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The poor are being nickel and dimed - again

Peter Van Buren spends time working in a shop, where he discovers the impossibility of a living on the minimum wage

When US presidential candidate Bernie Sanders talks about income inequality, and when other candidates speak about the minimum wage and food stamps, what are they really talking about?

Whether they know it or not, it's something like this.

My working life then

A few years ago, I wrote about my experience enmeshed in the minimum-wage economy, chronicling the collapse of good people who could not earn enough money, often working 60-plus hours a week at multiple jobs, to feed their families.

I saw that, in this country, people trying to make ends meet in such a fashion still had to resort to food benefit programs and charity.

I saw an employee fired for stealing lunches from the break room refrigerator to feed himself. I watched as a co-worker secretly brought her two kids into the store and left them to wander alone for hours because she couldn't afford childcare. (As it happens, 29 per cent of low-wage employees are single parents.)

At that point, having worked at the State Department for 24 years, I had been booted out for being a whistleblower. I wasn't sure what would happen to me next and so took a series of minimum wage jobs.

Finding myself plunged into the low-wage economy was a sobering, even frightening, experience that made me realize just how ignorant I had been about the lives of the people who rang up my charges at stores or served me in restaurants. Though millions of adults work for minimum wage, until I did it myself I knew nothing about what that involved, which meant I knew next to nothing about 21st-century America.

I was lucky. I didn't become one of those millions of people trapped as the "working poor." I made it out. But with all the election talk about the economy, I decided it was time to go back and take another look at where I had been, and where too many others still are.

My working life now

This time around, I worked for a month-and-a-half at a national retail chain in New York City. While mine was hardly a scientific experiment, I'd be willing to bet an hour of my minimum-wage salary (\$9 before taxes) that what follows is pretty typical of the New Economy.

Just getting hired wasn't easy for this 56-year-old guy. To become a sales clerk, peddling items that were generally well under \$50 a pop, I needed two previous employment references, and I had to pass a credit check. Unlike some low-wage jobs, a man-

Though millions of adults work for minimum wage, until I did it myself I knew nothing about what that involved, which meant I knew next to nothing about 21st-century America

PAY WAR

Inside that store, shoppers seemed to interpret “the customer is always right” to mean that they could do any damn thing they wished. It often felt as if we were penned animals, who could be poked with a stick for sport

datory drug test wasn't part of the process, but there was a criminal background check, and I was told drug offenses would disqualify me. I was given an exam twice, by two different managers, designed to see how I'd respond to various customer situations. In other words, anyone without some education, good English, a decent work history, and a clean record wouldn't even qualify for minimum-wage money at this chain.

And, believe me, I earned that money. Any shift under six hours involved only a 15-minute break (which cost the company just \$2.25). Trust me, at my age, after hours standing, I needed that break, and I wasn't even the oldest or least fit employee. After six hours, you did get a 45-minute break, but were only paid for 15 minutes of it.

The hardest part of the job remained dealing with . . . well, some of you. Customers felt entitled to raise their voices, use profanity, and commit Trumpian acts of rudeness toward my fellow employees and me. Most of our “valued guests” would never act that way in other public situations or with their own coworkers, no less friends. But inside that store, shoppers seemed to interpret “the customer is always right” to mean that they could do any damn thing they wished. It often felt as if we were penned animals, who could be poked with a stick for sport. No matter what was said or done, store management tolerated no response from us other than a smile and a “Yes, sir” (or ma'am).

The store showed no more mercy in its treatment of workers than did the customers. My schedule, for instance, changed constantly. There was simply no way to plan things more than a week in advance. (Forget accepting a party invitation. I'm talking about childcare and medical appointments.) If you were on the closing shift, you stayed until the manager agreed that the store was clean enough for you to go home. You never quite knew when work was going to be over, and no cell phone calls were allowed to alert babysitters of any delay.

And keep in mind that I was lucky. I was

holding down only one job in one store. Most of my fellow workers were trying to juggle two or three jobs, each with constantly changing schedules, in order to stitch together something like a half-decent paycheck.

In New York City, that store was required to give us sick leave only after we'd worked there for a full year – and that was generous compared to practices in many other locales. Until then, you either went to work sick or stayed home unpaid. Unlike New York, most states do not require such a store to offer any sick leave, ever, to employees who work less than 40 hours a week. Think about that the next time your waitress coughs.

Minimum wages and minimum hours

Much is said these days about raising the minimum wage (and it should be raised), and indeed, on January 1, 2016, 13 states did raise theirs. But what sounds like good news is unlikely to have much effect on the working poor.

In New York, for instance, the minimum went from \$8.75 an hour to the \$9.00 I was making. New York is relatively generous. The current federal minimum wage is \$7.25, and 21 states require only that federal standard. Presumably to prove some grim point or other, Georgia and Wyoming officially mandate an even lower minimum wage and then unofficially require the payment of \$7.25 to avoid Department of Labor penalties. Some Southern states set no basement figure, presumably for similar reasons.

Don't forget: Any minimum wage figure mentioned is before taxes. Brackets vary, but let's knock an even 10 per cent off that hourly wage just as a reasonable guess about what is taken out of a minimum-wage worker's salary. And there are expenses to consider, too. My round-trip bus fare every day, for instance, was \$5.50. That meant I worked most of my first hour for bus fare and taxes. Keep in mind that some workers have to pay for childcare as well, which means that it's not

impossible to imagine a scenario in which someone could actually come close to losing money by going to work for short shifts at minimum wage.

In addition to the fundamental problem of simply not paying people enough, there's the additional problem of not giving them enough hours to work. The two unfortunately go together, which means that raising the minimum rate is only part of any solution to improving life in the low-wage world.

At the store where I worked for minimum wage a few years ago, for instance, hours were capped at 39 a week. The company did that as a way to avoid providing the benefits that would kick in once one became a "full-time" employee. Things have changed since 2012 – and not for the better.

Four years later, the hours of most minimum-wage workers are capped at 29. That's the threshold after which most companies with 50 or more employees are required to pay into the Affordable Care Act (Obamacare) fund on behalf of their workers. Of course, some minimum wage workers get fewer than 29 hours for reasons specific to the businesses they work for.

It's math time

While a lot of numbers follow, remember that they all add up to a picture of how people around us are living every day.

In New York, under the old minimum wage system, \$8.75 multiplied by 39 hours equaled \$341.25 a week before taxes. Under the new minimum wage, \$9 times 29 hours equals \$261 a week. At a cap of 29 hours, the minimum wage would have to be raised to \$11.77 just to get many workers back to the same level of take-home pay that I got in 2012, given the drop in hours due to the Affordable Care Act. Health insurance is important, but so is food.

In other words, a rise in the minimum wage is only half the battle; employees need enough hours of work to make a living.

About food: If a minimum wage worker

in New York manages to work two jobs (to reach 40 hours a week) without missing any days due to illness, his or her yearly salary would be \$18,720. In other words, it would fall well below the Federal Poverty Line of \$21,775. That's food stamp territory. To get above the poverty line with a 40-hour week, the minimum wage would need to go above \$10. At 29 hours a week, it would need to make it to \$15 an hour. Right now, the highest minimum wage at a state level is in the District of Columbia at \$11.50. As of now, no state is slated to go higher than that before 2018. (Some cities do set their own higher minimum wages.)

So add it up: The idea of raising the minimum wage ("the fight for \$15") is great, but even with that \$15 in such hours-restrictive circumstances, you can't make a loaf of bread out of a small handful of crumbs. In short, no matter how you do the math, it's nearly impossible to feed yourself, never mind a family, on the minimum wage. It's like being trapped on an M.C. Escher staircase.

The federal minimum wage hit its high point in 1968 at \$8.54 in today's dollars, and while this country has been a paradise in the ensuing decades for what we now call the "One per cent," it's been downhill for low-wage workers ever since. In fact, since it was last raised in 2009 at the federal level to \$7.25 per hour, the minimum has lost about 8.1 per cent of its purchasing power to inflation. In other words, minimum-wage workers actually make less now than they did in 1968.

In adjusted dollars, the minimum wage peaked when the Beatles were still together and the Vietnam War raged.

Who pays?

Many of the arguments against raising the minimum wage focus on the possibility that doing so would put small businesses in the red. This is disingenuous indeed, since 20 mega-companies dominate the minimum-wage world. Walmart alone employs 1.4 mil-

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PAY WAR

At \$9 an hour, my per-minute pay rate was 15 cents, which meant that I had time-stolen perhaps 30 cents. I was, that is, being nickel and dimed to death

lion minimum-wage workers; Yum Brands (Taco Bell, Pizza Hut, KFC) is in second place; and McDonald's takes third. Overall, 60 per cent of minimum-wage workers are employed by businesses not officially considered "small" by government standards, and of course carve-outs for really small businesses are possible, as was done with Obamacare.

Keep in mind that not raising wages costs you money.

Those minimum wage workers who can't make enough and need to go on food assistance? Well, Walmart isn't paying for those food stamps (now called SNAP), you are. The annual bill that states and the federal government foot for working families making poverty-level wages is \$153 billion. A single Walmart Supercentre costs taxpayers between \$904,542 and \$1.75 million per year in public assistance money, and Walmart employees account for 18 per cent of all food stamps issued. In other words, those everyday low prices at the chain are, in part, subsidized by your tax money.

If the minimum wage goes up, will spending on food benefits programs go down? Almost certainly. But won't stores raise prices to compensate for the extra money they will be shelling out for wages? Possibly. But don't worry – raising the minimum wage to \$15 an hour would mean a Big Mac would cost all of 17 cents more.

Time theft

My retail job ended a little earlier than I had planned, because I committed time theft.

You probably don't even know what time theft is. It may sound like something from a sci-fi novel, but minimum-wage employers take time theft seriously. The basic idea is simple enough: If they're paying you, you'd better be working. While the concept is not invalid per se, the way it's used by the mega-companies reveals much about how the lowest wage workers are seen by their employers in 2016.

The problem at my chain store was that its in-store cafe was a lot closer to my work area than the time clock where I had to punch out whenever I was going on a scheduled break. One day, when break time on my shift came around, I only had 15 minutes. So I decided to walk over to that cafe, order a cup of coffee, and then head for the place where I could punch out and sit down (on a different floor at the other end of the store).

We're talking an extra minute or two, no more, but in such operations, every minute is tabulated and accounted for. As it happened, a manager saw me and stepped in to tell the cafe clerk to cancel my order. Then, in front of whoever happened to be around, she accused me of committing time theft – that is, of ordering on the clock. We're talking about the time it takes to say, "Grande, milk, no sugar, please." But no matter, and getting chastised on company time was considered part of the job, so the five minutes we stood there counted as paid work.

At \$9 an hour, my per-minute pay rate was 15 cents, which meant that I had time-stolen perhaps 30 cents. I was, that is, being nickel and dimed to death.

Economics is about people

It seems wrong in a society as wealthy as ours that a person working full-time can't get above the poverty line. It seems no less wrong that someone who is willing to work for the lowest wage legally payable must also give up so much of his or her self-respect and dignity as a kind of tariff. Holding a job should not be a test of how to manage life as one of the working poor.

I didn't actually get fired for my time theft. Instead, I quit on the spot. Whatever the price is for my sense of self-worth, it isn't 30 cents. Unlike most of this country's working poor, I could afford to make such a decision. My life didn't depend on it. When the manager told a handful of my coworkers watching the scene to get back to work, they did. They couldn't afford not to. **CT**

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*Peter Van Buren blew the whistle on State Department waste and mismanagement during the "reconstruction" of Iraq in his book *We Meant Well: How I Helped Lose the Battle for the Hearts and Minds of the Iraqi People*. His latest book is *Ghosts of Tom Joad: A Story of the #99 per cent*. Van Buren blogs at www.wemeantwell.com. This article was originally published at www.tomdispatch.com*

When public spaces become private property

Daniel Margrain explains why the corporate takeover of our cities is replacing our real environmental history with a Disneyfied parody

The 1998 film *The Truman Show* presents a character, Truman Burbank, who unknowingly stars in a 30-year soap opera/reality show about his own life, under a giant dome whose boundaries are hidden from him. The show is broadcast to a global audience of billions.

The fake town Truman lives in, Seahaven, is populated by actors playing real people. Seahaven's creator, director, executive producer, and God – Christof – is convinced that the deception is benign, because Truman's life in the synthetic town is far happier than anything he could find in the real world.

As the film progresses, Truman begins to suspect that his entire life is part of an elaborate set. It's at this point that the show's audience begin to root for him in his quest to uncover his fake existence, and to escape from the confines of his virtual reality prison. The audience is able to relate to Truman's plight because they recognize that they, too, are trapped by similar forces.

The film works as a satire because the community in which Truman lives his fake existence is very much tied into a corporate-dominated world, in which the notion of illusion and reality is often blurred. Truman's quest for freedom can be interpreted as the aspiration for authenticity and meaning within a world in which the increasing commodification of all things is a feature of life.

Was the movie onto something? Is the



Jim Carey in *The Truman Show*: Where life is just a corporate illusion.

world that Truman inhabits more than just a piece of science fiction allegory?

Every institution provides its members of it with a social role – that's just as true for the church, as it is for the corporation, whose goal is to maximize profit and market share. The aim is to have individuals who are totally disassociated from each another. Just like the God figure Christof in the fictional creator of *The Truman Show*'s Seahaven, public relations and advertising facilitate the process of disassociation, by moulding people into a desired pattern.

To achieve this, corporations don't necessarily advertise products, but advertise a way of life and a narrative of who we are as people. The aim is to persuade us that the corporation is virtuous, responsible for a good life,

The Truman Show works as a satire because the community in which Truman lives his fake existence is very much tied into a corporate-dominated world, in which the notion of illusion and reality is often blurred

The hollowing out of large parts of London and other towns and cities throughout Britain changes our perceptions of what constitutes private and public spaces,

that the future can only be better than the present, and that modernity itself means human improvement. Reinforcing this ideology of progress is the notion that successful corporations will increasingly focus on branding as a form of production.

Many corporations have already recreated their branded visions as three dimensional representations of real life. Disney, for example, has taken this logic to the next level by building a “town” in the image of its brand – Celebration, which it describes as a “unincorporated community of almost 8,000 people, situated on 11 square miles of carefully engineered Floridian swamp.”

The brand image of Celebration, Florida, is a themed all-American family-friendly environment set in a bygone era. Family orientated films are a logical extension of this idea. According to Celebration spokesperson, Andrea Finger, the Disney brand “speaks of reassurance, tradition and quality. And you can see that in this community that we’ve built.”

Celebration is essentially a privatized, branded cocoon, in which you enter, first by shopping, then holidaying in it, and eventually you just might buy a property and live there. This is the real-life Seahaven of the Truman Show. It would not be an exaggeration to suggest that the utopian Celebration model is a vision of the future that could become commonplace.

Destroyed community

Already, people are daily being subliminally targeted by undercover marketeers. Can civilization survive on this narrow definition of how we interact with one another? Not according to Guardian columnist George Monbiot, who argues that “progress is measured by the speed at which we destroy the conditions that sustain life.” The commodification of life perpetuates this destructiveness by reducing human resource to the same market discipline logic as everything else.

This brings into sharp focus the contesting nature of authenticity, of identity and

representation, and what constitutes democratic urban space and its relation to forms of state power. In London, this relationship is highlighted by the umbilical cord that connects the interests of the ruling Conservative government and the mayor’s office to big business.

The lack of affordable housing in the city, combined with the hated bedroom tax, is resulting in the effective social cleansing from the city of the poor and those on middle incomes. What determines the government’s housing policy is not ending the housing crisis, but bolstering the investment opportunities of the rich.

That is what Prime Minister David Cameron’s announcement in January on the government’s intention to demolish council homes and replace them with private housing was all about. This ethos is central to the proposed Housing and Planning Bill, which will force families living in social housing and earning £30,000-£40,000 to pay rents almost as high as those in the private sector.

It will also compel local authorities to sell “high-value” housing, either by transferring public housing into private hands, or by giving the land it sits on to property developers. What were once public spaces are increasingly being privatized and sold off to foreign investors. All this undermines social networks and local economies, upon which local businesses depend for their livelihoods.

More broadly, the hollowing out of large parts of London and other towns and cities throughout Britain changes our perceptions of what constitutes private and public spaces, and for what use the state intends to put them to.

The February 13 edition of the Guardian reported on a London rally that protested the corporate takeover of public streets and squares. Protesters cited London’s Canary Wharf, Olympic Park and the Broadgate development as public places that were now governed by the rules of the corporations that own the land.

Privatized public zones are appearing

throughout Britain, and include Birmingham's Brindley place, a significant canal-side development. In Exeter, there is Princesshay, described as a "shopping destination featuring over 60 shops set in a series of interconnecting open streets and squares."

Intrinsic to the privatization agenda is the Public Space Protection Order (PSPO). Introduced by the previous coalition government, the PSPO is another form of social cleansing, one intended to drive homeless people from town and city centres. The formal ordering and disciplining of the poorest within urban spaces in this way has had the affect of pushing the poor to the periphery, out of the sight and mind of urban powers, for whom responsibility is increasingly disavowed.

This process is not new. The 19th-century architect John Nash's designs of Trafalgar Square, Regent's Street, Oxford Circus and Piccadilly Circus created a London that has, according to Peter Ackroyd, in his book, *London: The Biography*, "the air of a seat of government, and not of an immeasurable metropolis of 'shopkeepers' to use Napoleon's expression." This was achieved, adds Ackroyd "by demarcating poorer and richer areas, in effect cutting off the rich from the sight and odours of the poor. Nash himself declared that he wished to create a line or barrier between the Streets and Squares occupied by the Nobility and Gentry and the narrow streets and meaner houses occupied by mechanics and the trading part of the community."

This shows that the government's latest attempt to cut off the rich from the poor through the implementation of the PSPO is part of an historical continuum, which also involves the enclosure of open fields and common land as part of a series of parliamentary Enclosure Acts that began in the early 17th century. Central to this is the notion that power relations are shaped by neo-liberal economic forces that determine and shape elements from the landscape of cities and re-package them under the banner of "urban renaissance."

Begun under New Labour, the ideology that underpins urban renaissance reflects a historical contradiction between planning in terms of social need, and the process of competitive accumulation, which is expressed in living and working urban spaces. Although urban planners have often been cast in an heroic role in protecting the public from shoddy contractors and the short-term drive for profit by speculators, town planning has been skewed by deeply undemocratic practices.

The real life Celebration, Florida, model that could have been borrowed from the fictional Truman Show, arguably represents the epitome of the concept of heritage-based place promotion predicated on consumption. Paradoxically, this vision is linked to the ideology of progress as seen through the lens of power. This is best highlighted by Sharon Zukin who, in her book, *Landscapes of Power*, quoted a Disneyland planner, "We carefully program out all the negative, unwanted elements and program in the positive elements. Disney succeeded on the basis of this totalitarian image-making, projecting the collective desires of the powerless into a corporate landscape of power."

The main issues underpinning the protests in London related to how economic conditions are re-redefining many urban spaces as cultural centres of production. This is leading not to diversification, but rather to a uniformity in which the high street, airport, shopping mall, museum and art gallery are increasingly based on corporate culture rather than aesthetic pleasure.

The expression of economic power is displayed in other ways, most notably in terms of the redevelopment of waterside areas. In London, for example, a "cleaned up" Docklands, while maintaining some of the visual references of its past, has nevertheless lost almost all the social and political symbolism it carried. It is a view of the past that has lost all power to express what that past meant. Do we really want to live in this kind of sanitized Disney-Truman Show-type environment.

Shunning refugees, detaining them as if they were criminals, or deporting them to war-torn environments sends a message that non-violent choices are punished

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Daniel Margrain, who lives in London, has a master's degree in globalization, culture and the city. More of his political articles may be found at his blog at www.danielmargrain.com

CT

The mail train reopens

Bradley L. Garrett tells why it's probably impossible to recreate the thrill of exploring urban ruins for tourists

As millions of hits crashed our blogs, I imagined citizens of the capital falling asleep dreaming of London's hidden secret underworld

London's Post Office Railway – the mail rail – is buried 70 feet under the city and stretches more than six miles, from Paddington in the north-west to Whitechapel in the east. For more than 75 years, tiny driverless trains called mini-yorks cruised at a breezy 40 miles per hour down its narrow gauge rails to transport four-million parcels a day across the capital. In 2003, the post office mothballed it, and it didn't take long for the railway to recede in urban memory, a buried presence haunting the junction of history and myth.

From 2008 to 2013, I was involved in research with a group of urban explorers in London, the infamous London Consolidation Crew. We climbed the Shard before it was complete, took photos of every abandoned tube station, and traced all of London's lost rivers. But, despite years of searching, the mail rail continued to elude us.

Finally, in the summer of 2011, good research and persistence paid off when an entry point was located. For four days, explorers walked every inch of track and photographed every train and junction in the system. Releasing the photos and stories of the mail rail exploration was a remarkable moment; as millions of hits crashed our blogs, I imagined citizens of the capital falling asleep dreaming of London's hidden secret underworld.

Interest in ruins seems to have snowballed over the past decade. People have become fascinated by the lived histories that ruins harbour, by the unique sensory and aesthetic qualities of abandoned spaces and by the *memento mori* they perform. Being in a ruin, surrounded by a bewildering amalgam of decay and rebirth, reminds us that we, too, will die and that future things will be born of us. In other words, ruins put us in our place.

"Hot, sweaty, dank, wet"

One of my research participants, Statler, explained to me what it felt like to walk through the mail rail: "It was hot, sweaty, dank, wet . . . It smelt like a mouldering hospital in parts and was pretty cramped in the tunnels. . . . There were also a lot of calcium stalactites that would snap off in your face and hair. It was obvious that people hadn't been in the tunnels for a very long time."

Imagine the feeling of walking through a great feat of human engineering like the mail rail: a secret, forbidden zone – a ruin-in-progress. Imagine the silence of the place, the feeling that you are surrounded by unresolved history. Imagine nature sluggishly swallowing the tunnels, where you can see calcification will eventually connect the top of the tunnel to the tracks.

Imagine sitting in a mini-york, even start-



THE PERFECT RUIN: Deep below the streets of London lie miles of undiscovered history.

Photo: Alastair Bachelor

As parts of our urban heritage are opened to the public, mysteries like these will keep driving explorers deeper into the urban underground

ing it up and nudging it forward a bit down the creaking rails under Clerkenwell, where thousands of people are stumbling past at street level on their way home from a night out, totally unaware that this implausible adventure is unravelling 70 feet below them. Imagine climbing out of the hole in the ground at dawn with a memory card full of images that the world had not seen for years. That is why the LCC pursued the mail rail for so long: It was the perfect ruin.

Soon you will be able to see the mail rail for yourself; the post office has announced that it is opening it to visitors in 2017. I am delighted that the public will finally be able to see the system, and the new postal museum that's been proposed will be a welcome addition to London's formidable heritage landscape. However, for your £9 (£14.50 if you want to ride the train), you will only see a small part of the system, and you would be hard pressed to call it an adventure.

And of course, it will no longer be a secret or a ruin – the two most alluring aspects of the place will have been exorcised. They have announced that two new mini-yorks will be built for the “ride,” prompting me to

wonder whether what we visit in 2017 will be the mail rail at all – or rather a Disneyfied profit-driven imitation for tourists.

It is likely that the actions of urban explorers played a role in the decision to create the museum; whether it was by sparking the public's imagination, or in prompting the post office to take action, once it realised what an appetite there is for stories of the urban underground. I just hope it doesn't do the legendary system a disservice as a result.

For those heritage enthusiasts who prefer a more visceral connection to the past, rumour has it that a pneumatic underground railway was used by the post office in London between 1863 and 1874 – a precursor to the mail rail. There's also an identical, and even older, mail rail in Chicago awaiting rediscovery. Even as parts of our urban heritage are opened to the public, mysteries such as these will keep driving explorers deeper into the urban underground. **CT**

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Media ties that blind

Journalists deceive themselves into missing the truth about their own manipulation, writes **Jonathan Cook**

Journalists like this kind of argument because it shifts responsibility for their failure to report honestly on to faceless penny-pinchers in the accounting department

As I have found out myself, there is nothing media outlets like less than criticizing other media publications or the “profession” of journalism. It’s not really surprising. The credibility of a corporate media depends precisely on not breaking ranks and not highlighting the structural constraints a “free press” operates under.

So one has to commend the Boston Globe for publishing a recent piece by Stephen Kinzer, a former foreign correspondent, warning that the media is not telling us the truth about what is going on in Syria. But those constraints are also why Kinzer glosses over deeper problems with the coverage of Syria.

“This [most western reporting of Syria] is convoluted nonsense, but Americans cannot be blamed for believing it. We have almost no real information about the combatants, their goals, or their tactics. Much blame for this lies with our media.

“Under intense financial pressure, most American newspapers, magazines, and broadcast networks have drastically reduced their corps of foreign correspondents. Much important news about the world now comes from reporters based in Washington. In that environment, access

and credibility depend on acceptance of official paradigms. Reporters who cover Syria check with the Pentagon, the State Department, the White House, and think tank ‘experts.’ After a spin on that soiled carousel, they feel they have covered all sides of the story. This form of stenography produces the pabulum that passes for news about Syria.”

Not our fault

This is more of the “cock-up, not conspiracy” justification for skewed reporting. If only there was more money, more space, more time, more reporters, the media would not simply spew the government’s official line. Guardian journalist Nick Davies wrote a whole book, *Flat Earth News*, making much the same claim – what he called “churnalism.” I reviewed it at length for ColdType.net in an essay titled *Rules of Production*. (See next page for download link to review – Editor)

Journalists like this kind of argument because it shifts responsibility for their failure to report honestly on to faceless penny-pinchers in the accounting department.

And yet, there are journalists reporting from the ground in Syria – Martin Chulov

● Find Kinzer’s story here: www.bostonglobe.com/opinion/2016/02/18/the-media-are-misleading-public-syria/8YB75otYirPzUCnlwaVtcK/story.html

of the Guardian, for example – who have been just as unreliable as those based in Washington. In fact, many of the points Kinzer raises about the reality in Syria echo recent articles by Seymour Hersh, who is writing from the US, not Damascus. But he, of course, has been shunted to the outer margins of media discourse, publishing in the London Review of Books.

Media coverage of Iraq was just as woefully misleading during the sanctions period in the 1990s, when I worked in the foreign department at the Guardian, and later in the build-up of the US-led attack on Iraq. In those days, when there was no shortage of resources being directed at foreign reporting, the coverage also closely hewed to the official view of the US and UK governments.

The problem is not just that foreign reporting is being stripped of financial resources as the media find it harder to make a profit from their core activities. It is, as Ed Herman and Noam Chomsky pointed out long ago in their book *Manufacturing Consent*, that the corporate media is designed to reflect the interests of power – and the corporations that control our media are power. They select journalists through a long filtering process (school, university, journalism training, apprenticeships) precisely designed to weed out dissidents and those who think too critically. Only journalists whose world-view aligns closely with those in power reach the top.

None of this is in Kinzer’s piece. It is doubtful that he, a member of the media elite himself, would recognize such an analysis of the journalist’s role. As Chomsky once told British journalist Andrew Marr, when Marr reacted with indignation at what he inferred to be an accusation from Chomsky that he was self-censoring:

“I don’t say you’re self-censoring. I’m sure you believe everything you’re saying. But what I’m saying is, if you believed something different you wouldn’t be sitting where you’re sitting.”

That understanding of journalism does not depend on conspiracy, but nor does it accept that it is all about cock-up. It posits a much more interesting, and plausible, scenario that journalists get into positions of influence to the extent that they are unlikely to rock the boat for elite interests. The closer they get to power, the more likely they are to reflect its values. Much like politicians, in fact.

That’s why extremely few senior journalists have read *Manufacturing Consent*. And why among the Guardian journalists I worked with, though none seemed familiar with his huge body of work, there were few intellectuals who were referred to in more derisive terms than Chomsky. **CT**

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The closer journalists get to power, the more likely they are to reflect its values. Much like politicians, in fact

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Antonin Scalia: Bury the soul, but not the history

Aged nuns, disenfranchised voters, and a 17-mile drive:
Greg Palast recalls the 'humour' of the late supreme court justice

Scalia chortled that
"Seventeen miles
is 17 miles for the
rich and the poor"



GAG-INDUCING: Antonin Scalia – behind his jokey comments lay a cruelty aimed at the poor.

Photo illustration: DonkeyHotey, via Flickr.com

To the family of Antonin Scalia, recently departed US Supreme Court justice, I offer condolences. To my readers, I offer the facts. A man's soul must be laid to rest, but history must not be buried as well, especially now that Scalia's passing has become grounds for stories that border on historical obscenity, cf. the New York Times "Liberal Love for Antonin Scalia."

Love?? Well, if you want a Valentine, this ain't it.

There's been a lot of gleeful chuckling, for example, about Scalia's courtroom bench "humour." But behind his jokey comments lay a cruelty aimed at the poor and the injured, who turn to the court as the last hope

for protection against corporate and state violence.

Here's a telling example of Scalia's humour from a crucial voting rights case. In 2005, Indiana's Republican legislature passed a law barring the vote to anyone without current state photo ID. The excuse: An official ID would prevent voter fraud – although the state had not found, in more than 100 years, even one case of a voter illegally impersonating another.

The media did get a laugh out of the 10 nuns who were turned away from an Indiana polling station because the sisters' driver's licenses had expired. The nuns were in their 80s and 90s. Their licenses had expired, though they had not. Tough luck ladies, you lose your vote.

Bobby Kennedy and I covered the story of the nuns; we also wrote about the unnoticed 78,000 African-Americans in Indiana who lost their right to vote because they did not have the right ID. A disproportionate number of African-Americans lack cars, and, therefore, driver's licenses, and only a few, apparently have passports.

Civil rights groups sued, stating the obvious: The Indiana law is racist in its operation, a violation of the Voting Rights Act. Black folk, the elderly, students, and poor whites – were all blocked from registering and voting. Federal Justice Terence Evans threw out the biased ID law, writing, "The

Indiana voter photo ID law is a not-too-thinly veiled attempt to discourage election-day turnout by certain folks believed to skew Democratic.” But Indiana argued before the Supreme Court that anyone could get an ID – they just had to get a non-driver ID from a county office.

Experts pointed out that the average poor person in Indiana – a poor person likely to be Black – lived an average 17 miles from a county seat. That’s when Justice Scalia rode, recklessly, to Indiana’s rescue. Scalia chortled that “Seventeen miles is 17 miles for the rich and the poor,” Black or white. How cute. How droll, Mr. Justice. And it’s true, at 65 miles per hour, 17 miles is just a 15-minute cruise, whether your BMW is black (as was the one he drove) or white.

But the experts I spoke to told me they calculated that travel required two bus rides, cost a day’s work, and included fees that amount to a poll tax. In the non-BMW world, 17 miles is just another long, obstacle-choked road to the ballot for voters of colour.

Since he died, I’ve heard Scalia praised as an “originalist,” that is, sticking with the intent of the writers of the US Constitution. Really? The right to vote without regard to race, the 15th Amendment, grew from the ground watered by the blood of Abraham Lincoln’s warriors:

“The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state.”

Was it the original intent of those words to enable the creation of new Jim Crow obstacles to citizen rights? Since when does an “originalist” so insouciantly ignore the clearly marked signposts of the law?

My suggestion: The president should not nominate a replacement for Scalia. Let’s make this election a referendum: Let Americans choose our court. Let Americans decide if the court will defeat or cuddle up to Jim Crow, whether our government may dictate

HURWITT’S EYE

Mark Hurwitt

Antonin Scalia’s last act as Supreme Court Justice just 4 days before his death was to block President Obama’s Climate Action Plan, a decision which effectively disables American participation in the Paris Climate Accord and sabotages the United Nations effort to fight global climate change.



whom you love and marry, whether the Bill of Rights is just a porous veil covering an unfettered and brutal spy state. Let’s put the soul of America to a vote.

Right now, I am completing my documentary, *The Best Democracy Money Can Buy: a Tale of Billionaires and Ballot Bandits*, on the latest, hidden tactics of racially poisonous vote suppression, which has grown like a mould from the 2013 decision by Scalia and his court comrades to gut the Voting Rights Act.

CT

Greg Palast is Palast is the author of *Billionaires & Ballot Bandits*, *Armed Madhouse*, *The Best Democracy Money Can Buy* and *Vultures’ Picnic*. His website is www.gregpalast.com

See the trailer for Palast’s new documentary, *The Best Money Democracy Can Buy*, at www.youtube.com/watch?v=kg2gCgFMB0g

Shoulda, woulda, coulda . . .

Tom Engelhart shows how the US military has bombed in the 21st century

“There were headless torsos and torso-less arms, cooked slivers of scalp and flayed skin. The stones were crimson, the sand ochre from all the blood. Coal-black lumps of melted steel and plastic marked the remains of his friends’ vehicles”

Here’s my 21st-century rule-of-thumb about the United States: If you have to say it over and over, it probably ain’t so. Which is why I’d think twice every time we’re told how “exceptional” or “indispensable” the United States is. For someone like me who can still remember a moment when Americans assumed that was so, but no sitting president, presidential candidate, or politician felt you had to say the obvious, such lines reverberate with defensiveness. They seem to incorporate other voices you can almost hear whispering that we’re ever less exceptional, more dispensable, no longer (to quote the greatest of them all by his own estimate) “the greatest.” In this vein, consider a commonplace line running around Washington (as it has for years): The US military is “the finest fighting force in the history of the world.” Uh, folks, if that’s so, then why the hell can’t it win a damn thing 14-plus years later?

If you don’t mind a little what-if history lesson, it’s just possible that events might have turned out differently and, instead of repeating that “finest fighting force” stuff endlessly, our leaders might actually believe it. After all, in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, it took the Bush administration only a month to let the CIA, special forces advisers, and the US Air Force loose against the Taliban and Osama bin Laden’s supporters in Afghanistan. The results were crushing. The

first moments of what that administration would grandiloquently (and ominously) bill as a “global war on terror” were, destructively speaking, glorious.

If you want to get a sense of just how crushing those forces and their Afghan proxies were, read journalist Anand Gopal’s *No Good Men Among the Living: America, the Taliban, and the War Through Afghan Eyes*, the best book yet written on how (and how quickly) that war on terror went desperately, disastrously awry. One of the Afghans Gopal spent time with was a Taliban military commander nicknamed – for his whip of choice – Mullah Cable, who offered a riveting account of just how decisive the US air assault on that movement was. In recalling his days on the front lines of what, until then, had been an Afghan civil war, he described his first look at what American bombs could do:

“He drove into the basin and turned the corner and then stepped out of the vehicle. Oh my God, he thought. There were headless torsos and torso-less arms, cooked slivers of scalp and flayed skin. The stones were crimson, the sand ochre from all the blood. Coal-black lumps of melted steel and plastic marked the remains of his friends’ vehicles.

“Closing his eyes, he steadied himself. In the five years of fighting he had seen his share of death, but never lives disposed of so



Khalil Bendib

easily, so completely, so mercilessly, in mere seconds.”

The next day, he addressed his men. “Go home,” he said. “Get yourselves away from here. Don’t contact each other.”

“Not a soul,” writes Gopal, “protested.”

Mullah Cable took his own advice and headed for Kabul, the Afghan capital. “If he somehow could make it out alive, he promised himself that he would abandon politics forever.” And he was typical. As Gopal reports, the Taliban quickly broke under the strain of war with the last superpower on the planet. Its foot soldiers put down their arms and, like Mullah Cable, fled for home. Its leaders began to try to surrender. In Afghan fashion, they were ready to go back to their native villages, make peace, shuffle their allegiances, and hope for better times. Within a couple of months, in other words, it was, or at least shoulda, woulda, coulda

been all over, even the shouting.

The US military and its Afghan proxies, if you remember, believed that they had trapped Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaeda fighters somewhere in the mountainous Tora Bora region. If the US had concentrated all its resources on him at that moment, it’s hard to believe that he wouldn’t have been in American custody or dead sooner rather than later. And that would have been that. The US military could have gone home victorious. The Taliban, along with bin Laden, would have been history. Stop the cameras there and what a tale of triumph would surely have been told.

Shoulda, woulda, coulda.

Keeping the cameras rolling

There was, of course, a catch. Like their Bush administration mentors, the American military men who arrived in Afghanistan were

In Afghan fashion, they were ready to go back to their native villages, make peace, shuffle their allegiances, and hope for better times

LESSONS IGNORED

It's probably accurate to say that in the course of one disappointment or disaster after another from Afghanistan to Libya, Somalia to Iraq, Yemen to Pakistan, the US military never actually lost an encounter on the battlefield

determined to fight that global war on terror forever and a day. So, as Gopal reports, they essentially refused to let the Taliban surrender. They hounded that movement's leaders and fighters until they had little choice but to pick up their guns again and, in the phrase of the moment, "go back to work."

It was a time of triumph and of Guantánamo, and it went to everyone's head. Among those in power in Washington and those running the military, who didn't believe that a set of genuine global triumphs lay in store? With such a fighting force, such awesome destructive power, how could it not? And so, in Afghanistan, the American counterterror types kept right on targeting the "terrorists" whenever their Afghan warlord allies pointed them out – and if many of them turned out to be local enemies of those same rising warlords, who cared?

It would be the first, but hardly the last time that, in killing significant numbers of people, the US military had a hand in creating its own future enemies. In the process, the Americans managed to revive the very movement they had crushed and which, so many years later, is at the edge of seizing a dominant military position in the country.

And keep in mind that, while producing a recipe for future disaster there, the Bush administration's top officials had far bigger fish to fry. For them and for the finest fighting force etc., etc., Afghanistan was a hopeless backwater – especially with Iraqi autocrat Saddam Hussein there in Baghdad at the crossroads of the oil heartlands of the planet with a target on his back. As they saw it, control of much of the Greater Middle East was at stake. To hell with Osama bin Laden.

And so, in March 2003, less than a year and a half later, they launched the invasion of Iraq, another glorious success for that triple-F gang. Saddam's military was crushed in an instant, and his capital, burning and looted, was occupied by American troops in next to no time at all.

Stop the cameras there and you're still talking about the dominant military of this,

if not any other, century. But, of course, the cameras didn't stop. The Bush administration had no intention of shutting them off, not when it saw a Middle Eastern (and possibly even a global) Pax Americana in its future and wanted to garrison Iraq until hell froze over. It already assumed that the next stop after Baghdad on the Occident Express would be either Damascus or Tehran, that America's enemies in the region would go down like 10-pins, and that the oil heartlands of the planet would become an American dominion. (As the neocon quip of that moment had it, "Everyone wants to go to Baghdad. Real men want to go to Tehran.")

It was a hell of a dream, with an emphasis on hell. It would, in fact, prove a nightmare of the first order, and the cameras just kept rolling and rolling for almost 13 years while (I think it's time for an acronym here) the FFFIHW, also known as the Finest Fighting Force etc., etc., proved that it could not successfully:

- Defeat determined, if lightly armed, minority insurgencies.
- Train proxy armies to do its bidding.
- Fight a war based on sectarian versions of Islam or a war of ideas.
- Help reconstruct a society in the Greater Middle East, no matter how much money it pumped in.
- Create much of anything but failed states and deeply corrupt ruling elites in the region.
- Bomb an insurgent movement into surrender.
- Drone-kill terror leaders until their groups collapsed.
- Intervene anywhere in the Greater Middle East in just about any fashion, by land or air, and end up with a world in any way to its liking.

Send in the ...

It's probably accurate to say that in the course of one disappointment or disaster after another from Afghanistan to Libya, Somalia to Iraq, Yemen to Pakistan, the US

military never actually lost an encounter on the battlefield. But nowhere was it truly triumphant on the battlefield either, not in a way that turned out to mean anything. Nowhere, in fact, did a military move of any sort truly pay off in the long run. Whatever was done by the FFFIHW and the CIA (with its wildly counterproductive drone assassination campaigns across the region) only seemed to create more enemies and more problems.

To sum up, the finest you-know-what in the history of you-know-where has proven to be a clumsy, largely worthless weapon of choice in Washington's terror wars – and increasingly its leadership seems to know it. In private, its commanders are clearly growing anxious. If you want a witness to that anxiety, go no further than Washington Post columnist and power pundit David Ignatius. In mid-January, after a visit to US Central Command, which oversees Washington's military presence in the Greater Middle East, he wrote a column grimly headlined: “The ugly truth: Defeating the Islamic State will take decades.” Its first paragraph went: “There's a scary disconnect between the somber warnings you hear privately from military leaders about the war against the Islamic State and the glib debating points coming from Republican and Democratic politicians.”

For Ignatius, channeling his high-level sources in Central Command (whom he couldn't identify), things could hardly have been gloomier. And yet, bleak as his report was, it still qualified as an upbeat view. His sources clearly believed that, if Washington was willing to commit to a long, hard military slog and the training of proxy forces in the region not over “a few months” but a “generation,” success would follow some distant, golden day. The last 14-plus years suggest otherwise.

With that in mind, let's take a look at what those worried CENTCOM commanders, the folks at the Pentagon, and the Obama administration are planning for the FFFIHW in the near future. Perhaps you

won't be surprised to learn that, with almost a decade and a half of grisly military lessons under their belts, they are evidently going to pursue exactly the kinds of actions that have, for some time, made the US military look like neither the finest, nor the greatest anything. Here's a little been-there-done-that rundown of what might read like past history but is evidently still to come:

Afghanistan: So many years after the Bush administration loosed the US Air Force and its special operations forces on that country and “liberated” it, the situation, according to the latest US general to be put in command of the war zone, is “deteriorating.” Meanwhile, in 2015, casualties suffered by the American-built Afghan security forces reached “unsustainable” levels. The Taliban now controls more territory than at any time since 2001, and the Islamic State (IS) has established itself in parts of the country. In response, more than a year after President Obama announced the ending of the US “combat mission” there, the latest plans are to further slow the withdrawal of US forces, while sending in the US Air Force and special operations teams, particularly against the new IS fighters.

Libya: Almost five years ago, the Obama administration (with its NATO allies) dispatched overwhelming air power and drones to Libyan skies to help take down that country's autocrat, Muammar Gaddafi. In the wake of his death and the fall of his regime, his arsenals were looted and advanced weapons were dispatched to terror groups from Mali to the Sinai Peninsula. In the ensuing years, Libya has been transformed not into a thriving democracy but a desperately failed state filled with competing sectarian militias, Islamic extremist outfits, and a fast-growing Islamic State offshoot. As the situation there continues to deteriorate, the Obama administration is now reportedly considering a “new” strategy involving “decisive military action” that will be focused on . . . you guessed it, air and drone strikes and possibly special operations raids on Is-

To sum up, the finest you-know-what in the history of you-know-where has proven to be a clumsy, largely worthless weapon of choice in Washington's terror wars

LESSONS IGNORED

A near-religious faith in the efficacy of bombing and of drone strikes will remain crucial to American efforts, even though in the past such military-first approaches have only helped to spread terror outfits, chaos, and failed states across this vast region

Islamic State operations.

Iraq is another country in which the situation is again deteriorating as oil prices plunge – oil money makes up 90 per cent of the government budget – and the Islamic State continues to hold significant territory. Meanwhile, Iraqis die monthly in prodigious numbers in bloody acts of war and terror, as Shiite-Sunni grievances seem only to sharpen. It's almost 13 years since the US loosed its air power and its army against Saddam Hussein, disbanded his military, trained another one (significant parts of which collapsed in the face of relatively small numbers of Islamic State fighters in 2014 and 2015), and brought together much of the future leadership of the Islamic State in a US military prison. It's almost four years since the US "ended" its war there and left. Since August 2014, however, it has again loosed its air force on the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, while dispatching at least 3,700 (and possibly almost 4,500) military personnel to Iraq to help train up a new version of that country's army and support it as it retakes (or in fact reduces to rubble) cities still in IS hands. In this context, the Obama administration now seems to be planning for a kind of endless mission creep in which, quoting Defense Secretary Ash Carter "hundreds more trainers, advisers, and commandos" will be sent to that country and neighbouring Syria in the coming months. Increasingly, some of those advisers and other personnel will officially be considered "boots on the ground" and will focus on helping "the Iraqi army mount the kind of conventional warfare operations needed to defeat Islamic State militants." It's even possible that American advisers will, in the end, be allowed to engage directly in combat operations, while American Apache helicopter pilots might at some point begin flying close support missions for Iraqi troops fighting in urban areas. (And if this is all beginning to sound strangely familiar, what a surprise!)

Syria: Give Syria credit for one thing. It can't be classified as a three-peat or even a

repeat performance, because the FFFIHW wasn't there the previous 14 years. Still, it's hard not to feel as if we've been through all this before: The loosing of American air power on the Islamic State (with effects that devastate but somehow don't destroy the object of Washington's desire), disastrous attempts to train proxy forces in the American mould, the arrival of special ops forces on the scene, and so on.

In other words, everything proven over the years, from Afghanistan to Libya, not to bring victory or much of anything else worthwhile will be tried yet again – from Afghanistan to Libya. Above all, of course, a near-religious faith in the efficacy of bombing and of drone strikes will remain crucial to American efforts, even though in the past such military-first approaches have only helped to spread terror outfits, chaos, and failed states across this vast region. Will any of it work this time? I wouldn't hold my breath.

Declaring defeat and coming home

At some point, as the Vietnam War dragged on, Republican Senator George Aiken of Vermont suggested – so the legend goes – that the US declare victory and simply come home. (In fact, he never did such a thing, but no matter.) Presidents Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford and their adviser Henry Kissinger might, however, be said to have done something similar in the end. And despite wartime fears – no less rabid than those about the Islamic State today – that a Vietnamese communist victory would cause "dominoes" to "fall" and communism to triumph across the Third World, remarkably little happened that displeased, no less endangered, the United States. Four decades later, in fact, Washington and Vietnam are allied increasingly closely against a rising China.

In a similar fashion, our worst nightmares of the present moment – magnified in the recent Republican debates – are likely to have little basis in reality. The Islamic

State is indeed a brutal and extreme sectarian movement, the incarnation of the whirlwind of chaos the US let loose in the region. As a movement, however, it has its limits. Its appeal is far too sectarian and extreme to sweep the Greater Middle East.

Its future suppression, however, is unlikely to have much to do with the efforts of the finest fighting force in the history of the world. Quite the opposite, the Islamic State and its al-Qaeda-linked doppelgängers still spreading in the region thrive on the destructive attentions of the FFFIHW. They need that force to be eternally on their trail and tail.

There are (or at least should be) moments in history when ruling elites suddenly add two and two and miraculously come up with four. This doesn't seem to be one of them, or else the Obama administration wouldn't be doubling down on a militarized version of the same-old same-old in the Greater Middle East, while its Republican and neocon opponents call for making the sand "glow in the dark," sending in the Marines (all of them), and bombing the hell out of everything.

Under the circumstances, what politician in present-day Washington would have the nerve to suggest the obvious? Isn't it finally time to pull the US military back from the Greater Middle East and put an end to our disastrous temptation to intervene ever

more destructively in ever more repetitious ways in that region? That would, of course, mean, among other things, dismantling the vast structure of military bases Washington has built up across the Persian Gulf and the rest of the Greater Middle East.

Maybe it's time to adopt some version of Senator Aiken's mythical strategy. Maybe Washington should bluntly declare not victory, but defeat, and bring the US military home. Maybe if we stopped claiming that we were the greatest, most exceptional, most indispensable nation ever and that the US military was the finest fighting force in the history of the world, both we and the world might be better off and modestly more peaceful. Unfortunately, you can toss that set of thoughts in the trash can that holds all the other untested experiments of history. One thing we can be sure of, given the politics of our moment, is that we'll never know.

CT

Tom Engelhart is a co-founder of the American Empire Project and the author of The United States of Fear, as well as a history of the Cold War, The End of Victory Culture. He is a fellow of the Nation Institute and runs TomDispatch.com. His latest book is Shadow Government: Surveillance, Secret Wars, and a Global Security State in a Single-Superpower World. This essay originally appeared at www.tomdispatch.com

Maybe if we stopped claiming that we were the greatest, most exceptional, most indispensable nation ever and that the US military was the finest fighting force in the history of the world, both we and the world might be better off and modestly more peaceful

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IN THE PICTURE

South Africa lost one of its greatest news photographers when Cape Town-based Juhan Kuus died, aged 62, after falling down a flight of stairs in the shelter in which he was living. **Hilton Hamann** pays tribute to one of the bravest journalists he ever met

REMEMBERING A RENEGADE



DECEPTIVE:
He looked frail, but Juhan Kuus was one of South Africa's bravest photographers during the years of apartheid.

Photo: Geof Kirby

● Juhan Kuus, who died on July 12, 2015, was twice South African Press Photographer of the Year, and a World Press Award winner

I first met Juhan Kuus at the Sunday Times in Johannesburg, in the early 1980s, when I was the paper's military correspondent, and he was a photographer. We hit it off immediately – we shared a common love of guns and cameras. Kuus was tall and thin, and his smoking and previous drinking excesses had left him frail-looking. But his appearance was deceptive: He was absolutely fearless and single-minded, and at times his determination resulted in his getting his ass thoroughly kicked by the extreme right-wing Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging (AWB: the Afrikaner Resistance Movement), the police and various Cape Flats gangsters in Cape Town, among others.

A good example of his doggedness occurred late in the 1980s – during a government-imposed state of emergency, when journalists and photographers faced the threat of long prison sentences for doing their



jobs. An anti-government march took place in Germiston, near Johannesburg, leading to violent clashes with the police, and leaving some protesters dead. Naturally, Kuus, by then a freelancer, was there with his beloved Leica. After shooting a few rolls of film, which he hid in dustbins and a flower box outside a shop, he was nabbed by a notorious security cop and dragged off to the police station, where he saw the bodies of two protesters. As the cop gave him a severe beating, Kuus was shooting images, unnoticed, from waist level. Later, he retrieved the other rolls of film and shipped them all off to SIPA, the Paris-based press syndication agency, which was happy to receive his images, but slow to pay.

He and his then-wife, Mareta, were often-

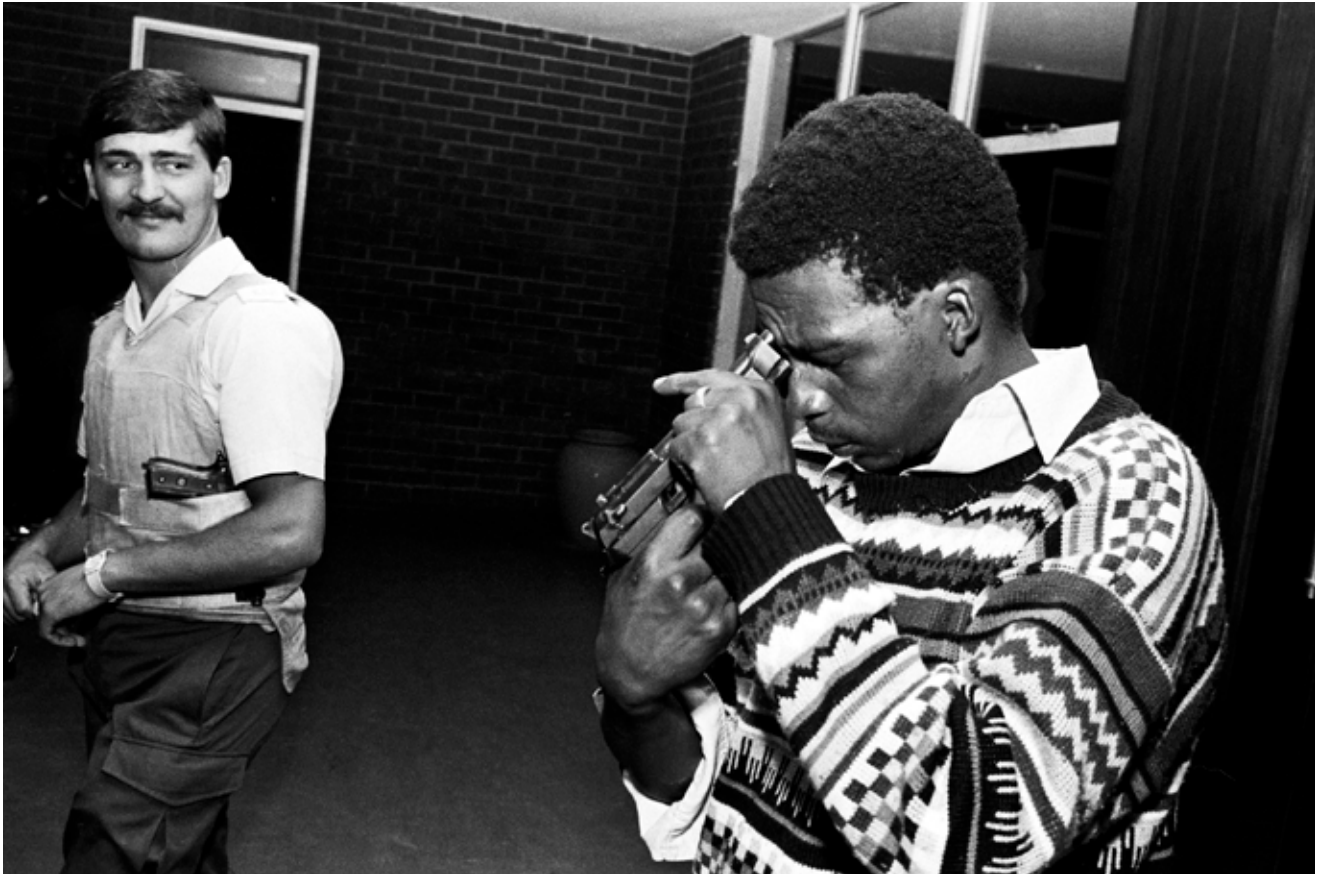


IN THE CROSSFIRE: The 2005 funeral of Rianna Pienar, an innocent teenager murdered by gangsters in turf battles for control of the Cape drug trade.



GENERATION NEXT: Above – Kids and guns.
Left – Father and son.

IN THE PICTURE



GUN LAW: White cop smirks as a black plainclothes cop playfully puts his gun to his own head.

He sold off many of his possessions to temporarily fend off creditors, but never wavered in his belief that what he did was bigger than himself

penniless. But such trivialities never phased him: Documenting the world around him was the most important thing in his life and came before anything else. He sold off many of his possessions to temporarily fend off creditors, but he never wavered in his belief that what he did was bigger than himself, or any financial discomfort he or Mareta might experience.

Once asked why he didn't do commercial work, such as shooting weddings, to help dig himself out of the hole he was in. He shrugged and replied, "Because that type of stuff is trivial. I've got more important work to do. Capturing life on camera is all that matters."

His bookkeeping may have been erratic, but his bravery was beyond dispute. On December, 15 1985, two African National Congress (ANC) terrorists landmined the rough road that ran along the Limpopo River, bordering Zimbabwe. It was the first time mines

had been planted on South African soil, and they killed six people, including three young children. The Sunday Times sent Kuus and I to cover the story, and teamed up with Des Blow from City Press.

The army had flown in specialist troops from South-West Africa, and had mine-protected vehicles and a squad of engineers sweeping the road for more landmines. The road was closed, and the only traffic allowed was convoys of military mine-proof vehicles. But we persuaded a confused soldier to let us through a make-shift barricade. We were scared of being blown up, so Kuus and I arranged with Blow that we'd drive our car in front for 15 kilometres, and, if we hit a mine, he'd get the photograph. Then we'd switch, and he'd drive in front.

After about 50 kms of leap-frogging, we came upon the military engineers, sweeping the road – towards us! We were given a roast-

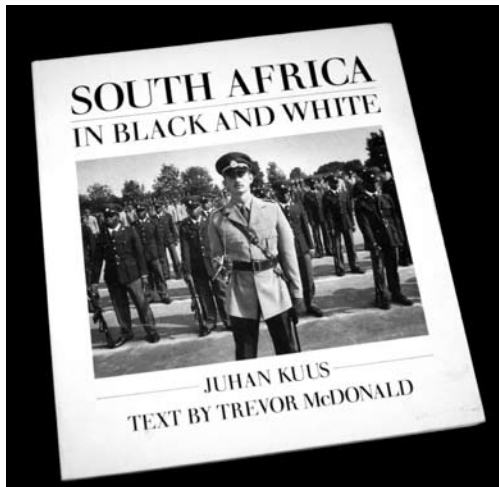


BEATING DISSENT: South African riot cop drags away a man shot during township unrest in 1976.



CRY FREEDOM:
Presidents
Mandela and
Clinton look
through the
window of
Mandela's old cell
on Robben Island.

IN THE PICTURE



VIOLENCE, ANGER, COMPASSION: The cover of Juhan Kuus's book, *South Africa in Black and White*, available at www.amazon.com

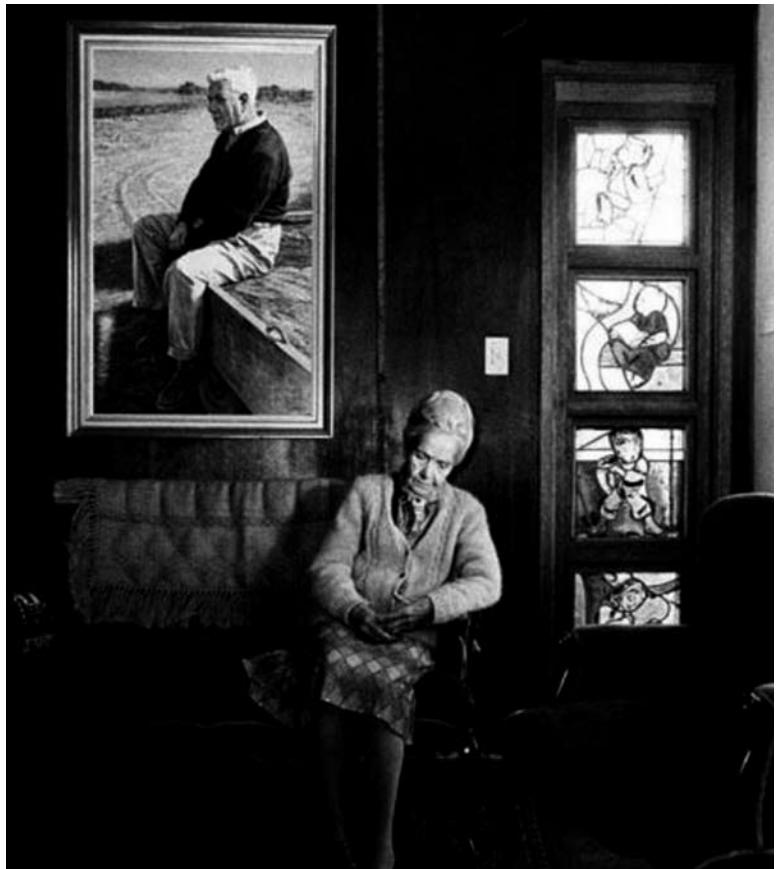
ing by the senior officer, before we proceeded along the swept road. We stopped to photograph the truck that had detonated one of the mines, and then went to the farmhouse, where the victims' families were trying to come to terms with their loss.

As usual, Kuus's images captured the pain and poignancy of the story.

When his 14-year SIPA contract ended in 2000, Kuus, who had been expelled by the Foreign Correspondents Association for carrying – and using – a gun during his work in the strife-torn townships, moved to Cape Town, where he disappeared into near obscurity. He later said, in an interview with the *Mail & Guardian* newspaper, that he was considered by mainstream news organizations to be a “bit of an untouchable.” He added, “I don't mind being on the outside looking in. I'm used to it, but I just wish they wouldn't ignore the work.”

However, Kuus gained the trust of the leaders of some of the most feared and violent gangs in the Cape Flats. He photographed their weddings and functions, cold-blooded hit men, drug lords and hookers. It was a peek into a life that few outsiders ever see.

He was inside a house occupied by gang-



MEMORIES: Betsie Verwoerd, widow of HF Verwoerd, architect of apartheid, who was murdered in parliament in Cape Town in 1966, at her retirement home.



TURF WAR: Gun-toting gang member readies for action.



DADDY DAYCARE: A busker nurses his son as he plays his trombone in the streets of Cape Town. Kuus had a close rapport with the people eking out a living in the streets of the South African city – he was, for years, one of them.



BABE IN ARMS: Farmer's wife, Northern Transvaal, 1985.

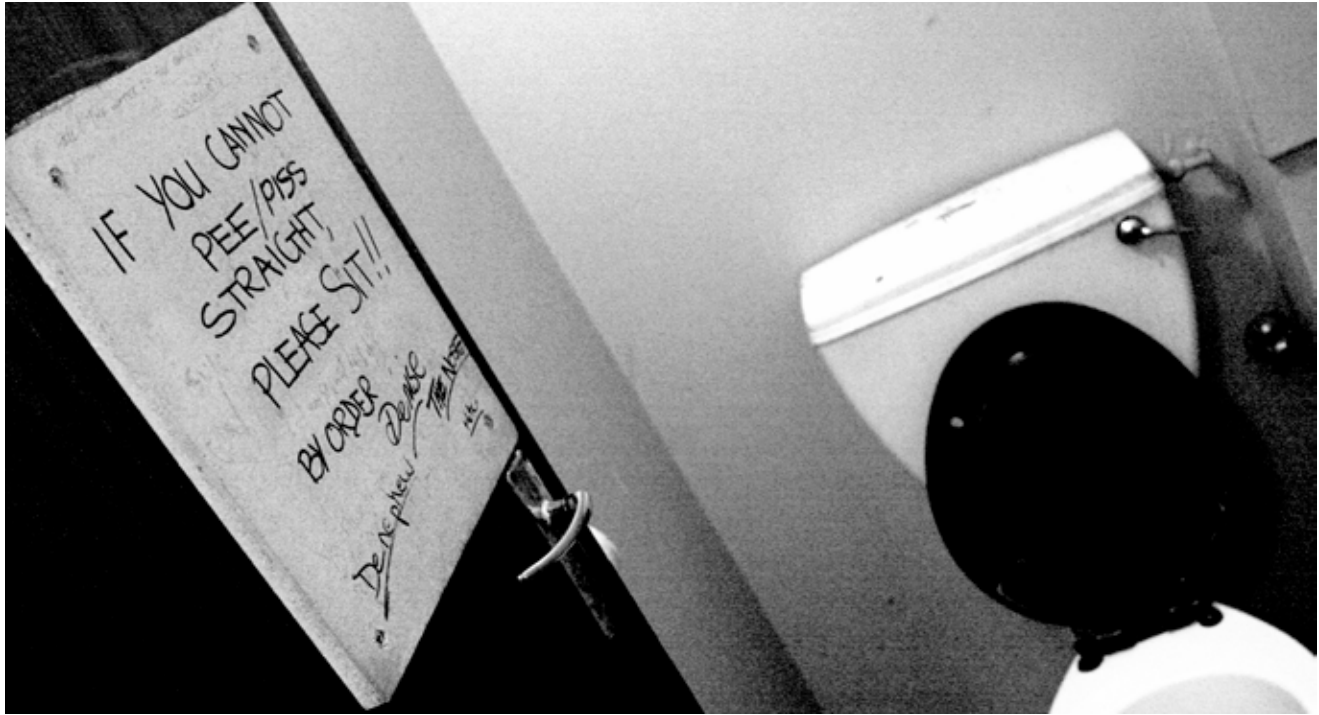
sters, when a rival gang opened fire and a full-scale gun battle erupted. (He posted a picture of scenes from the battle on his Facebook feed, just a week before he died.)

Kuus also took a remarkable sequence of photographs in the Cape ganglands. In the first couple of images, his lens is pointed at leaders of “The Fluffy Kids.” The last two frames, however, are blurred images of the sky – at that moment, another gang member had hit him over the head from behind. When Kuus regained consciousness, he was stripped of everything, except his underpants. Anyone else would have got the hell out and never returned, but Kuus made his way to the home of a particularly feared ganglord and explained the situation. A few phone calls were made, then everything stolen from him was returned.

Kuus was not working for an agency, when

IN THE PICTUREW

● See more of Juhan Kuus's work at: http://www.galleryf.co.za/wgallerydisplay.php?album_id=242400



SIGN LANGUAGE: Kuus's father Harri's favorite public house in the Cape Town suburb of Richwood.

He was banished from the home at 10:30 one evening and thrown onto the streets in his pyjamas and with his few possessions

.....
Hilton Hamann is the author of a number of books including the bestselling *Days of the Generals*. His novels are available on amazon.com

he shot his gangland series, and I don't think he ever sold any of those images.

Then, in 2008, in his mid-50s, homeless and looking a great deal older and very frail, he met Gavin Furlonger, head of Cape Town's Gallery F, devoted to the collection and display of South Africa's photographic heritage.

Furlonger says, "We managed to get him digs at the Salvation Army. But from here on, the downward plight continued, and within weeks he was banished from the home at 10:30 one evening and thrown onto the streets in his pyjamas and with the few possessions that he owned, including his camera.

"This was to become a pattern in Juhan's life, moving from one shelter to another until eventually we got him a place at St Monica in the BoKaap old people's shelter, where he remained until his tragic death, when he fell down a flight of stairs at the home. Fortunately, in the last year before his untimely end, Juhan made a turnaround in his attitude – and, I think, died a happy man." **CT**



PRIZED POSSESSIONS: In the corner of Kuus's Cape Town hostel room, just before his death.

Violent images – to deter violence



Top: Spread from Drum magazine features Kuus's image of an ANC gunman lying in a pool of blood. Below: In my favourite Kuus image from Frontline, a small dog runs freely down a corridor inside a South African prison.

Juhan Kuus was fearless. I discovered that when he came into my office in Johannesburg at the beginning of 1980, when I was editor of Drum magazine, a monthly for black readers.

Three ANC gunmen had attacked a Pretoria bank, taking 25 hostages. Hours later, security forces stormed the building, killing the gunmen. Kuus, ignoring police orders to stay outside, sneaked into the bank, where he hid behind a counter and photographed one of the men lying in a pool of blood.

We blew that photograph across two pages (above), aware that we were putting ourselves under threat – from South Africa's ban-happy

censors, and security police, who had a habit of detaining troublesome journalists. We knew, as they did, that – no matter how many words castigating violence we might print next to the image – many of our readers would see the gunmen as heroes of the revolution, not terrorists.

I next met Kuus in 1988, when, for a year or more, his photo essays appeared in Frontline, the South African political magazine I designed and produced.

As Denis Beckett, the magazine's editor, recalls, "Kuus fell for Frontline and never wanted money, though I paid him the same lousy rate as I paid everyone else. He believed his pictures deterred people from getting violent. And, to keep deterring them, he kept dealing with violence, or symbols of violence, such as a (black) policeman holding a pistol to his own head as if about to blow his brains out, while a nearby (white) policemen sniggers. (Page 25).

"That was humbling, to confront the fact that you could come by any number of unexpected routes to what was a real side of the angels. Kuus was a relief from the dedicated anti-apartheid missionaries, in whose company I more properly belonged, and by whom I was thoroughly surrounded." **Tony Sutton**



10 signs that America is the most corrupt nation

America today, a poem by **Gary Corseri**

1. Wealth Disparities

Trickle down economics
Is an excuse
For the rich to piss on the poor.
So, look up, ye wretched of the Earth!
We're happy to piss on your faces
While you cry out for "more!"

2. Human Carbon Emissions

I deny with a straight face
That I've anything to do
With the CO₂ I haphazardly spew
From my Lotus, or my factory –
Bringing to you
The latest baubles I've convinced you
You can't live without.

3. Endless Political Campaigns

Ridiculous to think they last a year or two
When, in fact, they've been going on
Since Washington chopped down the cherry tree
In quasi-actuality,
Then dressed in military garb
Impressing all the delegates
He was best-suited to make us "free."

4. Lobbyists, bankers, bribes.

Excuse me for being
Unpolitically correct,
But wasn't that the very thing
The "self-radicalized," reforming Jew
Got so upset about when he threw
all those money-changers out
Of the Temple?

5. Not Prosecuting the Villains of the Meltdown

What else is new?
When Polk invaded Mexico
And our legislators cheered him on,
Did anyone besides Thoreau
Cry "foul," let's end this now,
Once and for all?

6. Bloated Military Budgets

Forget the nitpicking, if you please!
It's not easy to maintain
A thousand military bases around the world,
"dedicated to the proposition"
That we're the "exceptional" people
And God loves us best!
What's a couple of trillion bucks mislaid
Got to do with "bad guys" slayed?

7. Our Prison-Industrial Complex

3 Strikes and you're out –
Works in baseball, why not crime?
We're a sporting people, and besides,
Better to pay the minimum-minimum-minimum
wage
To polish belt buckles for the troops
Then deal with marchers in the streets
Squawking about "fairness."

8. Domestic Spying

How else control a restive group
Of malcontents out-of-the-loop
Of what the country stands for?
When everyone fears everyone

Everyone will get a gun.
 Fear's the friend of governments
 Seeking to steer malcontents
 Against each other.

9. Insider Trading & Revolving Doors
 If I'm spying, why wouldn't I
 Occasionally lapse,
 Profit from some Great Collapse
 I see coming down the gilded pike?
 If prices of a stock should spike—
 and my foreknowledge tells me when —
 why shouldn't I collect a million,
 put the kid through the Ivy League,
 take my seat on the Corporate Board?

10. Asset Forfeiture

Why shouldn't our cops seize what they can?
 Could anything be more American?
 Forget your Citizens' Rights' complaints!
 They're neither paid nor trained for being saints! **CT**

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Gary Corseri has published articles, fiction, poetry and dramas worldwide, including in the New York Times. He has published novels and collections of poetry, and his dramas have been produced on PBS-Atlanta and elsewhere. He has taught in US public schools and prisons and in US and Japanese universities. He has performed his work at the Carter Presidential Library. Corseri can be reached at gary_corseri@comcast.net

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Muhammad Ali meets the Black Panthers

Muhammad Ali wasn't the 'civil rights saint' that he is often portrayed as today, he was an important inspiration to the Black Panthers, writes **Dave Zirin**

Ali had an effect on the Black Panthers that rippled well beyond his wicked grace in the ring

Stanley Nelson's new documentary *The Black Panthers: Vanguard to the Revolution* is a bracing examination of the history and politics of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense. Given that we, in the USA, are living in a time when the issues that animated this revolutionary socialist organization – racist police brutality and economic injustice – still resonate, and given that new movements are finding their voice, this film could not be more timely. The documentary also made me consider the ways in which boxer Muhammad Ali played a role in the inspiration of the very existence of the Black Panther Party. In many respects, the events of the sports world were not in the mind of rank-and-file Panthers because they weren't playing games.

As one-time Panther – and long-time political prisoner – Mumia Abu-Jamal said to me in an interview, "As someone who grew up, very young in the party, I didn't form a lot of the idolatries that many age-mates did. At 14 to 15, I wasn't fantasizing about being a member of the NBA or the NFL. I was a member of the Black Panthers, and that was enough for me." But almost in the next moment Abu-Jamal said, "But if ever there was a sports hero to us, it was Muhammad Ali."

Because he had been speaking out against racism, war and the mainstream

civil rights movement for several years before the Panthers formed, Ali had a singular resonance. His triumphs in the ring were themselves political acts. Future Black Panther Party leader Eldridge Cleaver wrote in his 1968 autobiography *Soul on Ice*, "If the Bay of Pigs can be seen as a straight right hand to the psychological jaw of white America, then [Ali's defeat of Floyd Patterson] was the perfect left hook to the gut."

Fighter inside and outside the ring

But Ali had an effect on the Panthers that rippled well beyond his wicked grace in the ring. In 1965 the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in Lowndes County, Alabama, launched an independent political party and became the first group to use the symbol of a black panther. Their graphic was of a black silhouette of a panther with a slogan straight from the champ: "WE Are the Greatest." They took his famous phrase, "I am the greatest," and made it a collective call to arms. In addition, Panther co-founder Huey Newton said he became politicized by watching Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali give speeches. They inspired him, but left him wanting more because he "had enough of religion" and later wrote, "references to God or Allah did not satisfy my stubborn thirst for answers."

As for Muhammad Ali, he was not only aware of



The Panthers, were subject to vicious state repression, not because of berets or charisma, but because they inspired masses of people to revolt

INSPIRED by Muhammad Ali: Panthers' leaders Eldridge Cleaver (left) and Huey Newton.

Photos: Jeffrey Blankfort (Cleaver), Stephen Shames (Newton)

the Panthers, he saw what they were doing as a critical contribution to black freedom. In a 1970 interview for a publication known as *The Black Scholar*, Ali said. "I was determined to be one n---er that the white man didn't get. Go on and join something. If it isn't the Muslims, at least join the Black Panthers. Join something bad."

There are photos of Ali walking with the Black Panthers online and a clip of Ali speaking at a rally in support of the Panthers in San Francisco, where he says, "Those of you who are white . . . have many white leaders who can speak for you. You have many whites in power who have the billions and trillions of dollars to help you. But black people also need a spokesman." Abu-Jamal also said to me that the only time a picture of an athlete made their newspaper, the *Black Panther*, was when Ali lost to Joe Frazier in the 1971 Fight of the Century, and they put Ali's face up there under the heading, *The People's Champ*.

Soldiers' heroes

This linking of Ali and the Panthers was also seen in the minds of the rebel black soldiers fighting "America's war" in Vietnam. In 1970, journalist Wallace Terry traveled to Southeast Asia to survey 392

African American and white soldiers. The heroes of black soldiers were primarily Muhammad Ali and Black Panther Stokely Carmichael – all because they were seen as symbols of opposition to the bloody conflict.

Stories like this remind us that Ali was not the harmless "civil rights saint" that he is often portrayed as. They also remind us why it is that Ali's radical teeth have been extracted and why the Panthers, as Stanley Nelson showed so searingly, were subject to vicious state repression. It wasn't because of berets or charisma. It was because they inspired masses of people to revolt. They inspired people to put down their guns in Vietnam or, even more scarily, turn their guns around. That was Ali. That was the Panthers. And given the plague of problems we face today, that is why Stanley Nelson did such a service by keeping the raw revolutionary memory of this organization alive.

CT

Dave Zirin is the author of Game Over: How Politics Has Turned the Sports World Upside Down, and other books on sports and politics. Zirin is sports editor of The Nation. This article was first published at www.thenation.com

Let's bash Beyoncé!

William Berkowitz shares his thoughts about the right-wing commentators who were offended by Super Bowl's half-time performance

Holmes argues that Beyoncé was wrong in using symbols of the Black Panther Party – black leather jackets and berets, and flowing Afros – to show her support for the Black Lives Matter movement

Attacking Beyoncé has become as American as apple pie and police shootings of unarmed black men. In the aftermath of the recent Super Bowl half-time show, during which Beyoncé and her dancers paid tribute to the Black Panther Party, and by inference the Black Lives Matter movement, right wing commentators went apoplectic. On Fox News, former New York City mayor Rudy Giuliani said, “It was really outrageous that she used it as a platform to attack police officers who are the people who protect her and protect us, and keep us alive.” On Facebook, Representative Peter King said that, while “Beyoncé may be a gifted entertainer, . . . no one should really care what she thinks about any serious issue confronting our nation.” A seemingly clueless Fox News host Steve Varney asked, “Is there anything in America that can exclude race? Why is race brought in at the half-time show of the Super Bowl?”

Beyoncé's performance followed on the heels of the release of “Formation,” a powerful, hard-hitting music video. As vox.com pointed out, “The video shows a young black boy standing with his hands up against a row of police officers – a reference to the Black Lives Matter movement, which has protested racial disparities in the criminal justice system and particularly police use of force. And it ends with a police car drowning in rising waters – a callback to Hurricane Ka-

trina and systemic neglect and abuse of the black community in New Orleans.”

Kim Holmes is what folks at the Heritage Foundation call a “distinguished fellow,” which also suggests some kind of respected scholar. His recent column for Heritage's The Daily Signal, titled, Why Beyoncé Shouldn't Have Honored Black Panthers in Super Bowl Show, is neither distinguished nor scholarly in terms of historical or cultural knowledge, or accuracy.

Panthers' violence

As a way of promoting his forthcoming book, which appears to be a balls-to-the-wall takedown of liberal cultural icons, Holmes's column argues that Beyoncé was wrong in using symbols of the Black Panther Party – black leather jackets and berets, and flowing Afros – to show her support for the Black Lives Matter” movement. After all says Holmes, the Black Panthers “has a long and sordid history of violence.”

“Why raise such a divisive symbol of racial militancy and separatism to the pinnacle of a Super Bowl half-time show?” Holmes asks. “The answer is quite simple: because it shocks – or at least it's intended to shock.”

For Holmes, “Taking a movement that once was known to have shoot-outs with the police, and even occasionally torture and murder snitches in its ranks, and then



POWERFUL: Beyoncé and her crew stir emotions at the Super Bowl halftime show.

Photo:YouTube

to make that movement a symbolic carrier of the Black Lives Matter movement, was meant to convey a very simple message. It is now ‘cool’ to embrace violence, mayhem, and frankly even racial separatism in the cause of civil rights.”

What racial separatism has to do with the Black Lives Matter movement is a mystery that Holmes doesn’t unravel.

From its humble Oakland, California, beginnings, the establishment of its free breakfast programs for hungry children, and community health care clinics, to its being targeted by the FBI and local law enforcement agencies, and its members being gunned down by the police, the Black Panther Party went through numerous iterations in its relatively short history. It is worthwhile embracing the entirety of the party’s history – including Panther-initiated violence – and placing the party within the context of the times. Holmes doesn’t appear equipped to do any of that.

Essentially, Holmes is using his critique of Beyoncé’s half-time performance – which, along with the performance of Bruno Mars, saved Super Bowl 50’s half time show – to both demonize the Black Lives Matter move-

ment and to publicize his forthcoming book, *The Closing of the Liberal Mind: How Groupthink and Intolerance Define the Left*.

The Closing of the Liberal Mind is transparent in its disdain for, and anger at, liberal entertainers, including Hollywood stars who dare inject politics into their careers.

“There’s nothing new about Carlos Santana sporting Che Guevara tee-shirts or Pete Seeger spouting communist propaganda,” Holmes writes, as if both Santana and Seeger – a life-long crusader for social justice – can be reduced to ridiculously offensive stereotyping. But Holmes’s larger point is his charge that “the degree to which today’s most popular entertainers are willing to indulge in fantasies of violence and mayhem. Some sound like bloody totalitarians.”

Holmes’s main conceit is an old one: Liberals are becoming a force for “illiberalism” – namely, denying their fellow Americans’ rights and freedoms. In an election season that has Donald Trump leading the Republican Party’s presidential field, and Ted Cruz heavily in the mix, I would think that Holmes might have better things on his mind than baseless charges and phony conclusions.

CT

It is worthwhile embracing the entirety of the Black Panthers’ history – including Panther-initiated violence – and placing the party within the context of the times

.....
Bill Berkowitz is a long-time observer of the conservative movement. His Conservative Watch columns document the strategies, players, institutions, victories and defeats of the American right.

Europe's left: Triumph or trap?

Conn Hallinan wonders if the left can create real societal change, or if it is doomed to lose in a game of stacked cards and loaded dices

Established socialist parties all over Europe tend to campaign from the left, but govern from the centre

Over the past year, left and centre-left parties have taken control of two European countries and hold the balance of power in a third. Elections in Greece, Portugal and Spain saw right-wing parties take a beating and tens of millions of voters reject the economic austerity policies of the European Union (EU).

But what can these left parties accomplish? Can they really roll back regressive taxes and restore funding for education, health and social services? Can they bypass austerity programs to jump start economies weighted down by staggering numbers of jobless? Or are they trapped in a game with loaded dice and marked cards?

And, for that matter, who is the left? Socialist and social democratic parties in France and Germany have not lifted a finger to support left-led anti-austerity campaigns in Greece, Spain, Ireland, and Portugal, and many of them helped institute – or went along with – neoliberal policies they now say they oppose. Established socialist parties all over Europe tend to campaign from the left, but govern from the centre.

Last year's electoral earthquakes were triggered not by the traditional socialist parties – they did poorly in Greece, Spain and Portugal – but by activist left parties,

such as Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain, and the Left Bloc in Portugal.

With the exception of Ireland's Sinn Fein, all of these parties were either birthed by, or became prominent during, the financial meltdown of 2008 that plunged Europe into economic crisis. Podemos came directly out of the massive plaza demonstrations by the "Indignados" [the "Indignant Ones"] in Spain's major cities in 2011.

Syriza and the Left Bloc predated the 2011 uprising, but were politically marginal until the EU instituted a draconian austerity program that generated massive unemployment, homelessness, poverty, and economic inequality.

From resistance to power

Resistance to the austerity policies of the "Troika" – the European Commission, the European Central bank, and the International Monetary Fund – vaulted these parties from the periphery to the centre. Syriza became the largest party in Greece and assumed power in 2015. Podemos was the only left party that gained votes in the recent Spanish election, and it holds the balance of power in the formation of a new government. And the Left Bloc, along with the Communist/Green Alliance, has formed a coalition government with Portugal's Socialist Workers Party.

But with success has come headaches.

Syriza won the Greek elections on a platform of resisting the Troika's austerity policies, only to have to swallow more of them. In Portugal, the Left Bloc and Communist/Green Alliance are unhappy with the Socialist Party's commitment to re-pay Portugal's quite unpayable debt. Podemos proposed a united front with the Socialist Party, only to find there are some in that organization who would rather bed down with Spain's right-wing Popular Party than break bread with Podemos.

Lessons learned?

It is still too early to draw any firm conclusions about what the 2015 earthquake accomplished – and Ireland's election has yet to happen – but there are some obvious lessons.

First, austerity is unpopular. As Italy's prime minister, Matteo Renzi, put it after the Spanish election, "Governments that apply rigid austerity measures are destined to lose their majorities."

Second, if you are a small economy, taking the power of capital head on is likely to get you trampled. The Troika did not just force Syriza to institute more austerity, it made it more onerous, a not-very-subtle message to voters in Portugal and Spain. But people in both countries didn't buy it, in large part because, after four years of misery, their economies are still not back to where they were in 2008.

The Troika can crush Greece – Portugal as well – but Spain is another matter. It is the 14th largest economy in the world and the fifth largest in the EU. And now Italy – the fourth largest economy in the EU – is growing increasingly restive with the tight budget policies of the EU that have kept the jobless rate high.

But can these anti-austerity coalitions force the Troika to back off?

A major part of the problem is the EU itself, and, in particular, the eurozone, the 19 countries that use the euro as a com-

mon currency. The euro is controlled by the European Central Bank, which, in practice, means Germany. In an economic crisis, most countries manipulate their currencies – the US, Britain, and China come to mind – as part of a strategy to pay down debt and re-start their economies. The members of the eurozone do not have that power.

Germany pursues policies that favor its industrial, export-driven economy, but that model is nothing like the economies of Greece, Portugal, Spain, or even Italy. Nor are any of those countries likely to reproduce the German model, because they do not have the resources (or history) to do so.

Complicating matters are political divisions among the Troika's left opponents. For instance, Syriza is under attack from its left flank for not quitting the eurozone. Former Syriza chief economic advisor Janis Miliotis charges that Syriza has abandoned its activist roots and become simply a political party more interested in power than principles. There are similar tensions in Spain and Portugal.

But the choices of what to do are not obvious. Withdrawing from the eurozone can be perilous. In Greece's case, the European Central Bank threatened to shut off the country's money supply, making it almost impossible for Athens to pay for food, medical and energy imports, and finance its own exports. In short, economic collapse and possible social chaos.

But following the policies of the Troika sentences countries to permanent debt, rising poverty rates, and a growing wealth gap. Portugal has one of the highest inequality rates in Europe, and Spain's national unemployment rate is 21 per cent, and double that among the young. Greece's figures are far higher.

The left coalitions are far from powerless, however. Portugal's coalition government just introduced a budget that will lift the minimum wage, reverse public sector

The European Central Bank threatened to shut off Greece's money supply, making it almost impossible for Athens to pay for food, medical and energy imports, and finance its own exports

POWER SHIFT

Putting people in apartments and raising minimum wages does not overthrow capitalism, but many activists argue that such victories are essential to convince people that change is possible

wage cuts, roll-back many tax increases, halt privatization of education and transport, and put more money into schools and medical care. That doesn't mean everything is smooth sailing. The coalition has already fallen out over a bank bailout, and it disagrees on the debt, but so far the parties are still working together. Jeremy Corbyn, the recently elected left leader of the British Labour Party, hails the Portugal alliance as the beginning of an "anti-austerity coalition" across the continent.

Easing the tensions

There are also interesting developments going on in Spain that address the tensions between street activism and political parties. Emily Achtenberg, a long-time housing expert from Boston and a reporter/analyst for North American Congress on Latin America (NACLA), has studied Barcelona's Platform of People Affected by Mortgages (PAH). PAH came out of Spain's catastrophic housing crisis brought on by the financial meltdown of 2008. Some 650,000 homes are in foreclosure, and 400,000 families have been evicted.

With the help of Podemos, progressive activists won control of Madrid, Barcelona, Cadiz, and Zaragoza. Ada Colau, the mayor of Barcelona, is a founder of PAH.

In Spain, homeowners are responsible for debts even after declaring bankruptcy, debts that can block them from renting an apartment, buying a home or buying a car.

At the same time, according to the 2013 census, 34 million homes and apartments – 14 per cent of the country's housing stock – are vacant, most owned by banks. And because the city has become one of Europe's tourist magnets, "tens of thousands of once-affordable apartments are marketed to tourists through on-line platforms like Airbnb," exacerbating the situation, says Achtenberg. But PAH and its allies on the city council have slowed down

the evictions, cracked down on unlicensed Airbnb owners, and leaned on the banks to free vacant homes and apartments.

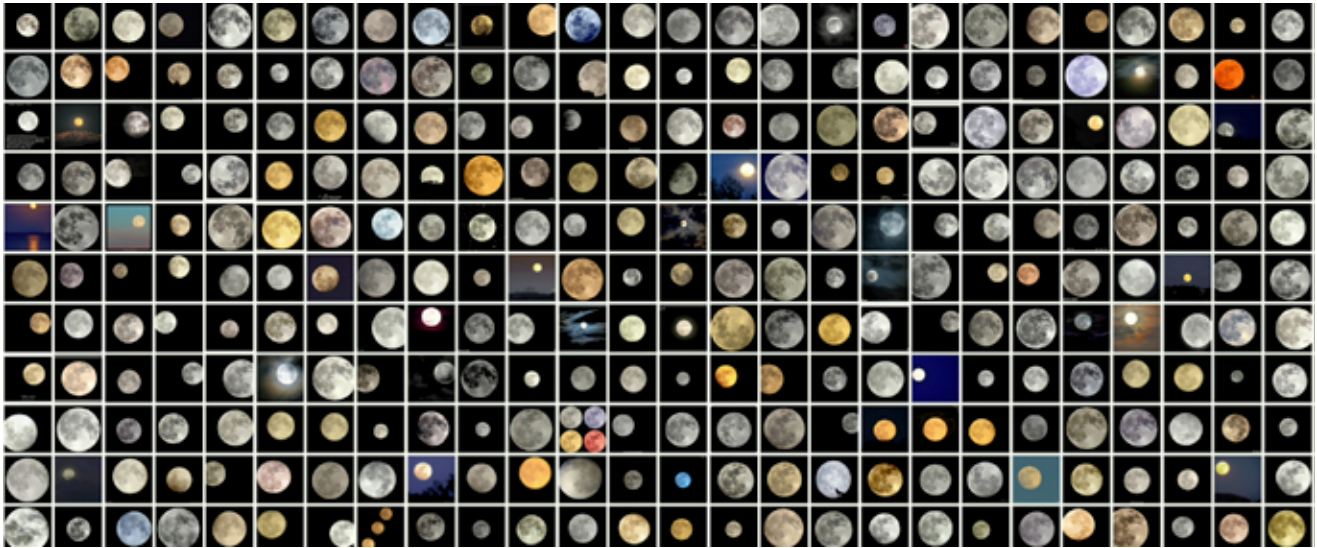
PAH now has some 200 chapters all over the country and is planning to press the national parliament to end the "debt for life" law. While allied with Podemos, PAH has maintained its political independence, working both sides of the street: sit-ins and protests, and running for office.

"A perennial question," says Achtenberg, "is whether the impetus for progressive change comes from inside the institution, or from the streets. In Barcelona today, it seems that both strategies are needed, and are working." As Colau says, for progressive movements "both are indispensable. For real democracy to exist, there should always be an organized citizenry keeping an eye on government – no matter who is in charge."

Putting people in apartments and raising minimum wages does not overthrow capitalism, but many activists argue that such victories are essential to convince people that change is possible and that the Troika is not all-powerful. They also play to the left's strong suit: Building a humanistic society.

Finding that fine line between change and co-option is not easy, and one formula does not fit all circumstances. Spain has more breathing room than Portugal and Greece simply because it is bigger. The Portuguese may find their path a bit easier simply because they have allies in the euro-zone. As Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras says, "I think it is not so easy to change Europe when you are alone." **CT**

Conn Hallinan is a columnist for *Foreign Policy In Focus*. He has a PhD in Anthropology from the University of California, Berkeley and oversaw the journalism program at the University of California at Santa Cruz for 23 years. He is a winner of a Project Censored Real News Award. Hallinan lives in Berkeley, California.



MOONSTRUCK: Keying in the words “Full Moon” at Flickr.com brings up more than a million images.

Image overload

Exposed to a deluge of digital photos, we’re feeling the psychological effects of too many pictures, writes **Rebecca Macmillan**

Twenty-four per cent of US teens say they’re online “almost constantly.” Much of that time, it seems, is spent incessantly compiling and navigating vast collections and streams of images.

In a 2014 survey, the photo sharing app Instagram supplanted Twitter as the social media platform considered “most important” by US teens.

These results stayed the same for 2015, confirming just how crucial image sharing and consumption have become to young people’s everyday online experiences. Not surprisingly, Facebook and Twitter have since become more image-driven, and Snapchat – which enables users to create and share ephemeral photographs and short videos – is one of the fastest-growing social networks.

Indeed, our relationship with photographs is rapidly changing. As we snap, store, and communicate with thousands of images

on our phones and computers, a number of researchers and theorists are already beginning to point to some of the unintended consequences of this “image overload,” which range from heightened anxiety to memory impairment.

Overwhelmed – and distracted – by images

In the Rhetoric of Photography course that I’ve taught at the University of Texas at Austin over the past few years, image glut was a constant topic of discussion among my students.

They repeatedly expressed feeling overrun by photographs and addicted to posting images. They even waxed nostalgic about the clunky plastic cameras of their childhoods, wistfully recalling the days of limited exposures and a waiting period before seeing their developed prints.

“Images are produced, commodified,

Researchers and theorists are beginning to point to some of the unintended consequences of “image overload,” which range from heightened anxiety to memory impairment

Image overload also suggests a level of exhaustion with the process of monitoring and creating photo streams – surviving the pressure to digitally document one’s everyday life

made public and circulated on an unprecedented scale,” sociologist Martin Hand writes in his book *Ubiquitous Photography*.

Image overload hinges on feeling visually saturated – the sense that because there’s so much visual material to see, remembering an individual photograph becomes nearly impossible.

For my students, this feeling was marked at times by general frustration, low-grade anxiety and flat-out fatigue. Image overload also suggests a level of exhaustion with the process of monitoring and creating photo streams – surviving the pressure to digitally document one’s everyday life and to bear witness to others’ ever-growing image banks.

Many accumulate thousands of images on their phones and digital cameras. The daunting task of organizing, altering and deleting these can evoke feelings of dread. Indeed, according to a 2015 report, the average smartphone user has 630 photos stored on his or her device.

Martin Hand also notes the “degrees of anxiety, concern and fascination” that his own students demonstrated in response to the daunting demands of public image proliferation and upkeep.

“Aside from anxieties about accidental deletion or irrevocable loss,” Hand continues, “people often express concern over the inability to organize, classify or even look at all their digital images in ways that are meaningful for them.”

Meanwhile, Fred Ritchin, dean of the school at the International Center of Photography, argues that the constant stream of visual information contributes to the kind of fragmented focus that former Microsoft executive Linda Stone calls “continual partial attention.”

In other words, by always being tuned in and responsive to digital technologies, we become less aware of our surroundings. As our attention succumbs to the allure of being someplace else, our concentration suffers.

According to psychologist Maryanne Garry, the overabundance of digital images may

be detrimental to memory formation.

Garry argues that a constant flood of photographs doesn’t actively inspire remembrance or generate understanding. As Garry explains, narratives are crucial to memory formation. When viewing a barrage of images, unless there’s some sort of timeline, contextualization or intense focus, we’ll fail to place the image within an overarching story – and it becomes that much more difficult to retain the memory of the image.

Discouraging remembering

Meanwhile, through her research, psychologist Linda Henkel has encountered what she describes as the “photo-taking impairment effect” – the idea that photographing may discourage remembering.

In Henkel’s study, students who visited an art museum with cameras remembered fewer of the objects they photographed than those they simply observed. And if they did remember the photographed object, they were less likely to recall specific details.

However, a second study found that if a student took the time to zoom in on an object, their memory was not impaired – an indication that increased attention and cognitive engagement can counteract this effect.

During my third semester teaching the *Rhetoric of Photography*, I created an assignment to allow my students to explore their concerns about image overload.

Students would spend at least a week shooting with a disposable camera before developing their film and writing about the experience. I specifically asked them to comment on film scarcity, the inability to digitally manipulate or review images, the feel of the camera and the delay between shooting and seeing their photographs.

Reflecting on the disposable camera assignment, many students delighted in the deliberately slow pace of the process.

“Without the option to manipulate or review each of these photos, I had to think even further about the size of my frame, lighting orientation and subject proximity to

the camera lens,” one student wrote. “Capturing in this way was satisfying and relaxing. Despite the fact that I could not alter or delete exposures, I had the opportunity to breathe and set up the perfect shot.”

Another commented, “While modern technology has given us the comfort of not having to physically move around as much to take a photograph, when you actually do it you feel more in the moment.”

Students seemed able to achieve the type of heightened focus that Henkel argues may enhance memories. Many students simply felt liberated. The pressure to alter an image until it was just right for public consumption was lifted. The stress and anxiety my students routinely referred to speaks to the changing role of images, especially for younger generations. No longer do photographs primarily function as works of art or memorial objects.

Instead, as media studies professor José Van Dijck explains in “Mediated Memories in the Digital Age”: “Even though photography may still capitalize on its primary function as a memory tool for documenting a person’s past, we are witnessing a significant shift, especially among the younger generation, toward using it as an instrument for interac-

tion and peer bonding.”

Part of what image overload may well register, then, is the regular pressure to communicate through photographs, which requires a series of ensuing steps beyond simply clicking the shutter: editing, posting, promoting, and responding. At the end of the assignment, students had roughly 24 pictures to show for their week (fewer than some might post online in a typical day). But they came away with a clearer sense of their own patterns of perception and photographic engagement. They also gained confidence in their capacity to step back (if only slightly) from non-stop image feeds.

With photo streams continuing to proliferate, greater self-awareness can counteract feelings of drowning amidst a flood of images. And by engaging with analog technologies such as disposable cameras, we’ll be better equipped to foster a slower, more intentional form of attention that’s crucial to defending our memories and sensations from being washed away.

CT

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Rebecca Macmillan is a Ph.D. candidate in English at the University of Texas at Austin. This article was originally published at www.theconversation.com

By engaging with analog technologies like disposable cameras, we’ll be better equipped to foster a slower, more intentional form of attention that’s crucial to defending our memories and sensations from being washed away



Journalist, Filmmaker, Author, Activist, Father, Brother, Friend, Troublemaker, News Dissector

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1,001 ways to die in Somalia

Almost destroyed by drought, famine and war, Somalia awaits another election as Western oil companies get ready to drill, writes **Jan Wellmann**

I rushed out to the balcony, expecting to see Con Air crash into the adjoining UN building, but I only saw a dark, black shape swoop down to Mogadishu's Aden Adde International Airport half a mile away

I was shivering in bed on my first night in Mogadishu. At 3:30 am I killed the air conditioner. Moments later, the room felt stuffier than a London subway. I got up and paced around, wondering if it was safe to keep the balcony door open.

A few months back, Al Shabaab, an Al Qaeda faction, had stormed Jazeera Palace Hotel, where I was staying, and sprayed a group of Chinese diplomats with lead. Now the building was secured by a street blockade, a double-gated check-in, blast-proof walls, two dozen armed men and Abdullah, the small, wiry gentleman with an AK-47 outside my door.

I took a peak into the corridor and caught Abdullah dozing. He was balancing on a tiny wooden stool, rifle propped between his legs. I was surprised to see his chair begin to gently vibrate, as if tapping Morse code on the cement floor. Seconds later, a set of massive, low-rumble turbo-props shook the building. I rushed out to the balcony, expecting to see Con Air crash into the adjoining UN building, but I only saw a dark shape swoop down to Mogadishu's Aden Adde International Airport half a mile away. Whoever was piloting the craft had killed all of its navigation lights.

"What kind of birds drop into Mogadishu at 4 am without lights," I felt compelled to ask my host, Hassan, the next morning. I was in town with an alternative energy del-

egation, presenting clean power options to Somali leaders and businessmen. Hassan was in charge of our arrangements and security. He knew Mogadishu inside out and was a fast thinker.

"Ah, you mean Big Brother?" Hassan smiled. His grin made me curious. The Americans had a peculiar reputation in Mogadishu.

Capturing the White Pearl

Mogadishu, Somalia's capital, was one of the Indian Ocean's principal ports until the early 20th century. Its trading history goes back to ancient Egypt. Mogadishu prospered through its trade in gold, beeswax, ivory and an abundance of fruits, animals and other foods all across the world, providing immense wealth to the native, dark-skinned Berbers and Arabs. The pearl white mosques and cathedrals of Mogadishu put it on par with Venice in Italy. The late American historian Ross E. Dunn described Somalia as a "kind of medieval America, a fertile, well-watered land of economic opportunity and a place of salvation from drought, famine, over-population, and war at home."

Today, Somalia is rife with drought, famine and war. Mogadishu lies in rubble. Tribal factions have deconstructed the city block by block, with their rocket-propelled-grenades and anti-aircraft guns, over a period of two decades. At least 300,000 Somalis



All photographs by Jan Wellmann

SAFETY FIRST: One AK 47 in his hand, another on his back, this security guard is ready for the worst the day has to offer.

were killed in Mogadishu alone during the civil war, another 1.1-million had to flee the country.

The city has no sewage system, waste management, energy infrastructure, population registry, or ownership records. Random diesel generators provide fractional power to the privileged few. Travel inside Somalia is practically impossible, with much of the roadways, bridges and infrastructure destroyed. Al Shabaab still pops into town for surprise mayhem, forcing us to behold the view from behind bulletproof glass and a convoy of armed guards.

My driver yelled at me when I tried to roll down the window to take a picture of a woman carrying her baby while rummaging through a mountain of trash. Later, as we drove past the central market place, I was happy to see one brand new modern structure rise out of the ashes. My guide told me it's the National Intelligence and Security Agency (NISA) headquarters, established in

2013 "under CIA supervision."

The gleaming building is symbolic of the new US influence in the region. Aside from training and building Somalia's intelligence infrastructure, the Americans are building a new, secretive military base 70 kilometres southwest of Mogadishu, without any official arrangement with the Somali government. The base has a capacity to house up to 100,000 troops, according to one source, who wished not to be named. As a result, the locals are seeing an influx of not only American troops, but private contractors, mercenaries and Big Oil "security."

There are two underground rendition facilities used by the CIA for "counter-terrorism operations" that my source calls "underground Guantánamos." (The case of one 25-year-old Kenyan extraordinary rendition victim was exposed in a 2014 article in *The Nation* magazine by Jeremy Scahill.) One of the facilities is apparently blasted into solid rock at the end of the airport runway, where

Al Shabaab still pops into town for surprise mayhem, forcing us to behold the view from behind bulletproof glass and a convoy of armed guards

BIG BROTHER

It's hard to fathom, however, how a ragtag rebel group that can barely hold a village in Somalia could threaten the United States

CIA transport planes drop classified loads on a nightly basis. The other is located under the presidential palace and is known as Godka, "The Hole."

The official reason for the US presence in Somalia is the perennial war against terrorism. Since 2011, there have been a glut of drone attacks against Al Shabaab in Somalia. In June 2011, CIA director John Brennan declared, "From the territory it controls in Somalia, Al Shabaab continues to call for strikes against the United States. As a result we cannot, and we will not, let down our guard. We will continue to pummel Al Qaeda and its ilk."

It's hard to fathom, however, how a ragtag rebel group that can barely hold a village in Somalia could threaten the United States.

A better rationale for the American presence in Somalia is its geostrategic location at the mouth of the Red Sea, with passage to Suez Canal and close proximity to Yemen, Saudi Arabia and Iran, the hotbed of Middle East affairs.

The real reason is oil.

The energy equation

Somalia holds some of the most under-ex-



TRIGGER HAPPY: Never argue with a truckload of AK47s . . .

ploited oil and gas reserves in the world. Already in the 1980s, geologists from the Texan Hunt Oil Company (with close ties to the Bush family) predicted a capacity of a billion of barrels of oil lodged in an underground rift that stretched from Yemen to Somalia. President Bush inaugurated the Hunt Yemen distillery in 1986, with a speech emphasizing, "the growing strategic importance to the West of developing crude oil sources in the region away from the Strait of Hormuz."

Before the civil war erupted in 1990, nearly two-thirds of Somali energy reserves were already allocated to the American oil giants Conoco, Amoco, Chevron and Phillips. But Mohamed Siad Barre, president and military dictator of Somali Democratic Republic, was not willing to give the entire pie to the Americans. Siad Barre, or Comrade Siad, came into power in 1969 with a coup d'état. Barre was a military dictator, who wanted to reassemble Somalia after half a century of colonialism. He was also a socialist who used cooperatives to build roads and hospitals, and reinvigorate local agriculture. He nationalized banks, industries and businesses under the new Somali Democratic Republic. Barre's mission was to build a Greater Somalia to unite ethnic Somalis who had been ripped apart by the British, French and Italian troops since 1881, when European powers partitioned more than 90 per cent of the African continent.

By the time Barre got into power, Somalia was fractured under five independent territories, Italian Somalia (South), French Somalia (Djibouti), Ethiopian Somalia, British Somaliland and Kenyan Somalia (North Eastern Districts). Barre's attempt to reacquire the Ethiopian-controlled Ogaden territory failed in 1977 after the Soviets flipped support from Barre to Ethiopia, giving an opening to the Americans, who began to support the Barre government with \$100-million a year in "economic and military aid."

While Texans were running around like wily coyotes in the 1980s, tagging Somalia's oil reserves, it became increasingly obvious



TOURIST TRAP: Mogadishu Lido Beach is part of a 3,300-km long coastline, the longest of mainland Africa and the Middle East.

that Barre would not become their puppet leader. Ergo, the Americans adopted the classic divide-and-conquer strategy, firstly by befriending a rebel group out of Somaliland, the Somali National Movement (SNM), hell-bent on taking out Barre. Other rebel groups followed suit. Some historic accounts at this time tag Barre as a ruthless military dictator, opposed by the people. But the real thrust against him came from tribal groups who fired from every cardinal direction of the compass to create chaos, with CIA backing.

By 1988, Barre was fighting to keep control of Mogadishu. By 1991, he'd been ousted, and Somalia was declared "a failed state." The resulting power vacuum intensified the war, collapsing distribution, infrastructure and agriculture. The result was one of the deadliest famines on record. From 1991 to 1992, half the population was starving.

It was the perfect time for the cavalry to come to the rescue.

Black Hawk Down

After a failed attempt in 1991 by UN troops to broker a cease-fire between the tribal groups, the United States offered to lead a "humanitarian operation" headed by the UN Security Council. Their aim was to reach resolution, utilizing "all necessary means" to ensure relief efforts.

Readily deployed news crews captured the US marines landing on the beaches of Somalia on December 9, 1992. It was code-named "Operation Restore Hope."

Enter General Mohamed Farrah Aidid, President Barre's former advisor, intelligence chief and ambassador to India. Educated in Rome and in an elite military institute in Moscow, he was revered by many Somalis as a fiercely nationalistic, charismatic soldier who fought in the trenches and was determined to resist a US-led occupation. As leader of one of the largest opposition groups, United Somali Congress (USC),

Readily deployed news crews captured the US marines landing on the beaches of Somalia on December 9, 1992. It was code-named "Operation Restore Hope"

BIG BROTHER

In Ridley Scott's film Black Hawk Down, Aidid the warlord has to be captured because he's starving his people. For the Somalis, the Black Hawks landing in Bakaara Market represented a century of colonialism

Aidid was perfectly positioned to inherit Barre's mantle. But Aidid's vision was contrary to US interests.

God's work

"You are doing God's work," President Bush told his 26,000 army and marine troops who were headed to Somalia. "We will not tolerate armed gangs ripping off their own people."

As the only US president in history to visit a Sub-Saharan nation during a conflict, President Bush spent two nights on the carrier USS Tripoli offshore from Mogadishu, trying to negotiate a deal with Aidid. The attempt was a failure. Aidid was a diehard for independence and a Greater Somalia. As the main obstacle for US dominance in the region, he quickly landed on top of the US kill list. But due to tip-offs from US Marines of Somalian ethnicity loyal to Aidid's ideology, most of the covert attacks against him failed.

In Ridley Scott's film *Black Hawk Down*, Aidid the warlord has to be captured because he's starving his people. For the Somalis, the Black Hawks landing in Bakaara Market represented a century of colonialism. It was no surprise that 20,000 Somalis or more converged on US Army Rangers with stones, RPGs and AK-47s. Eighteen Americans and some 3,000 Somalis perished in less than one day in the Fight for Mogadishu.

The bungled operation forced President Bill Clinton to pull out of Somalia in 1993 – but only in official capacity. The real war was just about to begin.

Masters of chaos

After the US Marines bailed out, Aidid became infamous. He declared himself president in 1995, but despite having enough sway to unite the country, a Western-orchestrated conference in Djibouti elected their own president, Ali Mahdi Muhammed.

Aidid's right-hand man, Osman Ali Atto, who happened to be the manager of a US oil company, allied himself with Mahdi's forces

and orchestrated Aidid's defeat. Aidid was fatally wounded in the ensuing battle (Ali Atto later became the biggest land owner in Somalia).

For the next decade, various rulers were able to control parts of Mogadishu, while factional fighting continued for the rest of the country. Another record famine took place in 1998. A Transitional National Government was formed in 2000 in Djibouti, but was instantly opposed by Somali Islamists who united under the Islamic Courts Union (ICU). In reaction to the growing influence of the ICU, a group of Mogadishu warlords formed the Alliance for the Restoration of Peace and Counter-Terrorism (ARPCT) – with CIA funding (\$100,000-\$150,000 per month, according to the International Crisis Group).

In 2006, despite CIA support, the ICU defeated the ARPCT in what is known as the "Second Battle of Mogadishu." Sheikh Sharif Ahmed, ICU's chairman, managed to seize Mogadishu, but his progress was quickly reversed when Ethiopian forces – again with US backing – joined the melee against ICU. When a weaker Sharif began to look for a deal with the transitional government, the extreme factions of ICU splintered off in the form of Al Shabaab. The group's first target was their former leader, Sharif, who proceeded to jump over to the American side. Sharif got a warm welcome from the Americans, with dual residence and education in US and UK, where he was accompanied by his four wives.

Al Shabaab is an evolution of al-Itihaad al-Islamiya (IAIA) – a group of militants originally funded by Osama bin Laden to secure an Islamist state in the Horn of Africa – after the fall of the Barre regime. Extremist IAIA leaders trained young jihadists in Afghanistan and imported them back to Somalia. One of them was Aden Hashi Farah Ayro, who came back to Somalia in 2003 to lead the Somali Al Shabaab faction. Ayro was said to have the mentality of Aidid, which would have made him particularly interest-



FAILED STATE: Once Somalia was the pearl of Africa. Here's Mogadishu's Bakaara Market, or what's left of it.

ing to Americans. In 2008, Ayro was killed by a US drone in central Somalia, along with up to 30 civilians.

But, at the same time, Somali sources claim that Al Shabaab was receiving support from Ethiopia via the US. Why were American drones being so selective? The answer may once again lie in the mastery of chaos. Impossible to corroborate, but possible to fathom, US drones seem, from the beginning, only to have targeted Al Shabaab members who are not aligned with US interests.

Another Al Shabaab member, who supposedly failed to cooperate with Americans, was Ahmed Abdi Godane, was also taken out by a drone in 2014. He was replaced by Al Shabaab's current leader, Ahmed Omar. Since 2007, there have been about 19 drone attacks in Somalia.

While the war raged on for a second decade, in 2010, Somalia entered its third re-

cord famine. By then, an entire generation of Somalis had either fled or died.

Mogadishu has since been repopulated with a predominantly young, once-rural population that fled the countryside to look for any means of survival. Today, the educated class, the leaders and the dreamers are dead, along with the idea of an independent Somalia.

An opportune outcome for the Masters of Chaos and Big Oil.

The final grab

On my last night in Mogadishu, another black bird roared over Jazeera Palace Hotel at 4 am. This time, the rumble sounded more sombre. I was sleepless again, pacing the room, feeling trapped inside a sardine can – an apt analogy for Somalia's own situation. Maybe the country had been canned purposely, waiting for the right time to be rolled open, I couldn't help wonder. There

Impossible to corroborate, yet possible to fathom, US drones seem, from the beginning, only to have targeted Al Shabaab members who are not aligned with US interests

BIG BROTHER



SLEEP TIGHT: Security precautions near Al Jazaara Palace Hotel.

While the country prepares for a “democratic” election campaign slated for summer 2016 – without a population registry, roadways, electricity or communication infrastructure – Western oil interests are completing new seismic surveys off the coast of Somalia

were countless clues to support such a containment tactic. All efforts to rebuild had fallen apart for consecutive years, despite several attempts by foreign nations and corporations to help Somalia. Foreign delegations were either rejected or, like the Chinese mission, conveniently became victims of terrorist attacks.

How deep does the wormhole reach down in Somalia today?

The current Somali president is Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, a Western favourite who was listed by Time magazine as one of the 100 most influential people in the world, known for his “national reconciliation, anti-corruption measures, socio-economic and security sector reforms.” British Prime Minister David Cameron and the US government have applauded him.

My sources call Mohamud “the most corrupt president in the history of Somalia.” The word is that Qatar paid \$20-million to put him in power. Qatar, in turn, plays the flute for Big Oil. Mohamud comes from a small rural town, with a degree in technology and minor training at the Center for Justice and Peacekeeping in Harrisonburg, Virginia. In 2011, Mohamud established the Peace and Development Party, and a year later, he was

promptly elected as the country’s president, as if pre-ordained for the position. There hasn’t been much peace or development in Somalia since.

The locals have not seen a single cent of the \$2-billion aid promised by the World Bank. An \$800-million offer by Malaysia to build a power plant as a relief effort was rejected by the president. While Mohamud is stalling several international relief efforts to help the country, the rumour is that his brother drives around Mogadishu in a black limo, buying real estate properties with bags of cash. President Mohamud works closely with the Somali National Security Agency, putting him in close quarters with US intelligence. He was also accused, according to reports on Al Jazeera and other media, of trying to steal \$420-million from a Swiss bank account set up by the Barre government. But the Western favourite remains cocooned in power, with the prime minister and cabinet all belonging to his small circle of family, friends and allies.

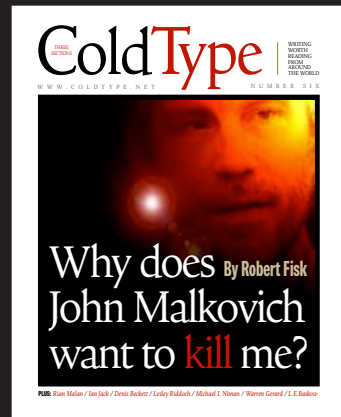
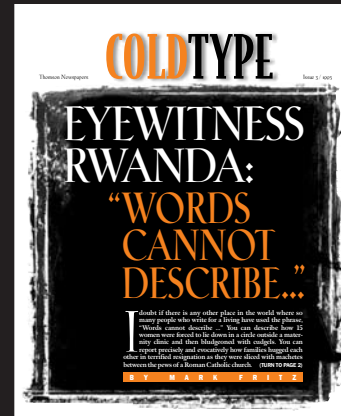
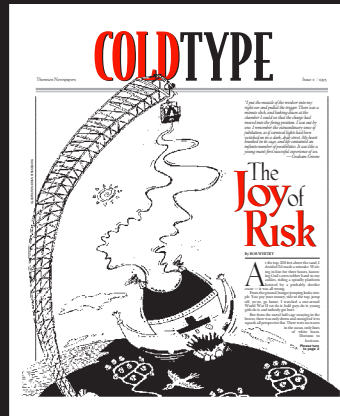
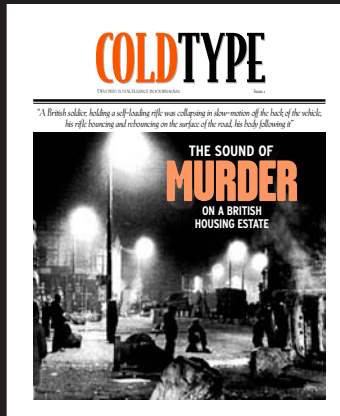
While the country prepares for a “democratic” election campaign slated for summer 2016 – without a population registry, roadways, electricity or communication infrastructure – Western oil interests are completing new seismic surveys off the coast of Somalia.

Most of the Somali entrepreneurs I met during my four-day visit see through the facades. They are exceptionally smart, resilient, men and women. They hear the same black birds at night. They know the history. They’ve lost most of their family and friends. But they are driven to try, once again, to build on the ruins.

They remember the Mogadishu that once was, before the black birds arrived. **CT**

Jan Wellmann is an entrepreneur and investigative writer, working in health & wellness and alternative energy. He comes from an advertising and film production background, lives in Los Angeles, Berlin and Greece and blogs at www.janwellmann.com

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Suffer the children . . .

Cassandra Dixon walks with persecuted kids as they make their way to school in Palestine's South Hebron hills

Between the settlement and the outpost, what remains of the road is closed to Palestinians, with one exception – children walk behind an Israeli military jeep to reach their school

The worst worries of a child's school day should be homework. Maybe a lost book, or an argument with a friend. No child's walk to school should routinely involve armed soldiers and the fear of being chased and assaulted by angry adults. But for the Palestinian children who live with their families in the small rural villages that make up the South Hebron Hills, this is how the school day begins. Illegal settlements and outposts isolate and separate their villages, and soldiers are a constant in their lives.

Once, the trip from the tiny hamlet of Tuba to the school in the village of Tuwani was a calm and beautiful walk along a quiet road connecting the two villages. During the 1980s, Israeli settlers built a settlement on privately owned Palestinian land, which had been used to graze sheep and goats. Following construction of the settlement, the settlers established an illegal outpost. Now, industrial chicken barns sit astride the road that once served children walking to school, farmers taking livestock to town, and families traveling to Tuwani, or the larger town of Yatta for health care, shopping, and higher education.

Between the settlement and the outpost, what remains of the road is closed to Palestinians, with one exception – children walk behind an Israeli military jeep to reach their school. Their parents are not allowed to



This little girl was injured by two masked settlers who attacked her with stones as she gathered herbs with a friend on the path between Tuba and Tuwani. She and her siblings make the same trip on foot each school day. She is an amazingly smart and tough young girl – insistent that the many odd volunteers who pass through her life should learn her name and visit her family's home. She needed four stitches in a head wound after the attack. Photo: Cassandra Dixon

walk with them.

The 20 or so children who make this trip start their school day in an unprotected field, anxiously waiting for the Israeli soldiers who will oversee their walk to school. Villagers had built shelters in which the chil-

dren could await the soldiers, but Israeli authorities have dismantled them. If it is raining, the children get soaked. Some days the soldiers are the same soldiers who chased or arrested shepherds the day before – shepherds who may be the brothers or fathers of these children. Some days, the soldiers are late, leaving the group of children waiting, vulnerable to attack and within easy reach of the outpost. Some days the military escort does not arrive at all, and the children make the trip to school with international volunteers along a longer path, which also lies alongside the settlement.

About 1,000 people, an estimated half of whom are children, live in the neighbouring villages. Nevertheless, because the villages lie inside of Israeli Firing Zone 918, the military uses the land for military training.

Amazingly, despite all of this, it is almost unheard of for children to miss a day of school. Parents are determined that their children will be educated. When I began volunteering in Tuwani, the school reached only to third grade. Now thanks to the community’s determination to provide their children with education, students can complete high school in the village, and although facing a continued threat of demolition by Israeli military bulldozers, villagers have built and staffed primary schools for children who live in eight nearby villages.

This is what non-violent resistance to military occupation looks like.

I’m grateful that I can spend a portion of this year in Palestine. For many years children in these villages have taught me about nonviolence. Sometimes, the presence of international human rights workers holding cameras has some small positive effect on their days.

US people bear some responsibility for the interruption of their childhoods. The US subsidizes about 25 per cent of Israel’s military budget, at a cost to US taxpayers conservatively estimated at \$3.1-billion a year.

I’m working with the Italian organiza-

tion Operation Dove, which supports Palestinians who resist the Israeli occupation, standing with families in their commitment to remain on their land. This includes accompanying school children and farm families as they walk to school, graze their animals and tend their crops.

Operation Dove helps document the harassment, intimidation, arrests, detentions, home demolitions, checkpoints, road closures, military training exercises, and settler attacks. Villagers also report to Operation Dove when they endure theft, and when their crops and property are destroyed.

Protective presence provided by activists is not a large-scale solution to the violence that intrudes into children’s lives in Palestine. But many years of visits with these families persuades me that it’s important and necessary to support and participate in the villagers’ non-violent efforts. Families who confront militarism and occupation help us move beyond our addiction to militarism and violence.

The children I met early on are grown now. Some have gone on to college, and some have families of their own. These young people have every reason to be angry. Their childhoods included fear, intimidation, demolitions, arrests and isolation. But they have also grown up witnessing their community’s steadfast commitment to non-violently resist injustice. Their families have supported them well, including them in the community’s struggle for dignity. Against all odds, they are growing up with humour and tenacity instead of anger and bitterness. They are living proof to the rest of us that love wins.

CT

Cassandra Dixon lives at Mary House of Hospitality, a small Catholic worker house that offers hospitality to families visiting the federal prison at Oxford, Wisconsin, and works as a carpenter in Madison. To read more about Operation Dove’s work in the South Hebron Hills, visit www.operazionecolomba.it/togetherattuwani

Although facing a continued threat of demolition by Israeli military bulldozers, villagers have built and staffed primary schools for children who live in eight nearby villages

The cheerleader

Dell Franklin takes two groups of teens home from the bar, offers advice to one of his passengers, and falls in love with another . . .

"I spent 80 bucks on my credit card buying shots of Jagermeister for this stone fox and her friends, and got shot down"

There are four of them, drinking age CalPoly students, coming out of Mother's Tavern, the pick-up mill in San Luis Obispo. It's one in the morning, and I've picked up this crew before – pleasant, respectful boys with fine breeding, who will go places in the American economy and social stratum. They ask me how my night is going as they pile in. I tell them it's like any other night and ask how their night has been.

The fine-looking kid beside me moans, "I spent 80 bucks on my credit card buying shots of Jagermeister for this stone fox and her friends, and got shot down."

Accompanied by jeers from the back seat, one kid says, "Poor loser." Another voice shouts, "Shot down by his dream girl." And another, "For the 10th time. What a lapdog."

"Hey," says Shotgun, facing his accusers. "You losers took gas, too. I wasn't the only one buying shots." He turns to me, a sheepish grin on his unlined face, "Hey, Boss, you been around, seen it all. We've talked, right? What do I do to get laid around here?"

Before I can answer, a kid in back says, "There's this fox he's after, absolute knock-out, unbelievable body, beautiful face, Scott's dream girl, Boss."

This kid beside me, Scott, wants to be in the Peace Corps, and do good things for humanity. But tonight he has bigger issues. "I can't seem to get anywhere with her," he says. "What do YOU think I should do?"

"Stop asking her out and buying her drinks," I advise, without pause. "Instead, try and piss her off."

"Look, kid," I tell him, "first of all, the kind of fine feathered foxes you're pursuing have been coddled and flattered since Day 1. Every hard-breathing Tom is trying to impress them, and win them over, as if they are the ultimate show-trophies.

"So Lesson No. 1 is: You never agree with them. No. 2: Once you have them on the defensive, you find some flaw in their make-up and ask them about it, subtly starting

an argument. Condemn their strongest beliefs and attack their insecurities. It's war, man. When you have them flustered and angry, walk away before they do. I guarantee they won't forget you. You've piqued their interest. You're a challenge, not some lackey, a beggar, a Mr Nice guy with hat-in-hand!"

I turn onto the main drag and head for the house they share in an area near campus. Scott is staring at me, shocked. "And,



you guys in the back, Lesson No. 3 is, read *Sexus*, by Henry Miller, and *Women*, or anything else by Charles Bukowski. Both were reprobates, who felt women were never completely happy unless they were debased, deflowered and thoroughly dominated, especially if they were the type of girls you kids put on pedestals.”

Scott sighs, and sags, obviously overwhelmed by the slew of wisdom I’ve just heaped upon him. “I don’t think I can be that way, sir. I’m kind of a boring engineer type, like my dad.”

I realize that this kid is in the same dismal place I was at his age, only I was in the army, and could at least get joyously drunk and buy prostitutes in places like Amsterdam and Barcelona when I was on leave.

“Scott,” I say. “You and your pals shouldn’t be messing around with foxes and dream girls anyway. The only thing important now is that you get laid, so you gain a little confidence. And you do this by pursuing ordinary-looking barflies who are, hopefully, somewhat drunk. You buy *them* drinks – preferably tequila shots. Always be a gentleman around the neglected and downtrodden. You’ll both end up having fun, and you might even become friends. It’s good karma in the long run, and the best sex ever, until love rears its ugly head. And don’t let that happen. Ever.”

“Jesus Christ, Doctor,” says a voice in back, as we turn off the main drag. “You ever been married?”

“Of course not. As Somerset Maugham wrote in *The Moon and the Sixpence* – ‘there’s no object more deserving of pity than the married bachelor.’”

They all laugh. “You’re the man, Doc!”

“Got any more tips, Doctor Feelgood?” asks another kid in back.

“Yeh – don’t go to hotspot pick-up mills, where everybody’s waiting in line to get in. Go to dive bars. The best women I’ve ever met came out of dives. You can get good and sloppy drunk in a dive and make an

ass of yourself, and the ladies will still like you. That’s what dives are for. And, if you strike out, you can still make an even bigger ass of yourself with your buddies.”

I pull up to a house in a neighbourhood known as The Jungle, a section just off campus, where students rent houses, and are hated by all their neighbours who are not students.

“Thanks for the advice,” Scott says, offering me his official hand, which I shake. They all flip singles at me, overtipping their mentor. One kid, standing outside the door, says. “Thanks for the advice, Doc, though I think you’re fulla shit and know it!”

“Hope yah get laid,” I say loudly as they walk toward the house.

It’s a busy night, and I’m despatched immediately to Bull’s Tavern, the kind of dive that I have just recommended to my protégés. When I arrive, four sweaty well-knit jock types in shorts and rugby shirts and a girl pile into my cab. Three guys sit in the back, another sits shotgun, the girl wedged between him and me. She is in shorts and midriff blouse and smells of soap and shampoo, a petite blonde with long naturally wavy hair and an expressive, confident, look. As she smiles at me, I feel her positive energy, exuberance and radiance. “How’s our cabbie doing tonight?” she chirps perkily. “Any interesting rides?”

“I just dropped off four students who spent hundreds of dollars trying to get laid, and couldn’t even get a phone number. I advised them, but I don’t think it’s going to do them any good. They’ll probably marry the first girl who sleeps with them.”

“Poor little baby boys,” she responds, with mock sadness.

The crew in the back begin wise-cracking.

“Hey, cab driver, maybe the wench sitting next to you will shack up with those techie geeks. Do you know she’s the head

She is in shorts and midriff blouse and smells of soap and shampoo, a petite blonde with long naturally wavy hair and an expressive, confident, look

This cheerleader winks at me, as if we are in cahoots, an impish look in her clear blue eyes

cheerleader at CalPoly?"

I turn to the blonde. "Really?" She smiles at me, and nods.

"Yeah, all the cheerleaders at CalPoly give out," says another voice from the back. "Even those losers you picked up could score with the CalPoly cheerleading skags."

Although I was a jock in high school and college, I never liked cheerleaders. I thought they were goody-goody, and I couldn't stomach their rah-rah antics, their constant excited optimism, or their inclination to go for boys who wore letterman's jackets, which, of course, I never did.

The cheerleader winks at me, as if we are in cahoots, an impish look in her clear blue eyes.

"Do you know, Mr. Cab Driver, that more than 90 per cent of the super macho male jocks at Cal Poly are secret homosexuals?" she says.

"I didn't know that, young lady. You sound like you've made an extensive academic study on the subject. Maybe you're onto something."

"There goes your tip, cabbie," says the first loud voice in back. "Sucking up to the bitches."

"You blew it, old man. Ha ha ha."

The cheerleader glances up at me, a gleam in her eyes, and pats my knee reassuringly, "Boys who talk about girls in a disparaging way, and brag about all the ass they're getting - you know what we call them?"

"No, beautiful, I don't."

"Male hysterics. It's in the psychology books. I'm a psych major. They feel they must brag and lie about their so-called conquests, and treat all women like sex objects, to hide the fact they're momma's boys and really want to fuck each other. You know, the pseudo-macho act obscures their insecurities about being real men because they secretly want a man."

"Male hysterics," I muse out loud. "Great phrase."

They're all booing in the back, calling her a lesbian, dyke, and slut. It's a very short ride, a little over a mile, much to my disappointment, and I pull over at their apartment complex, which borders the jungle.

"Don't worry about the tip," says the cheerleader. "I got it." She hands me \$10 for a \$5 ride, and tells me to keep the change. When all the grousing bozos pile out, she demands a hug, and I give her a good one. She is feather-light, yet fibrous, a real heartbreaker, a keeper.

I watch her go off with the straggly drunken crew, knowing that if I was her age, I'd sacrifice any vestige of common sense I might have, wear a letterman's jacket, buy her a drink, and literally swim through a sea of shit to pursue and secure her. **CT**

Dell Franklin is a long-time journalist and founder of the Rogue Voice literary magazine. He blogs at www.dellfranklin.com

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Obama: The man who gets up as JFK, and lies down as Cheney

A poem by **Philip Kraske**

I spent an hour with Mr. O, who explained the Union's state,
I have to say he sounded good, the country really great.
He made some jokes and talked with gut, didn't hide the pain,
And made you feel that he's a man who knows about hard rain.

Hard rain for old and young and mid, for workers, gays and straights,
For folks whose jobs just come and go, or student U-loan rates.
Future pains he understood, especially pension trouble,
For those unlucky sacked mid-stream or hit by Wall Street bubble.

Been years since someone spoke this way, with words so clean and calm,
For many troubled 'bout our nation, his words were sure a balm.
Yet he's the man of most contrast in Century Twenty-One,
Called quite right a saint, a Bush, or corporate hired gun.
Barack's the one who slammed Chelsea, sent Snowden on the run,

Dropped Hell-on-Fire on poor Pakis, killed a terrorist's son.
His new law lets the soldiers in to snatch you clean away,
To leave in prison 'till you rot; forget in court your day.

Homeland's only swelled and swelled, your data all to keep.
Yet Mr. O and Mr. Clap just promise not to peep.
His foreign p's pure neocon, he's outwarred Gen'ral Ike,
And never met a Saudi king or drone he didn't like.

What are we to make of him, who zigzags all so zany?
Who gets up feeling JFK and lies down feeling Cheney?
To me in him there's some huge gap, there's something very wrong,
This man that oozes common sense, yet strings us all along.

Not to say he's cynical: He's way too smart for that.
Nor to say he's criminal: He can't wear Nixon's hat.
But historians will long confer on just who this guy was.
The wonder that was Mr. O will long make people puzz.

*Philip Kraske lives in Madrid, Spain, where he teaches English on a freelance basis and does some translation.
His four novels, of varied plots but centring on American politics and society, began to appear in 2009.
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