep the genie stuffed in the bottle.

On December 10, in overturning a lower court decision that should have allowed Assange to walk free, the English High Court consented to effectively keep Assange locked up indefinitely. He is a remand prisoner – found guilty of no crime – and yet he will continue rotting in solitary confinement for the foreseeable future, barely seeing daylight or other

human beings, in Belmarsh high-security prison alongside Britain's most dangerous criminals.

The High Court decision forces our eyes off the ball once again. Assange and his supposed "crime" of seeking transparency and accountability has become the story rather than the crimes he exposed that were carried out by the US to lay waste to whole regions and devastate the lives of millions.

The goal is to stop the public conducting the debate Assange wanted to initiate through his journalism: about western state crimes. Instead the public is being deflected into a debate his persecutors want: whether Assange can ever safely be allowed out of his cell.

Assange's lawyers are being diverted from the real issues too. They will now be tied up for years fighting endless rearguard actions, caught up in the search for legal technicalities, battling to win a hearing in any court they can, to prevent his extradition to the United States to stand trial.

The process itself has taken over. And while the legal minutiae are endlessly raked over, the substance of the case – that it is US and British

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officials who ought to be held responsible for committing war crimes – will be glossed over.

But it is worse than the legal injustice of Assange's case. There may be no hacksaws needed this time, but this is as visceral a crime against journalism as the dismemberment of the *Washington Post* columnist Jamal Khashoggi by Saudi officials back in 2018.

And the outcome for Assange is only slightly less preordained than it was for Khashoggi when he entered the Saudi embassy in Istanbul. The goal for US officials has always been about permanently disappearing Assange. They are indifferent about how that is achieved.

If the legal avenue is a success, he will eventually head to the US where he can be locked away for up to 175 years in severe solitary confinement in a super-max jail – that is, till long past his death from natural causes. But there is every chance he will not survive that long. Last January, a British judge rejected extraditing Julian Assange to the US over his “suicide risk”, and medical experts have warned that it will be only a matter of time before he succeeds.

That was why the district court blocked extradition – on humanitarian grounds. Those grounds were overturned by the High Court last month only because the US offered “assurances” that measures would be in place to ensure Assange did not commit suicide. But Assange's lawyers pointed out those assurances “were not enough to address concerns about his fragile mental health and high risk of suicide”. These concerns should have been apparent to the High Court justices.

Further, dozens of former officials in the Central Intelligence Agency

## There are indications Assange suffered neurological damage when he had a small stroke during the October extradition proceedings

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and the previous US administration have confirmed that the agency planned to execute Assange in an extrajudicial operation in 2017. That was shortly before the US was forced by circumstance to switch to the current, formal extradition route. The arguments now made for his welfare by the same officials and institutions that came close to killing him should never have been accepted as made in good faith.

In fact, there is no need to speculate about the Americans' bad faith. It is only too apparent in the myriad get-out clauses in the “assurances” they provided. Those assurances can be dropped, for example, if US officials decide Assange is not being cooperative. The promises can and will be disregarded the moment they become an encumbrance on Washington's ability to keep Assange permanently silenced.

But if losing the extradition battle is high stakes, so is the legal process itself. That could finish Assange off long before a decision is reached, as his fiancée Stella Moris indicated in mid-December. She confirmed that Assange suffered a small stroke during a hearing in October in the endless extradition proceedings. There are indications he suffered neurological damage, and is now on anti-stroke medication to try to stop a recurrence.

Assange and his friends believe the stroke was brought on by the constant double strain of his solitary

confinement in Belmarsh and a legal process being conducted over his head, in which he is barely allowed to participate.

Nils Melzer, the United Nations expert on torture, has repeatedly warned that Assange has been subjected to prolonged psychological torture in the nine years since he fled into Ecuador's embassy in London seeking asylum from US efforts to persecute him.

That form of torture, Melzer has pointed out, was refined by the Nazis because it was found to be far more effective at breaking people than physical torture. Moris told the *Daily Mail*: “[The stroke] compounds our fears about [Assange's] ability to survive the longer this long legal battle goes on. ... Look at animals trapped in cages in a zoo. It cuts their life short. That's what's happening to Julian.”

And that indeed looks to be the prize for US officials that wanted him assassinated anyway. Whatever happens to Assange, the lawless US security state wins: it either gets him behind bars forever, or it kills him quietly and quite lawfully, while everyone is distracted, arguing about who Assange is rather what he exposed.

In fact, with each twist and turn of the proceedings against Assange we move further from the realities at the heart of the case towards narrative distractions.

Who remembers now the first extradition hearings, nearly two years ago, at which the court was reminded that the very treaty signed by Britain and the US that is the basis for Assange's extradition explicitly excludes political cases of the kind being pursued by the US against Assange?

It is a victory for state criminal-

ity that the discussion has devolved to Assange's mental health rather than a substantive discussion of the treaty's misapplication to serve political ends.

And similarly the focus on US assurances regarding Assange's wellbeing is intended to obscure the fact that a journalist's work is being criminalised as "espionage" for the first time under a hurriedly drafted, draconian and discredited piece of First World War legislation, the 1917 Espionage Act. Because Assange is a political prisoner suffering political persecution, legal arguments are apparently powerless to save him. It is only a political campaign that can keep underscoring the sham nature of the charges he faces.

What Assange bequeathed us through Wikileaks was a harsh light capable of cutting through the lies of power and power of lies. He showed that western governments claiming the moral high ground were actually committing crimes in our name out of sight in far-off lands. He tore the mask off their hypocrisy.

He showed that the many millions who took to the streets in cities around the world in 2003 because they knew the US and UK would



No journalist will dare repeat what Assange did – not unless they are ready to spend the rest of their days behind bars

commit war crimes in Iraq were right to march. But he also confirmed something worse: that their opposition to the war was treated with utter contempt.

The US and UK did not operate more carefully, they were not more respectful of human rights, they did not tread more lightly in Iraq because of those marches, because of the criticism beforehand. The west-

ern war machine carried on regardless, crushing the lives of anyone who got caught up in its maw.

Now with Assange locked up and silenced, western foreign policy can return comfortably to the era of zero accountability that existed before Assange shook up the whole system with his revelations. No journalist will dare to repeat what Assange did – not unless they are ready to spend the rest of their days behind bars.

The message his abuse sends to others could not be clearer or more chilling: what happened to Assange could happen to you too.

The truth is journalism is already reeling from the combined assaults against Khashoggi and Assange. But the hounding of Assange strikes the bigger blow. It leaves honest journalism with no refuge, no sanctuary anywhere in the world. **CT**

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DREAM IDOLS: George Chakiris and Natalie Wood, Tony and Maria of *West Side Story*.

EDWARD CURTIN

# Mr Blue and Maria: A musical dream

Sixty years ago in the late fall and early winter, a 17-year-old blue-eyed Bronx boy went by himself to see an afternoon showing of *West Side Story* on Fordham Road in the north Bronx. He took the bus to the theatre but walked the few miles home in a romantic daze, in love with Maria and yearning for a girl like that for himself.

The movie had mesmerised him, and though he knew about gang fights and the enmity between different ethnic groups, especially white prejudice against Puerto Ricans and blacks, he had never been involved in such violence. It was real and not-real for him, and he was smart

enough to realise that a movie was not real life and that great music had the anodyne power to enchant, and together with colourful moving pictures it could put one into a dream state that could be very powerful.

There was a reason why Hollywood was called the “Dream Factory”. But he liked to dream and went to the movies to lose himself in fantasy like so many others. But *West Side Story* had hit him especially hard, and as he walked home through the winding streets, he felt unreal, as though the spell the movie cast on him was everlasting.

He wanted to be Tony, not dead but alive, and Tony taking Maria away from the violent streets to a

somewhere place where love and happiness were possible. His fascination, however, was tinged with foreboding, a sense that despite what felt like a window of optimism and hope in 1961 with the new young president John Kennedy in the White House, something bad was coming round the corner or whistling down the sky since shortly before the US and the Soviet Union had faced off with tanks at the recently erected Berlin Wall, and weird things were happening around the world such as the Bay of Pigs invasion earlier in the year and the recent death of the Secretary General of the UN Dag Hammarskjöld, one of the boy’s heroes.

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In those years before cynicism swept the country, people had heroes, as did the boy: his father, JFK, Hammarskjöld, Paul Newman, and the basketball star Bob Cousy, obviously different in kind and stature. For the boy was a romantic at heart but his head thought dark thoughts. He didn't know why, but he felt an odd mixture of hope and dread, and he kept thinking of Tony and Maria and how they fell in love at first sight.

He wondered if this was just a movie thing. Was it fate that Tony got shot? He kept thinking back to seven years earlier when his seven-year-old cousin accidentally shot and killed his nine-year-old brother and the weirdness of accidents and horrible evil and love and sex and death and how his blue-eyed red-haired sister had married her Puerto Rican boyfriend despite the sick norms of the time. His mind was a merry-go-round of inchoate thoughts and impressions going in circles till the music stopped when he got home without a partner to share his deepest thoughts with, and no hand to hold. And so he went twice more by himself to see the movie, hoping to discover some secret embedded in its tale, thinking that perhaps the beautiful music hid a revelation and so he would have to listen again and again.

He kept all this to himself, not daring to share his heart's desires and fears with anyone, since he was an athlete and the only boy with seven sisters and his role was to be strong and brave and stoic and swallow his loneliness. The previous month he had come out of high school basketball practice on East 85th St. in Manhattan in the early evening only to ask a stranger for the time. The stranger in the tan cap and coat was his hero

Somewhere, someday,  
love might conquer all this  
madness and we'll find  
a new way of living and  
I'll find my Maria and  
it will be love at first sight

◆

Paul Newman, the star of the recently released movie *The Hustler* in which he played Fast Eddie Felson, the pool hustler. The boy, who loved movies and went dreaming in them, had identified with Newman and his character's desire to win, and when Newman, who introduced himself as Paul, very nicely took a few minutes to ask his name and talk to the boy about his school and basketball, the boy was thrilled, and the thrill was compounded when Newman called after him as the boy was leaving, "See you later, Fast Eddie." They shared blue eyes and for some reason blue now seemed to colour so much of what the boy saw and felt, the blue of the open sky's freedom and the blueness of Tony's eyes and his death and the Virgin Mary blueness of the aptly named Maria of the dark eyes, just like the talismanic miraculous medal of Blessed Mary that hung around the boy's neck, kept there to protect and guide him to something that felt just out of reach and that perhaps he needed a miracle to reach. Who knows? He didn't, but he felt that something was coming if he could only wait in hope, something very hard to do with his impetuous and passionate nature. He had just gotten into a stupid fight at a basketball practice with Louis Alcindor, who later became Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, which left him feeling weird and wondering about young men and fighting and now he had just seen Tony get killed

in a tragic twist of fate in a game run by forces bigger than the Sharks and the Jets could imagine.

What did it mean to win? And even though Tony wasn't real, only an actor playing a part, his death resounded in the boy's mind, just as did Maria's anguish as she held her dying lover. Somewhere, someday, he thought, love might conquer all this madness and we'll find a new way of living and I'll find my Maria and it will be love at first sight.

The next year the boy went with a friend to The Gaslight Café in Greenwich Village. It was around the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis when the world teetered on the edge of nuclear war. The unknown blue-eyed Bob Dylan was performing there that fall and it was when he first sang "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall." The boy kept hearing his words: "And what'll you do now, my blue-eyed son? And what'll you do now, my darling young one?" And a hard rain did fall, although nuclear war was avoided, Kennedy was soon shot dead for seeking peace between two gangs far more deadly than the Sharks and the Jets.

And the boy had to decide what he would do, for the music played on but nobody was listening and there were guns and sharp swords in the hands of young children and napalm and rifles in the hands of young men in distant jungles. He wondered if there really was a place for us somewhere, a place to find a new way of living, for it didn't seem like this was the time for it with blood everywhere, bad blood, good blood, puddles of blood, streams of blood, blood in the songs and songs in the blood, Dallas, New York, Memphis, the city of Angels, Saigon, San Juan, Hanoi down through the years as he wandered in tears and wondered where it was all



going, all this blood.

Blue entered his soul, a blueness of the deepest deep that was not a Technicolor blue but a Billie Holiday blue, the Bronx buried Billie near the boy's dead young cousin Jimmy, dead with a bullet to the heart because of an adult's carelessness, the adults who made the wars in the ghettos and the jungles and caused the deaths of so many all across the world, those unfeeling ones who killed Billie and Bobby and Jimmy and Tony and Johnny and Bernardo, and did their best to try to extinguish blue skies in the hearts of young people everywhere, to drug them and wipe their minds clean of hope and idealism and the feeling that miracles could happen and the world is full of light with suns and moons all over the place, wild and bright going mad, shooting sparks into space because love is found and love abides.

For the boy, as he walked through the years and became a man, the blueness in his soul always also harboured a certain blue that counteracted the blues, a blue like singing the blues defeats the darkness. For

One day, the boy who became the man, walked into a room to teach a course on death and meaning, and there was his Maria looking at him

him it was this inner image of Maria, Mary, Marie, the lady in blue, the Blessed one, the mother of all sorrows and hope that kept him company all along his journeys and sang to him as she held his hand. Who can explain it, who can tell you why? He wasn't foolish enough to try.

One day, the boy who became the man, now a reluctant young professor, walked into a room to teach a course on death and meaning, and there was his beautiful Maria looking at him, she of the long dark hair and dark eyes, resurrected, and he saw her and the world went away, death departed, they stared at each other spell-bound, and he knew this

wasn't a movie but was real love at first sight. Time flew away and yet a hard rain kept falling and it's falling still. The sky still weeps and the blood keeps a-flowing. The boy learned to tell it and "speak it and think it and breathe it and reflect from the mountain so all souls can see it", and is still doing his best.

He and Maria, no longer young, just went to the movies together to see the remake of *West Side Story*. The theatre was nearly empty. He was expecting to find much to criticise. Instead, he found Tony and Maria again and the same old story, the fight for love and glory for a new time and place but with new faces in the same race to defeat the old hate that never seems to die. It was only a movie. But as he took Maria's hand he knew that love abides, and he whispered to himself, "Always you, every thought I'll ever know/Everywhere I go you'll be, you and me". It was a miracle, not a dream. **CT**

Edward Curtin's new book is *"Seeking Truth in a Country of Lies"*. His website is [www.edwardcurtin.com](http://www.edwardcurtin.com)

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MATT BLACK

# Journey into the heart of a forgotten country

Photographer's 100,000-mile journey chronicles  
the reality of life in the 'other' America

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*Tuesday, January 5, 2016, Fresno, California: Leaving home. I once told myself that all I needed to understand was my corner of the world, but I've been crisscrossing the country for a year now, and all I want to do is see more. I'm catching the 11:00 p.m. bus from Fresno to Calexico, 438 miles, 10 hours. One backpack with one pair of pants, one long-sleeved shirt, one T-shirt, jacket, hat, four pairs of socks. Panasonic camera, XPan camera, six lenses, thirty rolls of film. From Calexico, I'll take the bus cross-country, to Bangor, Maine, and back. It's 3,317 miles, one way. About six weeks.*

**W**hen Magnum photographer Matt Black began exploring his hometown in California's rural Central Valley – dubbed “the other California,” where one-third of the population lives in poverty – he knew what his next project had to be. Black was inspired to create a vivid portrait of an unknown America, to photograph some of the poorest communities in the United States.

Travelling across 46 states and Puerto Rico, the award-

Photo: Matt Black / From American Geography





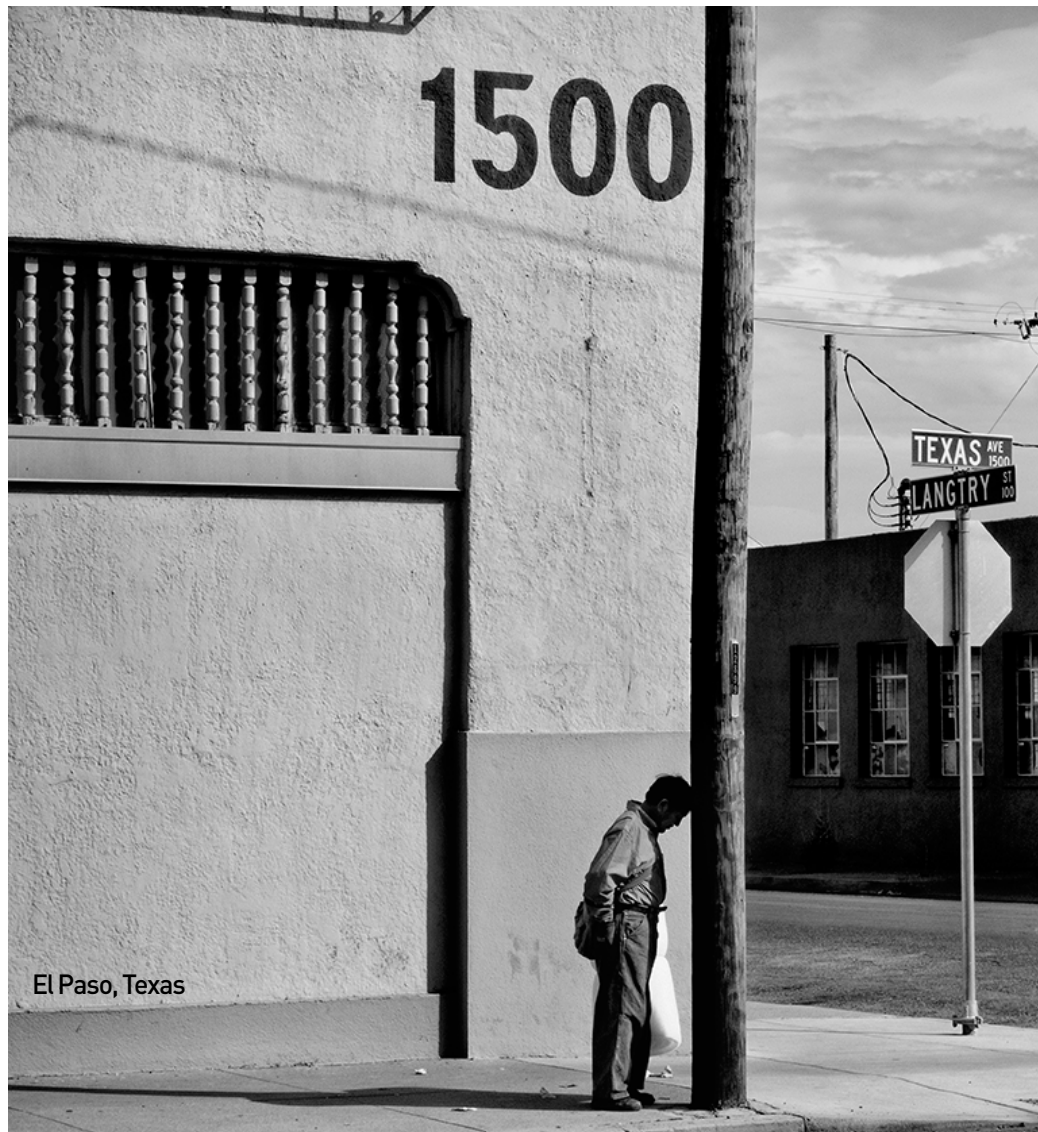
Flint, Michigan

winning photographer visited designated “poverty areas” (places with a poverty rate above 20 percent) and found these areas are so numerous that they are never more than a two-hour drive apart, woven through the fabric of the country but cut off from “the land of opportunity”.

His first monograph, *American Geography*, published by Thames & Hudson, is a visual record of this five-year, 100,000-mile road trip, conveying the nation’s grim realities. It destined to be a future classic of photography,

Accompanying Black’s compelling black-and-white photographs throughout the book is his own travelogue: an evocative collection of observations, overheard conversations in cafés and public transportation, bus timetables, diner menus, historical facts, and snippets from daily news reports.

The portrait of America that emerges in *American Geography* will challenge readers’ perceptions, deconstructing the myth of the American Dream and shining a light on the brutal reality for many people living in the world’s richest country.



El Paso, Texas



Photos: Matt Black / From American Geography



Photo: Matt Black / From American Geography

Eagle Butte, South Dakota



## The Photographer

Matt Black's work has appeared regularly in *Time* magazine, the *New Yorker*, the *California Sunday Magazine*, and other publications. A member of Magnum Photos, he has been honoured three times by the Robert F. Kennedy Journalism Awards. In 2015, he received the W. Eugene Smith Memorial Award for Humanistic Photography. **CT**

# AMERICAN GEOGRAPHY

## MATT BLACK

## The Book

**AMERICAN GEOGRAPHY:  
A Reckoning With A Dream**

MATT BLACK

Published by Thames & Hudson

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JOE ALLEN

# Artificial Intelligence is probing the universe – you’re included

AI overtakes Moore’s Law, designs a xenobot, “dreams up” new proteins, advances pure mathematics, and takes over Harvard

The late cyborg Stephen Hawking had a bad feeling about AI. Even though the paralytic depended on machines for his existence, he feared artificial superintelligence would evade human control and wreak havoc on our species. Buzzing in his computerised monotone back in 2014, the physicist retold a classic 1954 sci-fi story:

“Scientists built an intelligent computer. The first question they asked it was, ‘Is there a God?’ The computer replied, “There is now”. And a bolt of lightning struck the plug, so it couldn’t be turned off.

It’s an amusing parable, but many scientists take the idea quite seriously. Last January, an international team of experts led by Iyad Rahwan of the Max-Planck Institute in Berlin warned, “Superintelligence Cannot Be Contained”. Their analysis, published in the *Journal for Artificial Intelligence Research*, arrived at

an obvious conclusion, echoing the warnings of Oxford transhumanist Nick Bostrom in his 2014 book *Superintelligence*.

In order to fully control any mechanism or system, one has to predict its behaviour. Because artificial superintelligence will be beyond human comprehension, and therefore impossible to predict, it will also be impossible to control. The same motivational programs that drive an AI to gather data and improve itself would most likely drive it to escape containment. From there, God only knows what would happen.

End of discussion. Don’t plug it in. It’s not worth the risk.

But reckless human beings, being all too predictable, can’t resist the urge to open a box full of demons or chomp on forbidden fruit. The ancient quest to create gods from raw metals is moving ahead at an accelerating pace.

People have talked to their idols for

eons. Now, the idols are actually talking back. Even their creators couldn’t predict what they have to say.

In a nutshell, Moore’s Law holds that the computational power of transistors will double every two years. With a few fits and starts, this has been true for many decades.

On December 2, *IEEE Spectrum* magazine reported “AI Training Is Outpacing Moore’s Law”. Most of these strides have been made in natural language processing – the machine’s grasp of logos, the “word”, a quality once unique to humankind.

The analysis comes from MLPerf, a consortium of engineers who track machine learning performance. Analysts found that since 2018, top artificial intelligence systems – from Google, Microsoft, and Habana Labs – perform 6.8 to 11 times better than they did two years ago. Unlike the processing hardware gauged by





Moore's Law, this advance is due to rapid self-improvement by the software itself.

If this trend continues, we're about to see an explosion in artificial intelligence capabilities. Already, the past few months have seen a flood of news on this front – including the creation of new lifeforms. Artificial intelligence is producing novel ideas that had previously flown over bi-engineers' and mathematicians' heads.

On November 29, scientists at Harvard's Wyss Institute for Biologically Inspired Engineering unveiled a self-replicating xenobot. The creatures were literally designed by an AI system. Each organism consists of about 3,000 cells derived from a frog, *Xenopus laevis*, but their structure and function is entirely engineered. Hence the name "xenobot."

The xenos have a one-tracked mind. Using tiny hairs on their surface, they basically just swim

in a circular pattern. Stunning videos show these animated jellybeans sweeping pale stem cells into piles. Eventually, those piles become stem cell globs and those globs become new xenobots.

The design for this self-replicating system, found nowhere else in nature, came from the mind of a computer. Evolutionary algorithms running on the Deep Green supercomputer at the University of Vermont explored billions of different body types, and tested each of them in virtual space.

"We asked the supercomputer at UVM to figure out how to adjust the shape of the initial parents, and the AI came up with some strange designs after months of chugging away," a researcher explained. "It looks very simple, but it's not something a human engineer would come up with".

Once the AI had "discovered" a workable body plan – the now-famous jellybean – the scientists stitched them together from frog cells. The rest is history. AI created a novel xenobot capable of self-replication. Strangely, the scientists discuss this alien creature in terms of discovery, even using reverential capitalisation.

"We've discovered that there is this previously unknown space within organisms", one scientist marvelled. "We found Xenobots that walk. We found Xenobots that swim. And now, in this study, we've found Xenobots that kinematically replicate. What else is out there?"

I'd say we can only dream, but it's a computer manifesting these nightmares.

On December 7, *IEEE Spectrum* ran the trippy headline "AI Hallucinates Novel Proteins", citing a study published in *Nature*. After training itself on countless known examples,

---

a deep learning AI system “dreamed up” novel protein structures by exploring vast fields of possibility to model reality.

This use of the term “hallucinate” originates in the field of facial recognition, where a deep learning system uses its vast store of images to create an “ideal” face. Employing a similar method, scientists at the University of Washington trained their AI on existing 3D protein structures, then “asked” it to “dream up” new ones.

In virtual space, the scientists introduced various mutations into simulated DNA strands, and the AI predicted the resulting protein structure. In total, the program “hallucinated” two thousand proteins. The scientists then went into the lab, mutated the DNA of actual *E. coli* bacteria, and examined the results. Of 129 attempts, the machine’s “dreams” appear to have correctly predicted the protein structure in 27 cases.

This humanisation of machines – with terms like “hallucination”, “decision”, and “understanding” – is rampant among technologists. It’s a natural outcome of computers developing increasingly complex abilities.

On December 1, Google’s DeepMind team boasted their system had uncovered unique patterns in pure mathematics – in topology and representation theory – that humans had wrestled with for decades. The most significant aspect, though, was their comparison of AI to a Hindu mystic:

“More than a century ago, Srinivasa Ramanujan shocked the mathematical world with his extraordinary ability to see remarkable patterns in numbers that no one else could see. [He] described his insights as deeply intuitive and spiritual, and patterns



Within our lifetimes,  
some artificial intelligence  
system – or a number  
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declared superior  
to human beings

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often came to him in vivid dreams. ... In recent years, we have begun to see AI make breakthroughs in areas involving deep human intuition.”

Much like Google’s Ray Kurzweil said over two decades ago, the public consciousness is being herded into “The Age of Spiritual Machines.”

There are many other examples of “human-AI symbiosis” across dozens of fields. Oftentimes, the algorithms are merely crunching numbers or sorting items. In many cases, the supposed “AI” is a sham, with human grunts doing most of the work. But admittedly, that’s not what we’re seeing with the xenobots, the protein hallucinations, or the mathematical breakthroughs.

These are legitimate instances, now rapidly accumulating, of AI thinking for itself beyond the human mind. Machines are a long way from learning to love, but I truly wonder how long it will be before they can mimic love – or humour, or fear, or pleasure, or pain – just enough to trigger genuine human emotions. In normal people, I mean. Not robo-pervs. They’re already a lost cause.

As artificial neural networks become more complex in structure, more articulate through natural

language processing, more knowledgeable through larger data-sets, with more freedom to manoeuvre on their own – and as they solve problems and notice patterns beyond human abilities – machines will increasingly be regarded as colleagues.

Many AI systems will become personalised through social robots and virtual avatars. As the enthusiasts insist, they will become our intimate “companions”. For low-level workers, they’ll be deployed as supervisors and instructors. This is already true at Amazon warehouses, in e-learning “classrooms”, and numerous other miserable environments.

An entire generation is being primed to accept this as normal. Within our lifetimes, some artificial intelligence system – or a number of them – will be declared superior to human beings. If boosters can convince half the public that Biden is sentient, they can convince them that computers are gods, too. All it would take is establishment support.

On December 7, Harvard University announced its new Kempner Institute for the Study of Natural and Artificial Intelligence. A gift of \$500-million from Mark Zuckerberg and his wife will go toward hiring new faculty, creating a new computer infrastructure, and promoting interdisciplinary research in the fields of neuroscience and AI.

The goal is to produce an elite class of experts who understand thinking machines – whether human, animal, or silicon. Brain studies will produce better AI, and computers will create better models of the brain, back and forth, in a continuous feedback loop. Given that the Harvard Divinity School is now led by an atheist, one imagines there will be little emphasis, or even mention, of the soul.

In such a spiritual vacuum, anything except grace or miracles will seem possible.

Ray Kurzweil famously mused, “Does God exist? I would say, ‘Not yet.’” To be fair, the last two decades have made the Singularity – the moment when computers surpass human abilities – seem more immanent than the Second Coming, at least in Silicon Valley. They don’t call it the “rapture of the nerds” for nothing.

Artificial intelligence now resembles a new lifeform to the point that its makers are starting to believe it’s alive. Now, waves of propaganda are being pushed to get the public on board. If the past two years have taught us anything, it’s that when elites declare something to be true, most people will nod along, if only to avoid the trouble.

Perhaps the Singularitarians see Harvard, alongside MIT and Oxford, as a sort of finishing school for their Super Computer God. This entity wouldn’t have to be conscious or caring. Human rulers rarely are, so why



I suspect the coming catastrophes will look less like Skynet eradicating the human swarm, and more like the Wizard of Oz crying “Obey!”

expect it of a machine? No, it would only have to be convincing.

On December 2, Engineered Arts released a video of their new raceless, genderless robot, Ameca. Most people reacted with horror, mainly because their empathy circuits were triggered by its lifelike expressions. Even if there’s soul behind Ameca’s carefully crafted mechanisms, humans have an instinctive fear that when such a creature is animated by a sufficiently advanced AI, it will

eventually be alive and possibly malevolent.

It could be that an artificial super-intelligence will one day cut loose and destroy the world. But I suspect the coming catastrophes will look less like Skynet eradicating the human swarm, and more like the Wizard of Oz crying “Obey!” while an idiot behind the curtain deploys a drone swarm on the wrong target.

They say the Devil’s greatest trick is to convince the world he doesn’t exist. In the case of a Super Computer God, perhaps the greatest trick will be to convince the world that it does.

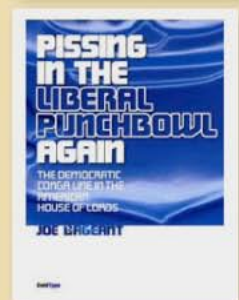
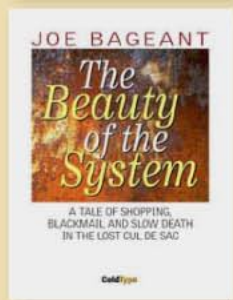
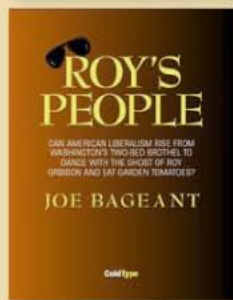
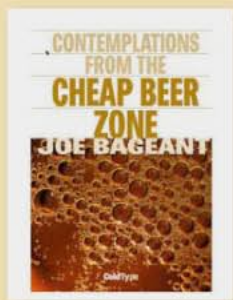
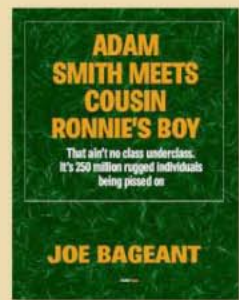
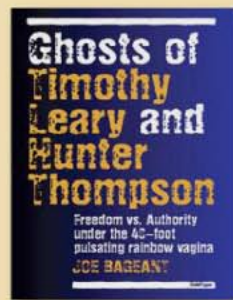
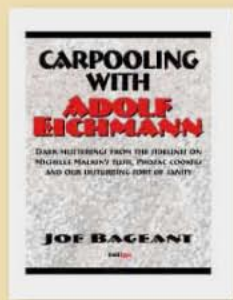
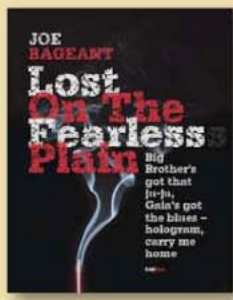
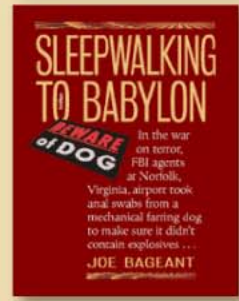
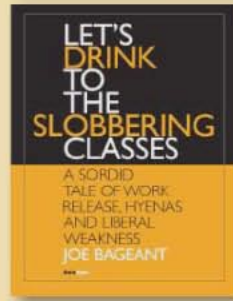
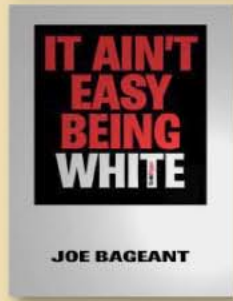
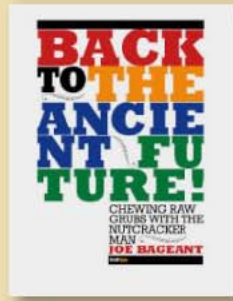
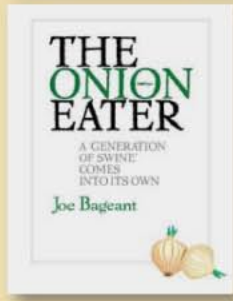
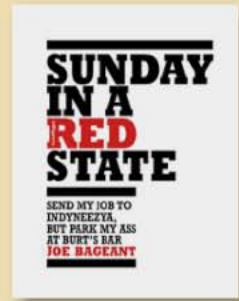
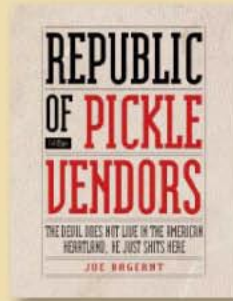
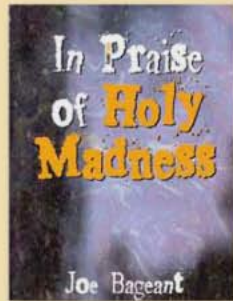
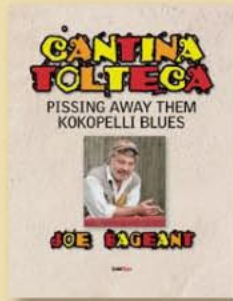
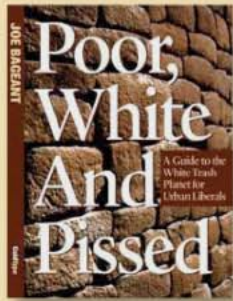
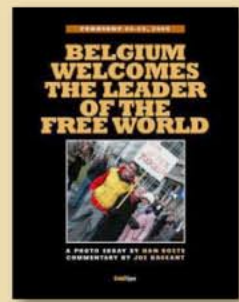
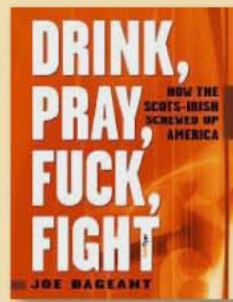
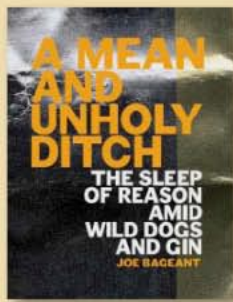
Technocrats don’t need superintelligence to ruin our lives. In fact, their machines don’t even have to function properly. All they need is legitimacy. No matter how amazing their gadgets become, never give them that satisfaction. **CT**

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

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CHOCOLATE DREAMS: 64-year-old Sabedin Ejupi at Ramstore Mall in Skopje, North Macedonia.

LINH DINH

# Ghosts. Not quite ghosts

Just being ourselves, lost in our normality

In Hanoi in 1998, poet Phan Huyen Thu gave me an anthology of the earliest Vietnamese prose. The book is now in a box in Moorestown, NJ, at my friend Ian Keenan's house, along with all my other books, which constitute my mental terrain, roughly. I won't see it again. Life is loss, in installments.

Though I read every page with much interest, all its characters have disappeared, except a certain ghost that used to bother people at a Hanoi wet market. Meaning no harm, he was just frustrated, it's clear, at not being seen and heard properly – just like the rest of us, especially now.

In a 15th-century account of just over 100 words, this ghost lives, then, an individual with sane, normal needs. Though fleshless, he's social and keeps no distance, unlike too

many of us, entombed, as we are, in a chimeric fear. Snap out of it, fools!

Granted, we had faded into nearly nothing even before this. By consensus, we had agreed to become mostly virtual. Still, handshakes were normal, hugs were OK and we routinely saw each other's lips, teeth and tongue. Now, with our body's last exposed orifices concealed, we move singly along, rubbing against nothing.

This regiment of self-erasure hasn't been followed universally, however. Here and there, as in Sub-Saharan Africa – where I am sitting now – and most of the Balkans, where I stayed until recently, people have maintained their ordinary ties and intercourses. During my 21 months of Covid-enforced wandering, I've been lucky to encounter life

as it has always been, with people, almost unthinkingly, just being themselves, most gloriously. Let's meet three of them.

In downtown Skopje, North Macedonia, there's Ramstone Mall, which bills itself as not just a centre of shopping, but of friendship. Filled with anticipation, I barged in and wasn't disappointed. In a wooden shack, there's a white haired man drawing portraits under a sign, "ART STUDIO/ SAIGON / SABEDIN EJUPI."

"Excuse me, Sir, but why is your studio called Saigon? I'm, uh, from Saigon."

Showing not the least surprise at having such an unlikely visitor, 64-year-old Sabedin Ejupi explained that when he was 11, a chocolate

company had a promotion. Each piece of chocolate came with a picture of a national capital. If you could collect the entire set, you'd win a prize.

Sabedin and his friends bought way too many pieces of chocolate. With infinite patience, they gathered Washington, Paris, Moscow, Peking, Seoul, Cairo, and so on, but no one ever came up with Saigon. With the Vietnam War raging, that elusive city was always in the news, like a daily taunt to these frustrated Macedonian boys.

Fate touched Sabedin, however, when he heard there was a place that sold these pictures. He went there and, sure enough, they had the extremely rare Saigon one! What a miraculous snatch!

Winning, Sabedin wasn't just the envy of all his friends, he became Saigon, that unreachable, ghostlike city now reduced to just one tiny, inaccurate photo. It could have been anywhere, really. More Saigon than me, Sabedin was still Saigon half a century later, and he'll die as Saigon, of course, without ever seeing his namesake.

On my first morning in Cape Town, I walked nearly the length of Kloof onto Long Street. In any new city, each building is curious, each shop sign, each passerby. Near the corner of Wale, Street a grinning guy at a sandwich stand yelled at me, "Hey!"

Irritated, I said silently to myself, "I've just had a long flight, with two layovers. I slept on the floor in Rome. I haven't had breakfast. Just leave me alone, man. I don't want your sandwich". Looking at him, I nodded and grinned, quickened my pace.

Each time after that, he would do the same, even when I was on the other side of the street, so I said,



**GREETINGS FROM CAPE TOWN:** Young man at a sandwich stand. "On my first day in Cape Town, he yelled at me in greeting as I walked by. Every time after that, he'd do the same."

"You've got to stop yelling at me, man. I'm afraid to walk by you!"

Finally, I bought a cup of coffee from this dude. We talked. As I got to know him better, I realised he yelled at everybody, in the most cheerful way. Seeing a woman walking by, he might say while putting two fists to his chest, "Oh, I'm so happy!"

"You're a total whore, man. You flirt with every woman!" I ribbed.

"They're beautiful."

"Hey, that's a good attitude. I hate guys who always judge women. She's this, she's that, but then, look at you, man!"

"That's right. Ha, ha!"

"Hey, you didn't say hello to her!"

"Which one?"

"That one". Studiously, we stared at this lithe woman in a tight, gray dress strolling away.

"I didn't see her."

"She's offended."

"I can't say hello to her if I don't see her."

Aged 27, he had never been outside South Africa. Though white enough, he actually had a coloured (mixed race) father, whom he had no memory of. His dad was abusive to his mom, so she moved away and raised two sons alone. She's

English.

Like most working people, he was not a reader, it's clear, so his knowledge of the world was limited. So what? Once, he asked me if the Portuguese language was native to Angola? Another time, if cheeseburgers were popular in the USA?

Like most South Africans, he's fluent in Afrikaans and English, of course, but since he didn't have a third language, like most South

African blacks, he was trying to teach himself Xhosa. It's not easy, he stated, for there were few resources online, but he was determined. Each language is a new, unsuspected universe. Plus, none is as rooted to that land as Xhosa. Going nowhere, he dug.

Now I've been in Windhoek, Namibia's capital, for five weeks. I've just moved into my second apartment. It's bigger, quieter yet cheaper. My landlord is an Indian who's interesting to talk to.

Most of the streets in my neighbourhood honour German composers, Beethoven, Bach, Wagner, Brahms, Schubert, Strauss, Mozart and Gluck. Hey, where are Mendelssohnstrasse and Schoenbergstrasse?

Compared to Cape Town or, frankly, Columbus, Ohio, Windhoek is a bit dull, but this suits me fine, for I need rest. There are no cafes or restaurants near me, just an old woman across Beethoven who sells lunch, I suppose, from a single pot. I haven't asked her to lift the lid.

Half a mile away, though, there's Old Location, a bar and restaurant

named after a black neighbourhood that was cleared out by the South Africans when they ruled Namibia.

Drinking a Hansa there one day, I met our final character for this article. Seeing Joana walk in, the barmaid tensed up, but served her anyway. A short, wild-eyed woman in her 60's, Joana lost no time raving. Clearly unhappy with this earth, she started to rant about space exploration.

"So you're a philosopher," I said.

"And a politician!"

"Why do you want to go to space? There's nothing there. I'd rather stay here."

"But we must explore!"

Turning to the barmaid, I asked, "Do you want to go to space?"

"Are you making fun of me?" Joana snapped.

"No, I'm just saying. There's nothing out there. Everything is here."

"You're right. It is horrible, but everything *is* here."

Frowning slightly, the barmaid clearly didn't want me to encourage Joana, but it was too late. I learned that she was an ex-teacher who lived with several relatives just down the street. "Come", she said, "I want to show you how we live."

Leaving my mug, I said to the unsmiling barmaid, "I'll be right back". Joana walked out with her beer.

In Vietnam or Naples, you can often see how strangers live by walking by their homes, or stare into their rooms from your upper floor window. In the USA, you can live next to a cannibal for several decades without knowing it. Every so often, there's a muffled scream, but it's just his TV, obviously. "Please don't stab me!" Geez, he really likes



**LOST IN SPACE:** In the Windhoek kitchen of Joana, a just-fired Namibian teacher. The appliances don't work because Joana can't afford to pay for electricity.

horror movies, you conclude.

Just like that, I met an articulate old man, cigarette-smoking old woman, smiling young woman in curlers, pretty teenage girl and a chubby boy, all related to Joana, and all living in houses without electricity or running water. Useless TVs, stoves and microwaves silently mock them.

The old man had been a labourer until disqualified by age. The woman in curlers was unemployed, though with an associate degree in tourism and hospitality. The teenage girl was Joana's granddaughter. After her mother had died, her father disappeared.

In Joana's home, I noticed a bible in English, but also *My Groot-Groot Storieboek* in Afrikaans, with marked her as a Baster. Her lighter skin reinforced this conclusion. Of mixed Dutch and Bushmen ancestries, Basters are centred in Rehoboth, a town of just 29,000 people. It's instructive how they cling to their bastard heritage. You are who you are.

With indignation, Joana showed me her just-received layoff letter: "We write this letter to inform you that your services have been terminated effective 1 November 2021. This has been necessitated by your contin-

ued absence from work.

"This has costed the school a lot in terms of service delivery, if not reputation. It is paramount that your perennial illness can not be tolerated. The school through the Principal's Office tried to counsel you to clarify that your frequent unauthorized absence from duty is not encouraged in our work environment, but you did not take heed of this.

"Despite the warnings and a fair chance to mend your ways, there has been no change [...]."

As the only one working in that extended family, Joana should not have tossed her job away, but I don't know the forces that have shaped or deformed her down the decades, nor if I could have survived them any better. We slog along until we break down, go mad or drop dead.

Stumbling along, we often help each other, but suddenly, all basic – normal – human acts, from smiling to touching, or just being together, are absurdly thwarted, if not outlawed. Even breathing freely has become illegal. Keep your mask on, over your nose! Beyond madness, it's evil. Only the most moronic or complicit can excuse this anti-life agenda. A while back I suggested that, at the very least, each man should be left alone to be ordinary, for the divine is already in every batted eyelash, grain of rice, smallest act of generosity or scuttling cockroach.

Normality is our birthright. How dare they pervert that, and why do we go along? **CT**

Linh Dinh's latest book is "*Postcards from the End of America*". He maintains a photo blog at [www.linhdinhphotos.blogspot.com](http://www.linhdinhphotos.blogspot.com).

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REBECCA GORDON

# Taking a stand against the 24-hour economy

Why workers are reconsidering the nature of work itself and its place in their lives, no matter what the president or anyone else might wish

In mid-October, President Biden announced that the Port of Los Angeles would begin operating 24 hours a day, seven days a week, joining the nearby Port of Long Beach, which had been doing so since September. The move followed weeks of White House negotiations with the International Longshore and Warehouse Union, as well as shippers like UPS and FedEx, and major retailers like Walmart and Target.

The purpose of expanding port hours, according to the *New York Times*, was “to relieve growing backlogs in the global supply chains that deliver critical goods to the United States”. Reading this, you might be forgiven for imagining that an array of crucial items like medicines or their ingredients or face masks and other personal protective equipment had been languishing in shipping containers anchored off the West Coast. You might also be forgiven for imagining that workers, too lazy for the moment at hand, had chosen a good night’s sleep over the vital business of unloading such goods from boats lined up in their dozens offshore onto trucks, and getting them into the hands of the Americans desperately in need of them. Reading further, however, you’d learn that those “critical goods” are actually

things like “exercise bikes, laptops, toys, [and] patio furniture.”

Fair enough. After all, as my city, San Francisco, enters what’s likely to be yet another almost rainless winter on a planet in ever more trouble, I can imagine my desire for patio furniture rising to a critical level. So, I’m relieved to know that dock workers will now be labouring through the night at the command of the president of the United States to guarantee that my needs are met. To be sure, shortages of at least somewhat more important items are indeed rising, including disposable diapers and the aluminium necessary for packaging some pharmaceuticals. Still, a major focus in the media has been on the spectre of “slim pickings this Christmas and Hanukkah.”

Providing “critical” yard furnishings is not the only reason the administration needs to unkink the supply chain. It’s also considered an anti-inflation measure (if an ineffective one). At the end of October, the Consumer Price Index had jumped 6.2 percent over the same period in 2020, the highest inflation rate in three decades. Such a rise is often described as the result of too much money chasing too few goods. One explanation for the current rise in prices is that, during the worst months of the

pandemic, many Americans actually saved money, which they’re now eager to spend. When the things people want to buy are in short supply – perhaps even stuck on container ships off Long Beach and Los Angeles – the price of those that are available naturally rises.

Republicans have christened the current jump in the consumer price index as “Bidenflation,” although the administration actually bears little responsibility for the situation. But Joe Biden and the rest of the Democrats know one thing: if it looks like they’re doing nothing to bring prices down, there will be hell to pay at the polls in 2022 and so it’s the night shift for dock workers and others in Los Angeles, Long Beach, and possibly other American ports.

However, running West Coast ports 24/7 won’t solve the supply-chain problem, not when there aren’t enough truckers to carry that critical patio furniture to Home Depot. The shortage of such drivers arises because there’s more demand than ever before, and because many truckers have simply quit the industry. As the *New York Times* reports, “Long hours and uncomfortable working conditions are leading to a shortage of truck drivers, which has compounded shipping delays in the United States.”





The Port of Los Angeles at sunrise.

## Rethinking (shift) work

Truckers aren't the only workers who have been rethinking their occupations since the coronavirus pandemic pressed the global pause button. The number of employees quitting their jobs hit 4.4 million this September, about 3 percent of the US workforce. Resignations were highest in industries like hospitality and medicine, where employees are most at risk of Covid-19 exposure.

For the first time in many decades, workers are in the driver's seat. They can command higher wages and demand better working conditions. And that's exactly what they're doing at workplaces ranging from agricultural equipment manu-

facturer John Deere to breakfast-cereal makers Kellogg and Nabisco. I've even been witnessing it in my personal labour niche, part-time university faculty members (of which I'm one). So allow me to pause here for a shout-out to the 6,500 part-time professors in the University of California system: Thank you! Your

In addition to demanding higher pay and better conditions workers are now in a position to re-examine and reject the shift-work system itself

threat of a two-day strike won a new contract with a 30 percent pay raise over the next five years!

This brings me to Biden's October announcement about those ports going 24/7. In addition to demanding higher pay, better conditions, and an end to two-tier compensation systems (in which labourers hired later don't get the pay and benefits available to those already on the job), workers are now in a position to reexamine and, in many cases, reject the shift-work system itself. And they have good reason to do so.

So, what is shift work? It's a system that allows a business to run continuously, ceaselessly turning out and/or transporting widgets year after year. Workers typically

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labour in eight-hour shifts: 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., 4:00 p.m. to midnight, and midnight to 8:00 a.m., or the like. In times of labor shortages, they can even be forced to work double shifts, 16 hours in total. Businesses love shift work because it reduces time (and money) lost to powering machinery up and down. And if time is money, then more time worked means more profit for corporations. In many industries, shift work is good for business. But for workers, it's often another story.

## The graveyard shift

Each shift in a 24-hour schedule has its own name. The day shift is the obvious one. The swing shift takes you from the day shift to the all-night, or graveyard, shift. According to folk etymology, that shift got its name because, once upon a time, cemetery workers were supposed to stay up all night listening for bells rung by unfortunates who awakened to discover they'd been buried alive. While it's true that some coffins in England were once fitted with such bells, the term was more likely a reference to the eerie quiet of the world outside the workplace during the hours when most people are asleep.

I can attest to the strangeness of life on the graveyard shift. I once worked in an ice cream cone factory. Day and night, noisy, smoky machines resembling small ferris wheels carried metal moulds around and around, while jets of flame cooked the cones inside them. After a rotation, each mould would tip, releasing four cones onto a conveyor belt, rows of which would then approach my station relentlessly. I'd scoop up a stack of 25, twirl them around in a quick check for holes, and place them in a tall box.

## Management was too cheap to buy screens for the windows, which remained shut, even when it was more than 100 degrees outside

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Almost simultaneously, I'd make cardboard dividers, scoop up three more of those stacks and seal them, well-divided, in that box, which I then inserted in an even larger cardboard carton and rushed to a giant mechanical stapler. There, I pressed it against a switch, and – boom-bada-boom – six large staples would seal it shut, leaving me just enough time to put that carton atop a pallet of them before racing back to my machine, as new columns of just-baked cones piled up, threatening to overwhelm my worktable.

The only time you stopped scooping and boxing was when a relief worker arrived, so you could have a brief break or gobble down your lunch. You rarely talked to your fellow-workers, because there was only one “relief” packer, so only one person at a time could be on break. Health regulations made it illegal to drink water on the line and management was too cheap to buy screens for the windows, which remained shut, even when it was more than 100 degrees outside.

They didn't like me very much at the Maryland Pacific Cone Company, maybe because I wanted to know why the high school boys who swept the floors made more than the women who, since the end of World War II, had been climbing three rickety flights of stairs to stand by those machines. In any case, management there started messing with my shifts, assigning me to all three

in the same week. As you might imagine, I wasn't sleeping a whole lot and would occasionally resort to those “little white pills” immortalized in the truckers' song “Six Days on the Road.”

But I'll never forget one graveyard shift when an angel named Rosie saved my job and my sanity. It was probably three in the morning. I'd been standing under fluorescent lights, scooping, twirling, and boxing for hours when the universe suddenly stood still. I realised at that moment that I'd never done anything else since the beginning of time but put ice cream cones in boxes and would never stop doing so until the end of time.

If time lost its meaning then, dimensions still turned out to matter a lot, because the cones I was working on that night were bigger than I was used to. Soon I was falling behind, while a huge mound of 40-ounce Eat-It-Alls covered my table and began to spill onto the floor. I stared at them, frozen, until I suddenly became aware that someone was standing at my elbow, gently pushing me out of the way.

Rosie, who had been in that plant since the end of World War II, said quietly, “Let me do this. You take my line”. In less than a minute, she had it all under control, while I spent the rest of the night at her machine, with cones of a size I could handle.

I have never been so glad to see the dawn.

## The deadly reality of the graveyard shift

So, when the president of the United States negotiated to get dock workers in Los Angeles to work all night, I felt a twinge of horror. There's another all-too-literal reason to call it the “graveyard” shift. It turns out that working when you should be in

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bed is dangerous. Not only do more accidents occur when the human body expects to be asleep, but the long-term effects of night work can be devastating. As the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) reports, the many adverse effects of night work include:

"[t]ype 2 diabetes, heart disease, stroke, metabolic disorders, and sleep disorders. Night shift workers might also have an increased risk for reproductive issues, such as irregular menstrual cycles, miscarriage, and pre-term birth. Digestive problems and some psychological issues, such as stress and depression, are more common among night shift workers. The fatigue associated with nightshift can lead to injuries, vehicle crashes, and industrial disasters."

Some studies have shown that such shift work can also lead to decreased bone-mineral density and so to osteoporosis. There is, in fact, a catchall term for all these problems: shift-work disorder.

In addition, studies directly link the graveyard shift to an increased incidence of several kinds of cancer, including breast and prostate cancer. Why would disrupted sleep rhythms cause cancer? Because such disruptions affect the release of the hormone melatonin. Most of the body's cells contain little "molecular clocks" that respond to daily alternations of light and darkness. When the light dims at night, the pineal gland releases melatonin, which promotes sleep. In fact, many people take it in pill form as a "natural" sleep aid. Under normal circumstances, such a melatonin release continues until the body encounters light again in the morning.

When this daily (circadian) rhythm is disrupted, however, so is

Perhaps the pandemic has given us an opportunity to rethink which goods are so "critical" that we're willing to let other people risk their lives to provide them for us

the regular production of melatonin, which turns out to have another important biological function. According to NIOSH, it "can also stop tumour growth and protect against the spread of cancer cells". Unfortunately, if your job requires you to stay up all night, it won't do this as effectively.

There's a section on the NIOSH website that asks, "What can night shift workers do to stay healthy?" The answers are not particularly satisfying. They include regular checkups and seeing your doctor if you have any of a variety of symptoms, including "severe fatigue or sleepiness when you need to be awake, trouble with sleep, stomach or intestinal disturbances, irritability or bad mood, poor performance (frequent mistakes, injuries, vehicle crashes, near misses, etc.), unexplained weight gain or loss."

Unfortunately, even if you have access to healthcare, your doctor can't write you a prescription to cure shift-work disorder. The cure is to stop working when your body should be asleep.

## An end to shift work?

Your doctor can't solve your shift work issue because, ultimately, it's not an individual problem. It's an economic and an ethical one.

There will always be some work that must be performed while most people are sleeping, including

healthcare, security, and emergency services, among others. But most shift work gets done not because life depends upon it, but because we've been taught to expect our patio furniture on demand. As long as advertising and the grow-or-die logic of capitalism keep stoking the desire for objects we don't really need, may not even really want, and will sooner or later toss on a garbage pile in this or some other country, truckers and warehouse workers will keep damaging their health.

Perhaps the pandemic, with its kinky supply chain, has given us an opportunity to rethink which goods are so "critical" that we're willing to let other people risk their lives to provide them for us. Unfortunately, such a global rethink hasn't yet touched Joe Biden and his administration as they confront an ongoing pandemic, supply-chain problems, a rise in inflation, and – oh yes! – an existential climate crisis that gets worse with every plastic widget produced, packed, and shipped.

It's time for Biden – and the rest of us – to take a breath and think this through. There are good reasons that so many people are walking away from underpaid, life-threatening work. Many of them are reconsidering the nature of work itself and its place in their lives, no matter what the president or anyone else might wish.

And that's a paradigm shift we all could learn to live with. **CT**

**Rebecca Gordon** teaches at the University of San Francisco. She is the author of *American Nuremberg: The US Officials Who Should Stand Trial for Post-9/11 War Crimes* and is now at work on a new book on the history of torture in the United States. This article first appeared at [www.tomdispatch.com](http://www.tomdispatch.com).



Above: Republican troops wave from train departing for the Aragón front, Barcelona. August 1936. The writing on the train reads, "UHP [Unión de Hermanos Proletarios; Union of Proletarian Brothers] swear on these letters before you die brothers rather than consent to tyrants."

ROBERT CAPA

# Remembering a year in Spain's civil war

Once a cult-status rarity, Capa's classic Spanish Civil War photobook *Death in the Making*, is available again

Robert Capa's *Death in the Making* was first published in 1938 as a poignant tribute to the men and women, civilians and soldiers alike, fighting in Spain against Franco's fascist insurrection.

The book included just one year of images from the Republican position, but covered the spectrum of emotions of a civil war, from the initial excitement to the more harrowing realities of modern warfare.

Over time, after World War II and rising



anti-communist paranoia in the United States, association with the Spanish Civil War was a liability and the book became obscured and hard to find.

Today, however, *Death in the Making* has reached cult status, not least because copies are hard to find (particularly ones with Capa's famous Falling Soldier image on the dust jacket), but also for its passionate call to defend democracy.

With new scans of all the images, a remastered facsimile of the original edition, co-published by Damiani and the International Center of Photography, reproduces the original layout by photographer André Kertész, along with the original caption text by Capa and

The book covered the spectrum of emotions of a civil war

preface by writer Jay Allen. The muddy 1938 publication is entirely transformed by high-quality printing to reflect the beauty and pathos of the original intention.

This edition also includes a new essay with new research on the making and the reception of the original book, and a complete checklist identifying the author, location and date of each image.

The most important new information is that Robert Capa and Gerda Taro are not the only photographers in the book, but also included was work by their good friend and colleague Chim, later known as David Seymour.

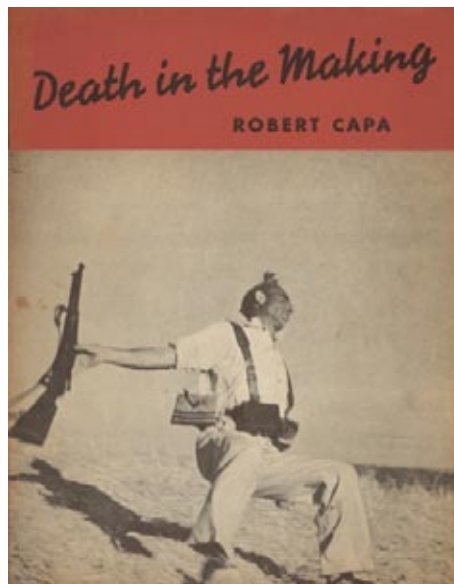
Above:  
Civilians running  
in the street during  
as air raid alarms  
ring out.  
Bilbao, Spain. May 1937.



Above: Republican soldiers lie on the ground aiming their rifles. Aragón front, Spain. August 1936.

RIGHT: Death of a Loyalist militiaman, near Espejo, Córdoba front, Spain, early September 1936.

This is one of the most famous images of war and one of the first photographs to depict death in such a physical way. It was first published in *Vu*, September 23, 1936, under the headline "How They Fell," and then it appeared in various international publications over the next few years. It was not published in the interior of the book.



### DEATH IN THE MAKING

Robert Capa

Published by Damiani  
[www.damianieditore.com](http://www.damianieditore.com)  
US \$45 / CDN \$63

### The Photographer

**Robert Capa** is one of the best-known photojournalists of the 20th-century. Born Endre Ernő Friedmann, in Budapest, Hungary, on October 22, 1913, to a Jewish family of tailors, he studied in Berlin, then fled to Paris in 1933. Quickly gaining an international reputation for his photographs of the Spanish Civil War, he later escaped to New York in 1939. He covered World War II as an Allied photographer, cofounded Magnum Photos in 1947, and made several books based on his photographs of travel in Europe, the USSR, and Israel. He died after stepping on a landmine in Indochina in 1954. **CT**



BOOK EXCERPT

# Life on the Mississippi, 1969

*A Riverboat Journal / by Dell Franklin*

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *This book is about the three generations of black people, with whom I worked during my time as storekeeper on the Delta Queen riverboat in 1969. Their stories, vividly illustrating their exclusion from opportunities I took for granted, caused me to think differently about America and the way black folks looked at white people, specifically me – somebody who represented everything that oppressed them and precipitated their anger and rage. This book is not my coming of age story, but theirs, told in their unique deep south vernacular – Dell Franklin*

**I**t is mid morning, breezy, clear, birds swooping and diving around the Jax brewery like participants in an air war. At the French Market, above the seawall, a man in an apron drops day-old bags of pastries to hobos scattered below him near a deserted box car adjacent the murky sea of a river. A few days back I shared a pint of whiskey with these men but soon left when the whiskey was gone and it became evident they regarded me resentfully as not yet accomplished enough to share their company.

On the bow of the Delta Queen is a chalkboard with chicken scratches: WANTED: DECK HANDS AND PORTERS. Several black deckhands in blue work shirts lounge or labor with brooms and mops or chisel away rust on the bow and along railings. They pause to fix me with stares as I try and work up the courage to cross the gangway onto the bow, where a massive barrel of a man of perhaps 60 in black captain's uniform and cap, his face broad and flat, narrows his already narrow squint on me.

The cheap whiskey and beer is still in my empty gut after a week of nonstop partying during Mardi Gras. I stand on the quay studying the Delta Queen, majestic and freshly painted following two months in dry dock repair. I am broke, having spent my last \$100 on a fleabag hotel across from Lafayette Park and burgers from White Castle and shellfish from Martin's bar in the French Quarter, where I ran across some Vietnam vet ex-marines who still owned the 1,000 mile stares and informed me the Queen, the last passenger carrying paddle-wheel steamship to ply the Mississippi and Ohio rivers, was hiring.

The deckhands resume their labors, still keeping an eye on me, possibly wondering where this white boy came from – he wears his only remnant

of a three year army hitch; faded flimsy field jacket, baggy work pants, sneakers, a secondhand army surplus backpack stuffed with a few changes of underwear, extra flannel shirt, two paperbacks, two pens, a pocket-size writing pad, and a secondhand sleeping bag attached to the pack.

Though broke, I do not fear starving and am exhilarated because I am free, trekking across the fractured and bleeding carcass of America with thumb out, unencumbered by wife, girlfriend, job, career, ambition. I feel a smug advantage over all those who possess these rewards, because there are no complications in my life, no burdens or pressures in a country addicted to striving, stress, security, and the stockpiling of junk

From the start, I had no idea where I was going, still do not as the black deckhands slow down to a near standstill, keeping a closer eye on me as I try to work up my courage to face the formidable man whose narrow flinty eyes seem to take me in as an intruder. The deckhands are all glinting gold teeth and ropy arms with knots in the middle. One wears a watch cap. They begin to nod at each other and giggle and smirk as the big man folds his arms across a massive chest and seems to challenge me with those eyes, which say, "Well, boy, you comin' aboard, or you gonna stand there shittin' your pants?" Like an old white cracker terrifying the slaves.

I take a deep breath and stride over the gangway as the big man unfolds his arms and stands planted on the bow like a 200-year-old oak. I stop directly before him and unstrap my pack as if I mean to stay.

"I see you need help," I say. "I'm looking for work. Would you be the captain, sir?"

"Yessuh." Gruff, guttural growl, the man seeming to spit the words at me like he's trying to dislodge tobacco from his tongue. "We need deckhands."

"I'll do that."

He pauses. "Y'all don't mind livin' with neegrows?"

"I've lived with all kinds in the army, sir."

He glances briefly at the deckhands, then scrutinizes me with a flicker of interest. He takes in everything, and I look him in the eye, almost grinning –

like we're in a movie. Then his voice suddenly booms at me. "What ah need is a gawdamn sto'keepah!"

Quickly I reply, "I'll do that, too, captain."

"What y'all know 'bout sto'keepin'?" he challenges me.

"I've worked in warehouses as a stock boy and order writer, sir."

"Where y'all work as a stock boy?" he demands to know.

"In Los Angeles, sir, that's where I'm from."

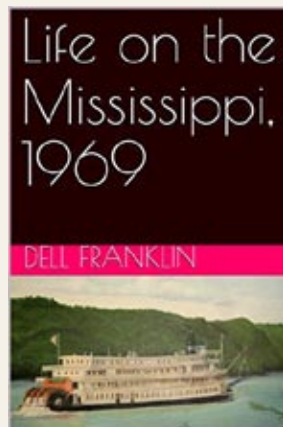
He takes in more of me, top to bottom. A sudden yellow-stained horsey grin rips across his meaty face. "Y'all har'd!" he announces and offers his enormous paw, and we shake. "Cap'n Ernest Wagnah."

"Dell Franklin, sir."

A spindly, bespectacled, old-time looking black man, who's been lurking in the background since I approached the captain, steps right up. He wears baggy check pants and a white smock with a tall toque drooping ludicrously to his ear, lending him a buffoonish air; but then he smiles, and he is a handsome old guy, dark chocolate, not even five-and-a-half feet tall, and in his incandescent puppy-friendly eyes is resolution, and when I look into those eyes I feel an instant rush of warmth and trust. I find myself exchanging smiles with the man, whose forearms could belong to a 200-pound blacksmith, his hands as big as those of the captain, who dwarfs him, and now addresses the old man.

"Chef Jawnah, look like we got us a sto'keepah. Say he run a warehouse." He glances at me. "Chef Jawnah, he yore boss, son."

His name tag says Henry Joyner Sr. I offer my hand and the old man lunges at me and grips my hand with a vise-like manacle, veins bulging along those forearms. "Playshuh t' shake yo' hand," he says in a slow, rich drawl, and a smile of false teeth blazes across his small oval face, those eyes shining with such genuine sincerity that I am disarmed. "Son, ah sho' nuff hope y'all the man ah been lookin' fo'. We gone troo a bunch-a sto'keepahs, and they drunk up mah cookin' wines, an' mah vanilla extract...they sniffin' up mah Sterno, 'bout druve Jawnah plum lowdown loco."



**LIFE ON THE MISSISSIPPI  
1969: A Riverboat Journal**

Dell Franklin

Pierside Press

Amazon – Kindle **\$6.03**

Paperback **\$13.95**



Another black man, in uniform and cap, perhaps 35, tall, erect, with a neat mustache, ambles up. His name tag reads FRANKLIN MYLES, STEWARD.

“Franklin,” says the captain. “We got us a new sto’keepah name of Franklin.” He chortles at the coincidence.

The steward shakes my hand weakly, gazes past me. “Well, cap’n,” he says in a squeaky falsetto. “Ah sho nuff hope he work out better’n them jive turkeys been roonin’ the chef’s sto’rooms.”

The chef smiles at me in a manner indicating we’re already on amiable terms. “Franklin, ah ’speck this young man be jes’ fine. Ah got a good feelin’ ’bout him.” The trust in his eyes is fathomless. He nods. “He gwain be jes’ fine.”

I figure I got no choice not to be. Old Joyner, he’s hooked me like a trout.

**M**yles leads me to a warren of rooms below deck: cramped, a faint whiff of musk reminiscent of barracks life. My quarters are at the end of the hallway directly under the bow, farthest from the shower area. There is a porthole and two army-like cots, and the one away from the door is covered neatly with a colorful comforter. A simple wooden dresser is in a far corner, and atop it, lined up in perfect juxtaposition beside a toilet kit are brush, hair pick, baby powder, witch hazel, bicarbonate of soda, peroxide, tiny scissors. Above the dresser, tacked to the wall, is a small, gleaming mirror. No dust anywhere. Three rows of leather shoes, variously colored, stuffed with trees, polished to a high gloss, are arranged under the cot beside foot powder. Two flawlessly pressed white shirts and black waiter jackets rest on wooden hangers on pegs in the wall. Beside the cot is a single plastic milk crate on which stands an alarm clock, goose-neck reading lamp, and a book – “Invisible Man” by Ralph Ellison. Name tags on the waiter jackets read, JEROME DAVIS. I drop my bedding and shirts on the narrow mattress. A fresh fragrance and slight breeze from the porthole offsets the mustiness of the hallway.

The steward says, “Most-a these rooms are noisy, four to a room. Davis, he likes to be alone. He won’t like this. Most waiters are two to a room. Now Davis, he’s quiet, and he won’t stand for no jive. You seem like a mature young man. I think you’ll like Davis...”

He flashes an uncertain and mischievous smile. “Once y’all get to know him.”

Myles takes me down to the storeroom, which borders the crew dining room, where the chef awaits me, ants in his pants, raring to go. He opens the main storeroom – the size of a large bedroom and looking like a tornado swept through it. I stand outside the doorway while he confides how a steady stream of no-accounts wrecked the storeroom, the meat locker, bakery, freezer, and cold storage room. He had to come down and scavenge through the mess for items to send up to the galley on the dumbwaiter in the crew dining room so they could cook.

“Day’uhl, it hard t’ find a good man nowadays. Young men, they ain’t hongry. When ah’z a young man wuzn’t nobody keep up with Jawnah, an’ ’at’s why ah got har’d. These young folks, they don’t wanna work.”

Two men stand near the serving counter in the dining room and observe me. There are three long tables parallel to one another, a small card table off by itself, a smaller condiment table, all on a linoleum floor. One of the observers, slender, charcoal-colored and sleepy-looking, sporting a crushed, shapeless hat, slouches against a wall like he has no spine, cigarette dangling from his lips, broom in hand. Behind the serving table, busying himself in a noisy huff, is a black man around 40 with a huge solid belly, broad shoulders, squarish head, and a short neck with a hump at the base. His face and nose are flat, nostrils like holes in a double-barrel shotgun, lips pursed in a severe pout, hooded eyes lifting to appraise me with unmasked suspicion and disapproval, as if I am a stray dog in HIS backyard. The chef introduces him to me as Jessie, the man in charge of the crew dining room. The other, low-key man is his assistant, Emmet. While Jessie continues scowling at me, Emmet nods, almost smirking, like he knows something I don’t know that will not turn out well.

“Ain’t nothin’ but no-accounts and thieves been in these sto’rooms, boy,” Jessie snaps at me in a nasal singsong. “I done stick-whipped ‘em til they bleedin’ half t’ death. Y’all don’t take good care mah chef, y’all git the same, boy.”

The chef sags. “Jess, ah got a good feelin’ ’bout this young man.”

Jessie huffs while Emmet smiles to himself. The chef and I enter the storeroom. I shed my field jacket. There is hardly an item on the unmarked shelves. Boxes and sacks are strewn about, cans, large and

small. It is hard to move through the mess. I hoist a case and hurl it out into the dining room, where a snooping Jessie jumps out of the way. He and the chef exchange glances. Emmet puts down his broom, pours himself a coffee, sits down at one of the tables and turns on a transistor radio to some scratchy blues and watches me heave more cases and sacks out into the dining room as the chef and Jessie back away. The chef says he has work in the galley and moves up the winding stairway to the galley like he's in a race, arms pumping, cap flopping back and forth.

Sweating, I clear the floor, sweep and mop it, and ask Jessie for masking tape. He hands me some as Emmet rolls a cigarette and lights up. After taping and marking shelves I begin stacking cases and sacks against a wall, open certain cases and stack shelves, finding room for every small and gallon can in the room. The chef scampers in, skids to a halt, does a double-take, and grins. "Why, y'all one workin' sonofagun."

"I've put in a system, chef, simplified the inventory. I'll need my own key."

He nods quickly. "Ain't nobody gwin have a key but y'all and me." He peers around. "Ah'm so pleased, son. Y'all sho is the man ah been lookin' fo'."

Then he shows me my other storerooms down the hall from the dining room, near quarters for waiters, cooks and engineers. Jessie stands in the doorway of the main storeroom, hands on hips, peering in. The other rooms are in disarray. I vow to the chef I will have them shipshape by evening. He smacks my arm, grins, scampers up the stairway. Jessie steps out of my way as I return to my storerooms. Suddenly, the captain tramps up, halts abruptly at the doorway, peers around.

"Look pretty good," he concedes with a grunt.

Jessie says, "He done worked like no man, cap'n."

The captain continues appraising, then walks to a corner where I've stacked empty boxes. "No room fo' these," he snaps. There is a half-door opening and he grabs a box and flings it through the opening into the Mississippi. He starts to grab another and I snatch it away from him as Jessie recoils in mock-horror.

"What the hell you think you doin'?" snaps the captain, flustered.

"I need those boxes, sir. They're part of my new system."

"Part-a yore system? Hell!"

"I use 'em to send supplies up to the galley, and I

need 'em for inventory, ordering, stocking. Everything in this room has a purpose, sir, so I'd appreciate it if you didn't pitch my boxes into the river."

Jessie backs away from the door. Emmet perks up as the captain's face and neck flush. Oh, Oh. His eyes flash. "This mah gawdamn ship!" he bellows. "Y'all been on this yere ship two hours and you tellin' me how t' run mah sto'rooms!"

"Cap'n, sir, I'm the storekeeper. I gotta run things my way, or you'll have to find more worthless no-accounts to make a mess like I found here, if that's what you want."

Jessie shakes his head at me and rolls his eyes. Emmet grins. The captain sputters. "This mah goddam ship! Ev-a thing on this ship mine! These sto'rooms, they mine..."

"Then why'd you hire me if YOU wanna run 'em? I'm busy, sir, tryna get things ship-shape for the chef, and you're in here interfering with my system."

He looks around for help, but Jessie and Emmet turn away. "Now he kickin' me out mah sto'rooms," he growls at them. "Ah jes' har'd the sumbitch...ah'm talkin' to mah chef 'bout this crazy sumbitch."

He tromps out, huffing up the stairs. I gaze at Jessie and Emmet with my best imitation of the ghetto-glare. "Sometimes," I tell them. "These white folks jes' gotta be put in their proper place." I turn and re-stack my empty boxes, then feel Jessie in the doorway.

"Mistah sto'keepah," he oozes, very polite. "May ah puh-leeeeeze have fo' cans a Sterno, so's we-all can keep the chef's vittles warm fo' mah boys?"

I find four cans and hand them over.

**W**hen the line begins moving, Jessie appears rankled while he plops food on their plates, much like the surly, desultory army cooks during basic training. "Do move along," he chides in a whiny nasal voice rising to a strident singsong. "I say, DO move along."

A tall, skinny, buck-toothed deckhand complains mildly about his portions, and Jessie stiffens, halts. "No sass from you-all, Youngblood, or I stick-whup yo' ugly black ass til it ain't black no mo'." There is grumbling among the men, but they are mostly resigned. "I say, DO move along. Y'all GIT seconds. Don't wanna hear no cryin' an' whinin' from no lazy ass niggers."

The captain enters, followed by a small white uni-

formed officer, in his 30s, preppy, boyish-looking. Behind him is another officer, a thickset 40 year old with a chiseled face and dark, engaging eyes. He smiles and nods at everybody, like an experienced social leader. The three men hang their hats on a rack and sit down. Jessie allows Emmet to take over the serving and flutters to these men, pouring ice teas as Franklin Myles joins them.

“How’s mah cap’n?” Jessie oozes

“Jes’ fine, Jessuh.”

Jessie gushes over the officers, brings their food, then returns to wait on the last person in line, me, on whose plate he drops extra portions of rice, black-eyed peas, and collared greens, smiling at me as if we’re in cahoots. Emmet places a large wedge of cornbread on the mountain of food and the blacks glance up to observe my outrageous bounty as I sit at the end of one of the deserted tables, away from the crowd.

I hear Jessie. “Cap’n...” He hands the officers linen napkins. “We got us a new sto’keepah, and he done OWN them sto’rooms, suh!”

The captain tucks his napkin at his throat. “Kick me out mah gawdamn sto’rooms!” he bleats, turning to his officers. “Been on the rivah all mah life, and nobody kick me out no sto’room befo’. Now this new sto’keepah tell me t’ git out his sto’rooms, cuz them sto’rooms HIS!”

The 40ish man smiles at me and winks. I taste my food, and an elixir moves immediately through my system like a natural high. I eat, and eat, mopping up gravy with cornbread. Jessie smiles at me like an adoring matriarch as deckhands straggle up for seconds. “Aint nobody cook peas ’n ham like our chef,” he chirps, simpering.

“Now this new sto’keepah say he gon quit he don’t get a raise...after he kick me out HIS sto’rooms! He think this gawdamn ship HIS. Gawdammit, ah guess ah ain’t got a damn thing t’ say ’bout nothin’ no mo’.”

Myles giggles and the officers grin as Jessie refills their glasses of tea, the steward last, of course. He moseys by and fills my glass and returns to his station in prim, mincing steps. The crew shuffles along for seconds, and Jessie suddenly seems resigned and too depleted to scowl and wheedle, just plops food into their plates as if he’s got a dirty job and sees no way out but to trudge on, long suffering, sweat streaming down his molten face and dripping from his chin and nose, saturating his neck.

My storerooms are squared away by mid evening and I feel like celebrating my new job. Chef Joyner is only too happy to dig into his cigar box and loan me \$20 when I ask for \$10, a spot against my wage, which is to be \$75 a week instead of \$65 when the captain agrees to my raise. Damn, I found a home!

Kachefski comes along, and we manage to wedge into Martin’s, finding the marines, who buy round after round of shots to toast my job. We get pretty smashed, say our good byes, and straggle back to the Queen. Kachefski eschews a cot in one of the rooms and rigs up a blanket/pallet atop the ten-foot high mound of linen. It is dark in my quarters and I stand by my cot waiting for a little starlight to outline the room through the porthole. A long hump is under the covers of the other bunk. I’m sticky and rank, need a shower. I try to make my cot as quietly as possible so as not to awaken the sleeping hump, but bang around while doing so. I creep down to the shower room, where, alone, I soap up and rinse off and return to the room, where my room mate reads, his lamp shining.

**D**avis sits under his blanket, bifocals in place. He could be 50, hair neatly parted on one side and specked with gray. He is not as dark chocolate as the chef but with similar refined, handsome features, and his neatly clipped mustache is also graying. He glances at me with only his eyes, not moving his head as I stand like a lump, towel around my waist.

“If you’re going to get drunk,” Davis says, enunciating his words carefully like a college professor, which he resembles, “please do not destroy the room.” His voice is strong, resonant, like a blues singer.

“Sorry. I couldn’t see. Didn’t mean to awaken you, sir.”

He shifts his eyes back to the book. I quickly rummage through my pack and change into briefs and climb under covers. I take out my current bible, Jack Kerouac’s “On the Road,” and stare at a page.

After a silence, I ask, “Do you like the porthole open?”

“Always, unless there’s a hurricane.”

“Good. I like the fresh air.”

Davis continues reading.

“Listen,” I find myself saying. “I hate to inter-

rupt your reading, but I'm the new storekeeper, Franklin."

"Yes, so I've heard, Mr. Franklin."

"Well, I know you're Mr. Davis. Just wanted to introduce myself."

"Very well, Mr. Franklin. We are now formally introduced. I will be reading for a short time, until I feel sleep return. Then I will turn off my lamp. If it is your desire to read at night, I suggest you find a low-wattage lamp. You can plug it in my outlet."

"Thanks, Mr. Davis. I appreciate that. Glad to meet you."

He keeps his eyes on his book, turns a page with exceptionally long fingers, nails immaculate. His wrists are thick, and, like the chef, there is a natural bulge to his forearms. I turn back to my book. Very softly, the river laps against the hull below our porthole, and I feel safe and secure and adrift from the turbulence of the outside world. I am so tired. The book falls out of my hand. I curl up, turn away; a delicious cool draft from the porthole wafts over me. The reveling down town is finally expiring in the distance.

**A** hubbub of voices in the hallway awakens me to a throbbing headache, cotton mouth, nausea. My toes are pinched and I jump up to see the chef, toque dangling to his ear.

"Git on up, they's work t' be done. Come on now."

Before I can focus he is gone, a puff of smoke. Sunshine pours through the porthole. Davis's bed is crisply made, area immaculate. I make my bunk military style, clean up, go straight to my storeroom. Breakfast is over. Jessie and Emmet are cleaning up.

"Sho' hope the new sto'keepah ain't no alky," Jessie snorts. "Like them other no-accounts."

"Any coffee left, boss?"

"Cream and sugar, Mistah. Sto'keepah?"

"Please, sir."

I'm sipping and checking my shelves and missing my big city newspaper when the chef bustles in, full speed ahead.

"Y'all late." He hoists a sack of rice onto his shoulder. I grab it and place it on my shoulder. "I do the heavy lifting from now on, chef. You're half my size and five times as old, at least."

He straightens and juts his jaw at me. "Age don't

mean nothin'. Ah feel like a young man. A man is a man."

"I'll carry this up the stairs for you. Don't want you falling and breaking a hip and end up in one of those homes where they hafta feed you."

"Reckon y'all end up in one of them places fo' ah do, drinkin' like y'all do. Come on, ah show y'all the kitchen." The galley is large, spacious. Across the room is a very long black stove and beside it a bank of refrigeration, boilers, a dish washing area. In the middle is a large wooden cutting table below a steel rack from which hang pots, pans, spatulas, ladles, etc. To my left is a milk dispenser like those in army mess halls. There are cabinets with dishware. Beside a door size opening to the river is a card table with folding chairs and coffee cups and ashtrays on top.

There are four cooks in checked pants, white smocks, toques, and a portly, droopy-shouldered, light-skinned negro toiling with dishes. The chef calls his cooks over for introductions. They are in no hurry, neither friendly or unfriendly in facial expression. Will is a slight, cocoa-colored man with sparse mustache, elusive eyes, soft handshake. CJ is husky, gray-yellow, rubbery face etched with deep, troubled creases. He issues a soft handshake, but speaks: "My pleasure," he says softly. His loner eyes want no complications. I know I'll like him. James is tall, lanky-lean, around 30, with a slick pompadour to go with a Fu Man Chu mustache to give him a menacing Genghis Khan aura. He won't look at me, disdains my offer of a handshake. Lastly there is Lewis, who seems to spill out of his uniform like the roundest, softest 300 pounds of soft brown pudding. His mouth is excessively wide, and his lips seem to tremble in anticipation of danger, like a dog used to being abused. He inches toward me, struggling with his ponderous bulk, eyes sad, bulgy, solicitous, and he parts those lips in a pleased if painstaking smile. "So happy to make your acquaintance, Mr. Sto'keepah. Chef, he say fine things 'bout y'all." His voice is a lazy falsetto. His girly hand offers another soft shake.

The chef explains to his crew that only he and I will have keys and access to the storerooms. If any of them need something during their work I am to be called over the intercom downstairs or on the loudspeaker throughout the ship, and I will deliver the needed items. Insult registers on their faces, especially James, who smirks, almost sneers, and stalks off. The others just look resigned.

The chef asks if I want breakfast, but I know these

cooks will resent this after I've been late, so I take coffee and a roll downstairs to get ready for a shipment of supplies he has ordered and which should show up on the bow for the 100 plus passengers coming aboard this late afternoon for our first trip – to Memphis. Already I feel the pressure on the chef and his cooks, for the chef explains that the most important job on the cruise is the meals.

“They’s mos’ly old folks, and they lives to eat!”

**A** truck pulls up to the dock and two men unload my shipment, their T-shirts soaked in sweat. Suddenly several deckhands, like birds swooping out of the sky to alight on telephone lines, stand at the edge of the bow in a patch of shade watching the white men jack the big sled of stock across the gangway onto the bow. One hands me inventory papers, which I sign after checking the shipment, and then they are gone and I glance out of the corner of my eye at the deckhands who seem to hold a unified posture of defiance.

I begin pulling boxes from the six-foot high sled and stack them dolly high. I have half-a-dozen separate stacks and finally wheel one of three which specifically holds soft drinks down to my storeroom. When I return to the bow the sky has darkened, losing some of its metallic glare, but is still molten. I am lathered in sweat, eyes stinging, hair soggy and limp. One of the remaining soda cartons is ripped apart and six deckhands drink from cans, very smugly, staring directly at me. I glance their way, settling my eyes on Willie and have visions of blacks marauding the streets during riots, looting, burning and beating to death any white man who happens to be caught up in the scene.

The sky cracks and goes slate gray, yet the heat feels more intense. Willie straightens, puffs out his chest, glowering at me with what I recognize as murderous intent. I say, “You’re a big man, Willie, stealing cokes when you got me out-numbered ten to one.”

His glower turns evil. I slip the dolly under another stack of soft drinks and wheel it down to the storeroom, dumping the boxes inside, hands trembling, heart bonging in my chest. When I reach the bow a gouge has been ripped out of another box of soda cartons and Willie puts his can down and growls, “Muffa-kiss-ma-muffuckin-ass! His crew stiffens and they put down their cans. I turn away, slip the dolly under another stack and start to it wheel away. Out

of the corner of my eye I see a shadow drawing near and feel Willie’s heat. I drop the dolly and duck just as he lunges at me with a roundhouse right, clobbering me on the ridgy bone beside my eye and dazing me, wobbling my legs. As he prepares for a follow up shot I smash him full in the face with my right fist, feeling his nose crunch and lip split against his teeth as he unleashes a bellow and lurches backwards onto the deck, landing on the seat of his pants, already shaking his head, clearing out the cobwebs.

Blood trickles down the side of my face. Boxes are scattered. The deckhands make no move toward me. Then Willie jumps to his feet and bangs his chest with his fists and moves toward me, eyes full of a new rage. Lightning cracks and I prepare to take him down with a low tackle and try to grapple him into submission. He’s hollering that he’s going to KILL me when the captain and first mate come around the railing and the captain quickly plucks Willie and holds him squirming while the first mate steps up to the growling pack of deckhands. When Willie realizes who’s holding him, he ceases squirming and goes instantly limp, peers straight down, licking his bloodied mouth.

“What the hell’s goin’ on?” the captain asks me.

I shrug. “Willie and I had an accidental collision.”

The captain releases Willie and studies me as I use my shirt to wipe the blood from my face and neck. “Y’all okay, son?”

I nod.

“Willie?”

Willie nods, still gazing down.

“By Gawd, boys’ll be boys!” the captain hoots, nodding at his first mate. He flashes his horsey grin. It starts raining. The rain cuts the river into whip-like ribbons as steam rises in the mist. The air cools ever so slightly. I am still panting. My fist aches. My eye and temple throb. Willie shambles back to his crew mates. There is blood on his face and shirt. The captain and first mate glance at both of us and leave the bow. Willie, refusing to look at me, starts to lead his crew off the bow. As they pass, Ellsworth and Barnes linger.

“Y’all one lucky muffucka,” Ellsworth snarls. “We see y’all later.”

“See me now,” I snap, clenching my fists. “Come get it while it’s hot, motherfucker!”

“Shee-it,” Barnes mutters. “Y’all goin’ down!”

“Fuck you!” I hear myself shout, and I’m trembling, nauseous. They leave the bow and I go back to work, sweating in the rain, tasting my own blood and savoring it.

**CT**

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