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Issue 232

ColdType

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March 2022



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struggle, do Black lives really
matter in Birmingham, Alabama?**

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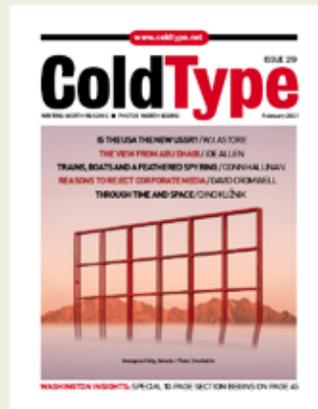
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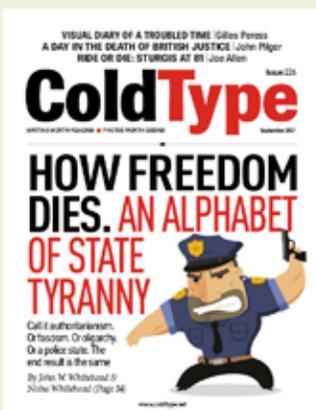
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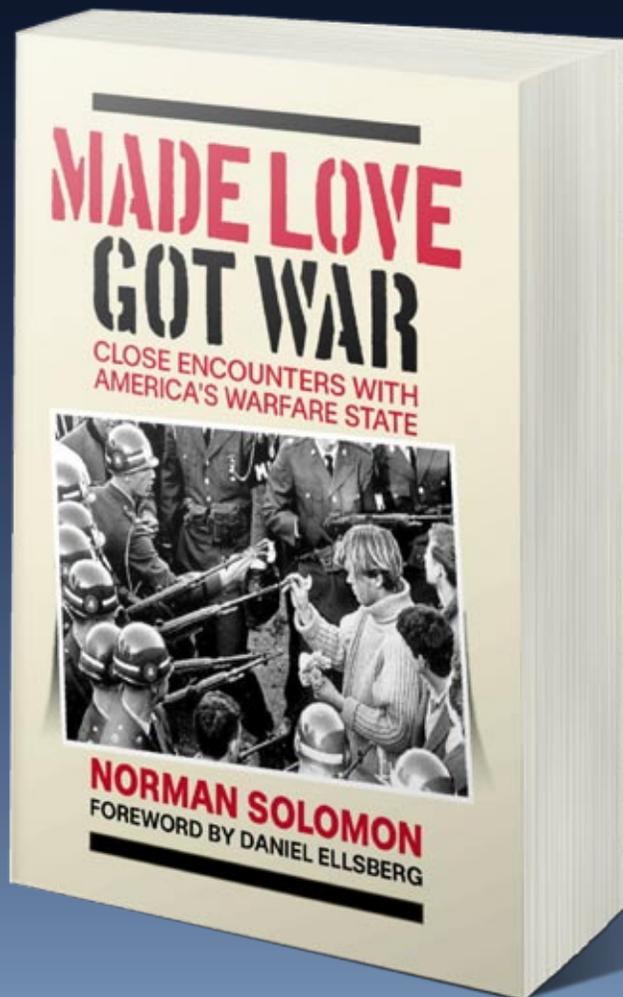
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INSIGHTS



Photo: Artist's Facebook page

UNCERTAIN SUPERSTAR: Meat Loaf was not mentally or physically prepared for the pressures of success or large-scale touring.

DUNCAN WHEELER

Meat Loaf: Complicated musical giant

Ridiculed by critics and custodians of cool, Meat Loaf's bombastic performances were loved by millions, providing the soundtrack to the lives of various generations.

The man born Marvin Lee Aday was something of an unreliable narrator. He offered contradictory accounts in interviews of such basic details as his date of birth, real name, or why and how he came to be known as Meat Loaf. According to his autobiography, an inheritance from his mother allowed him, as a disturbed and distressed teen-

ager, to leave the house of a violent alcoholic father to live, first in Dallas, and subsequently California.

Meat Loaf – who died on January 22 – was cast in the original Los Angeles productions of both *Hair* and *The Rocky Horror Show*, also appearing in the 1975 film adaptation of the latter. On auditioning for budding playwright/songwriter Jim Steinman's *More Than You Deserve* musical – the title track of which would later pop up on the *Dead Ringer* album – Steinman identified his ideal leading man for the *Bat out of Hell* project.

Record executives were less convinced. They thought that the pairing of a large sweaty singer with unorthodox musical arrangements, pitched somewhere between Phil Spector and Wagner, was a complete anomaly in the age of punk and disco. The odd pair were eventually signed by independent label Cleveland after getting Todd Rundgren onboard as a producer.

The Texan-born singer and actor outlived his chief collaborator by less than a year. Their signing with Cleveland would be the start to a career full of hits and as many

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highs as there were lows.

Bat Out of Hell – one of the top five selling records of all-time – was released in 1977. Almost all the songs originated from a university project of Steinman's based on Peter Pan. Unable to clear the rights with JM Barrie's estate, Steinman recycled the material into *Bat Out of Hell* instead. Jukebox musicals typically rely on a pre-existing songbook but *Bat out of Hell* is best characterised as a cast album that had its first outing in the charts before the stage.



BEST-SELLER: Meat Loaf's 1977 album *Bat Out of Hell*.

Given that three of the album's seven songs exceed eight minutes, remarkably not a moment is wasted. Epics such as *Paradise by the Dashboard Light* and *Bat out of Hell* (designed to top the 1960s hit *Tell Laura I Love Her* as the ultimate motorcycle crash song) are more than guilty pleasures. They encapsulate the sensations if not perhaps the realities of being a hormonal teenager in thrall to sex, death and rock'n'roll.

The album sold over 10-million copies in the US, and spent over ten years on the UK charts. Meat Loaf was not, however, mentally or physically prepared for the pressures of success or large-scale touring. After losing his voice on the *Bat Out of Hell* tour in 1978, he had multiple nervous breakdowns and attempted suicide. Steinman lost patience, and a planned sequel to *Bat* was put on the backburner.

There were occasional hits in the 1980s without Steinman (for instance *Modern Girl* and *Mid-*

night at the Lost and Found) but Meat Loaf's star was on the wane. Despite recording one of the most successful albums of rock's golden age, by 1983 the singer was facing the prospect of bankruptcy.

Yet by playing smaller venues and adopting more sophisticated vocal techniques, a constant touring schedule through the latter part of the 1980s transformed Meat Loaf into one of world's most accomplished live performers. A nearly three-hour 1988 concert recording from Edinburgh shows why this period is considered his live peak by hardcore fans.

It also ensured he was better prepared to reap the rewards when he and Steinman staged one of rock's most unlikely comebacks with *Bat out of Hell II* in 1993, with lead-single *I'd Do Anything for Love (But I Won't do That)* topping the charts in 28 countries. The 1990s marked Meat Loaf's imperial phase, selling out arenas and enjoying celebrity, appearing in films such as *Fight Club* (1997) and *Spice*

World (1999).

Yet unlike Peter Pan, Meat Loaf wasn't forever young, often appearing lost in the new millennium. After collapsing on stage in Newcastle, in 2007, he said he wouldn't perform in concert again. In reality, he continued touring for another decade, the musical equivalent of a veteran boxer not knowing when to hang up the gloves.

Steinman also launched a legal action when the singer sought to go it alone with *Bat Out of Hell III* (2006). An out of court settlement effectively gave the songwriter free rein to develop a stage version of *Bat out of Hell*. Despite their

differences, Meat Loaf took on promotional duties as Steinman's health prevented him from undertaking for the 2017 premiere of *Bat Out of Hell the Musical*.

Now that so many of rock's founding fathers have died, my current research into rock musicals such as this and David Bowie's *Lazarus* sees them as repositioning one of the major forms of cultural expression from the second half of the last century.

Blessed with one of rock's most distinctive voices (admirers include Axl Rose and Kurt Cobain), quality control was never Meat's forte. At his best, however, the Loaf was a heavyweight contender, able to hold his own alongside the world's finest performers irrespective of genre. **CT**

Duncan Wheeler is Professor in Spanish Studies, University of Leeds. This article was first published by *The Conversation* at www.theconversation.com.

INSIGHTS

BINOY KAMPMARK

Hemospheric gangsters: Cuba embargo turns 60

It all seems worn, part of an aspic approach to foreign policy. But US President Joe Biden is keen to ensure that old, and lingering mistakes, retain their flavour. Towards Cuba, it is now 60 years since President John F. Kennedy's Presidential Proclamation 3447 imposed an embargo on all trade with the island state.

The proclamation was packed with Cold War righteousness and much sanctimony. Cuba under the revolutionary Fidel Castro, fresh from overthrowing a Washington favourite and blood-smeared thug, Fulgencio Batista, was "incompatible with the principles and objectives of the Inter-American system". The US was "prepared to take all necessary actions to promote national and hemispheric security by isolating the present Government of Cuba and thereby reducing the threat posed by its alignment with communist powers."

A year later, Kennedy invoked the Trading with the Enemy Act with the purpose of expanding the scope of the embargo, covering trade, travel, and financial transactions except those licensed by the Secretary of the Treasury, as directed by the president.

Before inking the prohibition of

the importation into the US of all goods of Cuban origin and all goods imported from or through Cuba, Kennedy had a particular vice that needed feeding. The resourceful press secretary Pierre Salinger was ordered to scour Washington and gather as many Cuban cigars (the H. Upmann Petit Upmann was a favourite) as he could by the morning. The mission was a success: 1,200 cigars were found.



FIDEL CASTRO: Defied superpower.

Acting with suitable presidential hypocrisy, Kennedy could then authorise the proclamation. As Salinger recalls, "Kennedy smiled, and opened up his desk. He took out a long paper which he immediately signed. It was the decree banning all Cuban products from the United States. Cuban cigars were now illegal in our country."

It was very much in keeping

with Kennedy's own family's tradition of self-enrichment and opportunism. His father, Joe Kennedy, used his efforts in the latter part of 1933 to nab British importation rights to distribute a range of spirits, including Gordon's gin, Haig & Haig Scotch whisky, and Dewar's. Father Kennedy's nose had picked up the right political scent: the disastrous era of Prohibition was coming to an end, and he was hardly going to miss out capitalising on it. By the end of 1934, net profits had quadrupled.

The embargo began a series of justifications and rationales for a venal system that has proven to be bankrupt and, in large measure, ineffective. Cuba has been the hemisphere's villain so designated by the biggest of them all, at various points condemned for its relationship with the Soviet Union, its socialism, human rights abuses, and its lending of support for revolutions in Africa and Latin America.

Even before Kennedy came to power, the administration of Dwight D. Eisenhower had concluded that the Castro regime could only be deprived of its support "through disenchantment and disaffection based on economic dissatisfaction and hardship". The April 1960 memorandum from Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Lestor D. Mallory, seeking to justify an unlawful interference in the affairs of a sovereign state, suggested that such policies be adopted in an "adroit and inconspicuous" way to make "the greatest in-roads in denying money and supplies to

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Cuba, to decrease monetary and real wages, to bring about hunger, desperation, and overthrow government”. This, in the argot of international relations, was the language of war.

At points, US officials could pettily gloat about the various effects of the embargo. The prohibition of food sales to Cuba during Lyndon B. Johnson’s Presidency (Kennedy had exempted them) saw a delighted Gordon Chase, member of the National Security Council staff between 1962 and 1966, praise the “effective control over lard supplies”. Cuba had resorted to importing “an inedible product from the Netherlands and then turn into an edible product. It is low quality and the Cubans don’t like it”. A truly mighty outcome.

The sanctions regime has, for the most, been in place for six decades. There have been brief spells of tinkering. In 1975, for instance, the embargo on trade between Cuba and the companies of US subsidiaries working in third countries, was lifted. Two years later, under the Carter administration, the complete travel ban was lifted, and remittances to family members based on the island permitted.

But more typical were the apoplectic responses such as that of President Ronald Reagan, who reimposed the travel ban and placed Cuba on the US State Department’s list of State Sponsors of International Terrorism. Both Presidents George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton pushed the democratic fetish with some aggression, including the Cuba Democracy Act of 1992 and

the Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act of 1996. This was hemispheric gangsterism in plain sight.

In 1982, despite admitting that the sanctions had initially done significant damage to “Cuba’s growth and general development”, a CIA case study had to concede that the embargo had fallen short in meeting its objectives. Cuba’s capital base had diversified, making use of Soviet, East and Western European, and Japanese machinery and equipment. Havana had guilefully resorted to front companies “to obtain various types of US products, particularly consumer goods.”

While falling short of admitting it had been a crude failure, the same study prosaically remarked that Castro’s position remained unchanged. “Sanctions implied a grave external threat, which Castro exploited to carry out the radicalisation of all Cuban political, economic, and social institutions.”

In 2012, at the five-decade point of US-Cuba sanctions, the Obama administration made some modest concessions to allowing US businesses to establish themselves in Cuba. This policy shift had its own Trojan Horse element to it. “By further easing these sanctions,” US Treasury Secretary Jacob Lew reasoned at the time, “the United States is helping to support the Cuban people in their effort to achieve the political and economic freedom necessary to build a democratic, prosperous and stable Cuba.”

On December 17, 2014, President Barack Obama announced that he would be “ending an outdated policy that had failed to advance US interests and support reform and a better life for the Cuban

people on the island over several decades”. The new normalisation policy would increase engagements between Washington and Havana in “areas of mutual interest, and increase travel to, commerce with, and the free flow of information to Cuba”. Rabid opponents firmly insisted that no measure should aid this satanic communist State.

The Trump administration proceeded to reverse what adjustments had been made to the US-Cuban relationship. Individual travel by US citizens to Cuba for educational and cultural changes was prohibited. Most functions of the US embassy in Havana were suspended. Trump even went so far as to deem Cuba a state sponsor of international terrorism under the Export Administration Act of 1979.

President Biden has shown an almost soporific lack of interest in challenging the sanctions regime. When it has acted, it has kept the system in place, going so far as to impose specific sanctions on Cuban security and interior ministry officials. Responding to claims of Cuban government brutality in suppressing protests, Biden declared last July that the “United States will continue to sanction individuals responsible for oppression of the Cuban people.”

Some members of that mendacious class known as Congress are urging a trimming of sanctions, though their views remain modest and calculating in the name of benevolent self-interest. In mid-December, 114 members or so sent a letter to the President calling for “humanitarian actions” to lift eco-

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conomic sanctions on food, medicine and other forms of humanitarian assistance. “Engagement is more likely to enable the political, economic and social openings that Cubans may desire, and to ease the hardships that Cubans face today.”

Whichever group in Congress is consulted, from the vociferous Cuban American lobby in Florida to the claimed progressives in

the metropolitan centres, all agree with one objective, however achieved: regime change. The hemispheric gangster is simply biding its time. **CT**

Dr. Binoy Kampmark was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He currently lectures at RMIT University. Email: bkampmark@gmail.com

Others include the truck blockade in Ottawa and its duplicates in Australia, New Zealand and the US, and the angry men outside the British parliament, waiting to pounce on passing politicians. By incoherent protest, I mean gatherings whose aims are simultaneously petty and grandiose. Their immediate objectives are small and often risible, attacking such minor inconveniences as face masks. The underlying aims are open-ended, massive and impossible to fulfil. Not just politically impossible, but mathematically impossible. Listening to these men (and most of them are men), it seems that every one of them wants to be king.

The “sovereign citizen” theory is a powerful current running through these movements. Its adherents insist that they stand above the law. Some of them refuse to buy vehicle licences, or pay taxes or fines. They believe they are exempt from public health measures, such as lockdowns and vaccine passes.

In other words, they arrogate to themselves sovereign powers that not even the monarch enjoys. They produce elaborate pseudo-legal documents to justify these claims. The “memorandum of understanding” published by two of the leading organisers of the Ottawa blockade, which makes impossible legal demands of the government, looks like a classic of the genre. It was supposedly signed by 320,000 people before the organisers withdrew it.

What explains the appeal of this movement? Such claims of individual sovereignty arose in the 1970s



Photo: Michael Swan / Flickr.com

ANGRY MEN? The Freedom Convoy protests that spread across Canada last month were directed at Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

GEORGE MONBIOT

Rage rules in citizen protests

When a group in black fatigues called Alpha Men Assemble began practising paramilitary manoeuvres in a park in Staffordshire at the beginning of this year, it looked pretty threatening. These men, we were warned, were about to launch an insurrec-

tion against vaccines and in favour of “the sovereign citizen”. Since then, silence. It wouldn’t be surprising if the group had dispersed: a society of self-proclaimed alphas is bound to fall apart.

This was just one example of the incoherent protests now sweeping rich, English-speaking nations.

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with an antisemitic, racist agitation called Posse Comitatus. They appear to surge in hard times. Some people believe they can annul their debts or tax arrears by renouncing their citizenship. But I suspect it's about more than money. The promise of capitalism is that one day we will all be alphas – just not yet. It is a formula for frustration and humiliation. The less equal the economic system becomes, the wider the gap between the promise and its fulfilment yawns. Humiliation, as Pankaj Mishra argued in his excellent book *Age of Anger*, is the motor of extremism. Noisy assertions of sovereignty look like an obvious attempt to overcome humiliation.

There was a time, in the rich nations, when it seemed as if we could all triumph. From the second world war until the late 1970s, general prosperity rose steadily. The top 1% captured a decreasing proportion of total income. But then, in the US, the UK, Canada, Ireland and Australia, the curve suddenly turned, and the 1% began to grab an ever greater share. The trend has continued to this day, sustained by the neoliberal doctrines that were first imposed in the rich world by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan.

The ultra-rich have gained most: since the beginning of the pandemic, the world's 10 richest men have doubled their wealth, while 163 million people have been pushed below the poverty line. Wages for many people in the Anglosphere have stagnated, but the costs of living, especially housing, have soared.

Trudeau invokes rare emer-

Photo: Wikimedia.com



Candace Bergen replaced Erin O'Toole as leader of Canada's Conservative Party during the Freedom Convoy protests.

gency powers in attempt to quell protests

But even during the “glory years” (1945 to 1975) the universal triumph capitalism promised was an illusion. The general rise of prosperity in rich nations was financed, in part, by poor ones. Decolonisation was resisted by the rich world with extreme violence and oppression, then partly reversed through coups and assassinations (such as the overthrow of Mohammad Mosaddegh in Iran in 1953, the crushing of Jacobo Árbenz's government in Guatemala in 1954, the murder of Patrice Lumumba in Congo in 1961, Suharto's coup in Indonesia in 1967 and Augusto Pinochet's in Chile in 1973). Today, such extreme measures are seldom required, as the transfer of wealth is secured by other means. The rich world's wealth continues in large part to rely on the exploitation of black and

brown people.

Incoherent protest movements tend to be infested with racism and white supremacy. Some of the key organisers of the Ottawa action are reported to have a grisly history of racist statements, and some of the protesters have flown swastikas and Confederate flags. When black and brown people assume positions of power and authority, and appear more alpha than those who expected tribute from them, this is perceived as an intolerable reversal. The current wave of incoherent protest began in the US with the reaction against Barack Obama's government, and soon evolved, with the encouragement of Donald Trump and others, into undisguised white supremacy.

Some of the Ottawa organisers also have a history of attacks on trade unions. The “independence” they demand means freedom from the decencies owed to other people, freedom from the obligations of civic life. In pursuing these selfish freedoms, they reinforce the neoliberal policies – such as the crushing of organised labour – that helped cause the impoverishment and insecurity suffered by those they claim to represent.

Canadian truckers, for example, especially immigrant workers, now suffer from wage theft, unsafe conditions and other brutal forms of exploitation, caused in part by a loss of collective bargaining power. But the protest organisers seem uninterested. Sovereignty and solidarity are not compatible. **CT**

George Monbiot is a columnist at the *Guardian*, where this article first appeared. His website is www.monbiot.com.

INSIGHTS

RAMZY BAROUD

Russia cements ties to South America

As soon as Moscow received an American response to its security demands in Ukraine, it answered indirectly by announcing greater military integration between it and three South American countries, Nicaragua, Venezuela and Cuba.

Washington's response, on January 26, to Russia's demands of withdrawing NATO forces from Eastern Europe and ending talks about a possible Kyiv membership in the US-led alliance, was noncommittal.

For its part, the US spoke of 'a diplomatic path', which will address Russian demands through 'confidence-building measures'. For Russia, such elusive language is clearly a non-starter.

On that same day, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov announced, in front of the Duma, Russia's parliament, that his country "has agreed with the leaders of Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua to develop partnerships in a range of areas, including stepping up military collaboration," Russia Today reported.

The timing of this agreement was hardly coincidental, of course. The country's Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov did not hesitate to link the move to the brewing Russia- NATO conflict. Russia's strategy in South America could potentially be "involving the



Photo: Wikipedia

US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan: Denied Russian military presence.

Russian Navy," if the US continues to 'provoke' Russia. According to Ryabkov, this is Russia's version of the "American style (of having) several options for its foreign and military policy".

Now that the Russians are not hiding the motives behind their military engagement in South America, going as far as considering the option of sending troops to the region, Washington is being forced to seriously consider the new variable.

Though US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan denied that Russian military presence in South America was considered in recent security talks between both countries, he described the agreement between Russia and the three South American countries as

unacceptable, vowing that the US would react "decisively" to such a scenario.

The truth is, that scenario has already played out in the past. When, in January 2019, the US increased its pressure on Venezuela's President Nicolás Maduro to concede power to the US-backed Juan Guaido, a coup seemed imminent. Chaos in the streets of Caracas, and other Venezuelan cities, mass electric outages, lack of basic food and supplies, all seemed part of an orchestrated attempt at subduing Venezuela, which has for years championed a political discourse that is based on independent and well-integrated South American countries.

For weeks, Washington continued to tighten the pressure valves imposing hundreds of sanction orders against Venezuelan entities, state-run companies and individuals. This led to Caracas' decision to sever diplomatic ties with Washington. Ultimately, Moscow stepped in, sending in March 2019 two military planes full of troops and equipment to prevent any possible attempt at overthrowing Maduro. In the following months, Russian companies poured in to help Venezuela out of its devastating crisis, instigating another US-Russia conflict, where Washington resorted to its favourite weapon, sanctions, this time against Russian oil companies.

The reason that Russia is keen on maintaining a geostrategic presence in South America is due to the fact that a stronger Russian role in that region is coveted by several countries who are desperate to loosen Washington's grip on their economies and political

INSIGHTS

institutions.

Countries like Cuba, for example, have very little trust in the US. After having some of the decades-long sanctions lifted on Havana during the Obama administration in 2016, new sanctions were imposed during the Trump administration in 2021. That lack of trust in Washington's political mood swings makes Cuba the perfect ally for Russia. The same logic applies to other South American countries.

It is still too early to speak with certainty about the future of Russia's military presence in South America. What is clear, though, is the fact that Russia will continue to build on its geostrategic presence in South America, which is also strengthened by the greater economic integration between China and most South American countries. Thanks to the dual US political and economic war on Moscow and Beijing, both countries have fortified their alliance like never before.

What options does this new reality leave Washington with? Not many, especially as Washington has, for years, failed to defeat Maduro in Venezuela or to sway Cuba and others to join the pro-American camp.

Much of the outcome, however, is also dependent on whether Moscow sees itself as part of a protracted geostrategic game in South America. So far, there is little evidence to suggest that Moscow is using South America as a temporary card to be exchanged, when the time comes, for US and NATO concessions in Eastern Europe. Russia is clearly

digging its heels, readying itself for the long haul.

For now, Moscow's message to Washington is that Russia has plenty of options and that it is capable of responding to US pressure with equal or greater pressure. Indeed, if Ukraine is Russia's redline, then South America – which has fallen under US influence since the Monroe Doctrine of 1823 – is the US's own hemispheric redline.

As the plot thickens in Eastern Europe, Russia's move in South America promises to add a new component that would make a win-lose scenario in favour of the US and NATO nearly impossible. An

alternative outcome is for the US-led alliance to recognize the momentous changes on the world's geopolitical map, and to simply learn to live with it. **CT**

Ramzy Baroud is the editor of *The Palestine Chronicle*. He is the author of six books. His forthcoming book, co-edited with Ilan Pappé, is "Our Vision for Liberation: Engaged Palestinian Leaders and Intellectuals Speak out". Dr. Baroud is a Non-resident Senior Research Fellow at the Center for Islam and Global Affairs (CIGA). His website is www.ramzybaroud.net

REBEKAH ENTRALGO

Unions can prevent workplace disasters

The fight for justice and accountability continues for six Amazon employees who were killed when a warehouse roof collapsed during a tornado last December.

Federal officials are investigating possible health and safety violations at the facility in Edwardsville, Illinois, a suburb of St. Louis. Illinois lawmakers are considering raising statewide standards for warehouse construction to prevent future tragedies. And family members of one of the employees, Austin McEwen, recently filed a wrongful death suit against the giant retailer.

"My daughter was not expendable," said Jeffrey Hebb at a January rally in front of the Edwardsville facility. Hebb's daughter, 34-year-old Etheria Hebb, died in the warehouse collapse, leaving behind a one-year-old daughter.



Alpha Stock Images

"Amazon was supposed to keep them safe," Hebb said. "They didn't do that. How does a company worth over \$1 trillion let this happen?"

Despite multiple severe tornado

INSIGHTS

watch alerts in the surrounding area, Amazon workers were advised not to leave the facility the night of the storm. With Amazon forbidding personal cell phone use at work, workers were also cut off from all communication with loved ones.

While the e-commerce giant claims the building was up to code and that workers followed safety procedures to shelter during the storm, that offers little solace to the workers and their loved ones who believe this tragedy could have been prevented.

"This was negligence from the richest company in the world, owned by the richest man in the world," said Cheryl Sommer, a local faith leader and mother of an Amazon warehouse worker.

"I understand that these safety procedures take time and money and would have impacted the company's bottom line and that profits are good," she added. "But how much profit is worth it when it comes to the dignity and safety of workers who contribute to that profit? How many homes for one person are enough? How many yachts? How many trips into space?"

Workers for other large low-wage employers are showing support for the Amazon warehouse workers and their families.

"Why are fast food workers here standing with Amazon workers? Because an injury to one is an injury to all," said Terrence Wise, a McDonald's employee and organizer with the Fight for \$15 and Stand Up Kansas City at the Edwardsville rally.

"Amazon and McDonald's are the second- and third-largest

employers in the United States," he noted. "What happens to us and the workers at trillion-dollar corporations is going to set the standard for workers across the whole economy."

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has embarked on a six-month investigation of the warehouse collapse and will "issue citations and propose monetary penalties if violations of workplace safety and or health regulations are found," said a spokesperson for the Labor Department.

Meanwhile, workers will continue to build cross-movement solidarity to fight for a world where everyone can work with dignity.

The fight for accountability for the Edwardsville Amazon workers is happening at a time of increased organizing activity at the retailer's operations.

A new labor group, called Ama-

zon Labor Union, is attempting to organize workers in warehouses on New York's Staten Island. Meanwhile Amazon warehouse workers in Bessemer, Alabama are getting a second chance to vote on unionization, after the National Labor Relations Board ruled that the company had interfered with the election process last year. Results of the re-vote are expected by March 28.

Last December "it was them, but it can be any of us," said McDonald's worker Wise at the Edwardsville rally. "It's time we organize. It's time for all of us to build worker movements that are powerful enough to raise wages and win a union." **CT**

Rebekah Entralgo is the managing editor of Inequality.org at the Institute for Policy Studies. This op-ed was distributed by OtherWords.org.

HURWITT'S EYE

MARK HURWITT



MÁIRTÍN Ó MUILLEOIR

60 years after the civil rights struggle, do black rights really matter in Birmingham, Alabama?

An Irish publisher encounters suspicious minds, infinite patience and amazing grace in a battered community

As a white man entering a black church in America, it's hard not to cast the shadow of Dylann Roof, the crazed racist who joined a bible study class in a famed African American church in Charleston, South Carolina, in 2015 and proceeded to shoot dead all nine of his 'fellow-worshippers'.

And in Birmingham, Alabama, of course, those suspicious minds might be even more acute given that blowing up black churches has a long and sorry history here, earning the city the sobriquet 'Bombingham'. Those murderous white supremacist attacks would culminate in the September 1963 blast at 16th Street Baptist Church which left four children dead, propelled the black civil rights battle onto front pages worldwide and forced the President Lyndon Johnson to introduce a long-delayed civil rights act a year later.

And yet, here at the Movement Fellowship Church on the outskirts of Birmingham, I am given the full Prodigal Son works by beaming

parishioners filing in for Sunday service. While face masks hide the smiles, I sense a joy and generosity here reflecting the comfort and sanctuary which the African American community has traditionally associated with the Lord's house.

I am here to attend worship with an old buddy of mine via the Rev Jesse Jackson, Pastor Kris Erskine who serves a working class, black congregation which has known – and knows – its share of sorrows. He has been forewarned that I am the world's worst Christian but is rolling out the red carpet nevertheless. "We share commonality", he writes me, "I strive and fall short

on a daily basis."

Truth be told, while not a person of faith, I have never failed but to be uplifted at a religious service and, equally importantly, I know it makes my 93-year-old mother proud to hear I have been to church – even 4,000 miles from home in Ireland.

Yes, it is a long way from Sunday mass at St Teresa's in Belfast's Andersonstown in the seventies. For starters, we didn't have gospel singers like the Barnes family on stage, and certainly not wearing yellow stilettos! – and then there is the high-octane, impassioned, sweat-soaked, soaring, and ultimately redemptive sermon of Pastor Kris, against a rising sea of Amens and full-bellied cheers from the faithful. This is sermon as adrenaline shot to the soul. "I am challenging you to praise God", Pastor Kris exhorts the faithful. "Some of them died for you to sit in a church today. Some of them died so you could sit in the church and have the comfort of not worrying about a bomb going off at Sunday school taking the lives of

He has been forewarned that I am the world's worst Christian but is rolling out the red carpet nonetheless



TERROR: James Drakes' powerful sculptures in Kelly Ingram Park, Birmingham, Alabama, depicting the attack dogs seized on children marching from 16th Baptist Street Church to demand the same freedoms their white neighbours enjoyed.

four little girls.”

After addressing the gathering – with considerably less fire than Pastor Kris – I nipped out early to attend my second Sunday service (at this point my sainted ma is punching the air) on the hallowed ground of 16th Street Baptist

Church, where the Rev Arthur Price had invited me as a special guest alongside local Belfast ambassadors Mark and Allison Jackson. I bring with me greetings from the Free Derry Museum in recognition of the Bloody Sundays which unite two civil rights struggles – theirs

on the bridge in Selma, ours on the streets of the Bogside. After the service and another mesmerising sermon for the ages, the Rev Price invited us to the basement – where the four young lives had been lost – to view an evocative video of those times. Included was the heartbreaking eulogy of Martin Luther King for the victims in which he reinforced his message of non-violence, while beseeching America to end the African American nightmare. Although standing in front of coffins of innocents, Rev King has not yet lost hope in the promise of America. “Their death says to us that we must work passionately and unrelentingly for the realisation of the American dream”, he tells the grieving community.

It wasn't difficult for this pilgrim to appreciate how comforting that pulpit message must have been at the height of the civil rights rising in the “most segregated city in America”. There are, of course, comparisons to be made between the civil rights struggles made famous by backlash in Birmingham and Burntoltet. But in its scale and severity, not to mention its roots in slavery and its shameful enshrining in law, the sweltering oppression of the Deep South forever trumps our own hell.

That much is clear from the searing memoir *While the World Watched* by “wounded healer” Carolyn Maull McKinstry, who came along to Bethel Baptist church, a sixties bridgehead for freedom of the Rev Fred Shuttlesworth, on the Monday to share her own peacemaking story with this Irish traveller.

At the age of 15, Carolyn lost her four closest friends in the September 1963 bombing – just moments after she had chatted with them in

that church basement. The following day, she was sent to school as normal and told not to mention the carnage she had witnessed. And she didn't – not for 20 years.

In her vivid recounting, the petty humiliations of this American apartheid are writ-large. She recalls being unable to use the public library or eat in a department store cafe in her native city because of the colour of her skin. “We serve no Negroes, Mexicans or dogs”, declared the window signs in the Land of the Free. And these were no ad-hoc affronts from uneducated know-nothings but actual city ordinances – enforced to the nth degree by the establishment. “It shall be unlawful for any person in charge or control of any room, hall, theater, picture house, auditorium, yard, court, ballpark, public park or other indoor or outdoor place, to which both white persons and negroes are admitted, to cause ... any entertainment of any kind whatsoever unless such place has entrances, exits and seating set aside for the use of white persons, and other entrances, exits and seating set aside for negroes”, reads the 1951 Birmingham Racial Segregation Codes.

When the black community refused any longer to sit at the back of the bus and took to the diner counters to demand service and to the streets to demand equality, their homes were bombed, their leaders murdered and their young jailed. 2,000 children were doused with fire hoses, terrorised by dogs and locked up in fairground hog pens for taking



SANCTUARY: The Rev Thomas Wilder outside the oft-bombed old Bethel Baptist church from which civil rights marches were launched by the Rev Fred Shuttlesworth.

part in the strictly peaceful Birmingham protests against segregation during May 1963. Ironically, for the crusading children, this was their first time in the fairgrounds as their colour barred them from attending the annual summer fair.

Carolyn recalls the day that the children, under the tutelage of the Rev Martin Luther King and Birmingham civil rights warrior the Rev

2,000 children were
doused with fire hoses,
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locked up in hog pens
for taking part in protests
against segregation

Fred Shuttlesworth, joined the freedom struggle leaving 16th Street Baptist Church in a line two-abreast to march to City Hall – to be met by the full force of ardent segregationist and Commissioner of Public Safety, Eugene ‘Bull’ Connor. “Four firefighters turned their hose on me. Our bodies jerked around, and we were pressed tightly against the building”, she writes. “The water struck me like a stinging whip, and I was sure it would knock me down. I flattened my body against the brick, steeling myself against the forceful water, and prayed. The pressure of the water blew a hole in my sweater. Then the firefighters focused the violent stream of water at my face and shoulders. It bruised my face and ripped off a portion of my hair from the side of my scalp.”

Kelly Ingram Park, the site of that attack on peaceful child marchers, just yards from 16th Street Baptist, is now home to monumental works of sculpture commemorating those unvanquished young heroes. Particularly striking, if unsettling, are installations by artist James Drake portraying the fierce German shepherds being unleashed on teenagers, and children cowering under withering blasts from the firemen’s hoses.

Carolyn comes across as someone who remains deeply pained by the trauma she suffered as a 15-year-old – even though she has now spent the better part of her life drawing on that awful experience to encourage the peacemakers. Our meeting place Bethel Baptist Church, is an iconic civil rights site, where the Rev Shuttlesworth birthed the Birmingham freedom struggle. In December 1956, when the Supreme Court ruled that

segregation was illegal, the Rev Shuttlesworth vowed to sit at the front of the bus on Birmingham's segregated transit system. The Ku Klux Klan, working hand-in-glove with the local police force, responded by blowing his home (next door to the church) to kingdom come. Miraculously, the good reverend survived, memorably stating that he had fallen from his bed, through the floor and into the "arms of God".

I asked Carolyn to help me unravel one puzzle which continues to confound: How did 'upstanding Christian people' create and then stand behind a system of segregation so incompatible with the scripture they held dear. Even all these years later, it's a question she grapples with.

"If you're a Christian, how can you not teach that the Bible tells us to treat all men the way you want to be treated?" she wonders. "How can you not know what that is? What is it that makes you think it's all right to maim and kill and hang people? If you're a preacher, you've got the same Bible that we have. And that was my question to a lot of white people when I started, this work of reconciliation, 'are we all reading the same Bible?'"

Current minister at Bethel Baptist, the Rev Thomas Wilder believes there can be no resolution of race issues in modern-day America without fair play for the African American community which continues to bear the brunt of insult and attack. For sure, the legacy of second-class citizenship is enduring. Blacks represent 13.2 percent of the total population in the United States, but 23.8 percent of the poverty population. Black Americans are incarcerated in State prisons at five times the rate of whites. And, as seen on a dis-



CRIME SCENE: Birmingham's 16th Street Baptist Church, scene of the notorious bomb leftblast on September 15 1963 that left four black children dead.

tressingly frequent basis on grainy mobile phone videos, from Ferguson to Minneapolis and from Kenosha to Charlottesville, black lives still don't seem to matter very much at all. For too many, 'Make American Great Again' has more than a whiff of 'Make America White Again'.

"I don't think you can reconcile where there's no justice", says the Rev Wilder, his tone earnest and considered. "If I stole your wallet and said, 'I'm sorry' and I want to reconcile but I keep your money then I don't think we can be reconciled. I got to give you your wallet back. Then we start from an even keel and we can be reconciled."

Corlette Stewart Burns, director of Birmingham's Sister City pro-

gramme and daughter of a famed civil rights veteran, understands the impact the struggle for freedom in the Deep South had on communities around the world. Over grits and eggs in Fife's famed breakfast stop she appears surprised, but also relieved, that this white visitor, in the Magic City, ostensibly, to discuss city twinnings, wants to jump right into a discussion on Black Lives Matter. I tell her that support for that movement has been led by sports people and is now part of many sporting events in Britain and Ireland.

"We do not have to look far in the past to see how the world unites", she says. "On May 25, 2020, we witnessed a police officer commit murder as he knelt on the neck of George Floyd and saw how such injustice caused an uproar worldwide.

"Some of the same tactics are used today. The tactic of separating families has been an essential component of what we call housing projects or low-income homes, where men are not allowed to stay in the homes. The dehumanisation of our people is seen in the US prison system, which is also referred to as slavery by another

There can be no resolution of race issues in modern-day America without fair play for the African-American community

name. Blacks have long outnumbered whites in US prisons. And, despite the discussion around police reform, police violence is a leading cause of death for young men in the United States. Over their life course, about one in every 1,000 black men can expect to be killed by police.

“Have we made progress? Yes, but we are nowhere near where we need to be”, adds Corlette, a hint of weariness in her voice. “I have hope that we will one day live in a world where all human beings are treated equally and with respect, despite the gender or colour of their skin. However, with over 400 years of systems being developed to support racial hierarchy, I wonder if I am a realist or asking for magic.”

I returned to the Movement Fellowship Church on the Monday to catch up with Pastor Kris, high school teacher and fellow-pastor Jonathan Hatton, and members of the seniors’ ministry Sam Duncan and Pastor Kris’ mum Donno. As we tucked into a lunch spread laid on for the visitor, Pastor Kris spoke to the reality of being black in America. “Cornel West says, ‘to be black in America is to always live under the threat of violence’. Yet I believe in this hour, the movement cannot die because our ancestors won’t allow it. I believe from their graves, they are yet nudging certain ones of us to carry this torch, carry this baton and not think you’re going to run the whole race. Most people now pick up the baton and think I’m going to cross the finish line. But there is no finishing line for the movement. It always continues. Each of us share a moment in holding that baton, as it passes down through the movement.”

At every turn in Birmingham, symbols of the progress made towards

Despite the discussion
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full equality are visible. The airport is named after the Rev Shuttlesworth and black and whites share workplaces and transport without eyebrows raised. Segregation still exists, of course. The black area once branded ‘Dynamite Hill’ so frequent were KKK bombings there, remains mired in poverty and home to one community only. (Though there may be a mote in your eye element in my despair at this news: For when I shared with the Rev Wilder that we have physical walls separating our communities in Belfast, he took a shocked and audible intake of breath!)

For history teacher Jonathan Hatton, the four years of the Trump Presidency moved the African American community “back 40-50 years”. “In the words of King we have celebrated symbols of progress as substance”, he said. “We stopped applying pressure when we had symbols. Trump’s election did two things: it woke many of the people who had thought we came a long way because we elected a black president; and then it woke another group of people who had been asleep for 40 years. With those people being awakened, you have this sense of entitlement reappearing. You have the sense of suppression with some of the same tactics that they were using during the civil rights movement reappearing.”

Before I left, Pastor Kris’ mum insist I chat by phone to a pal of hers, “an elder” who had taken part in

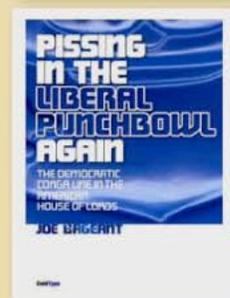
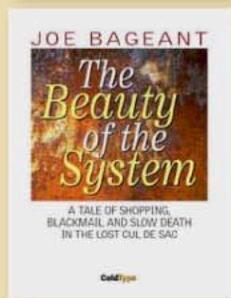
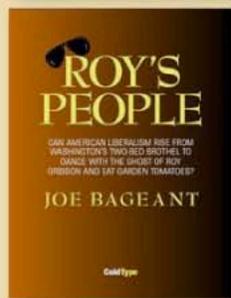
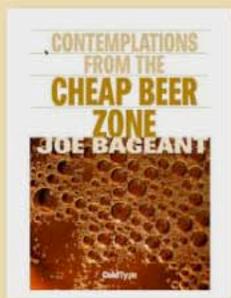
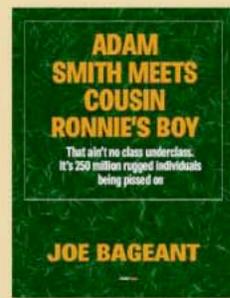
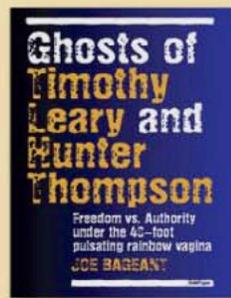
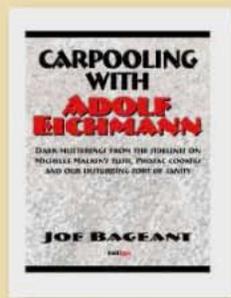
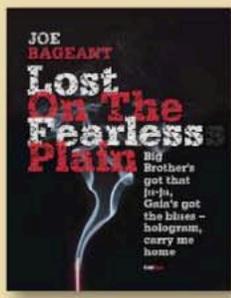
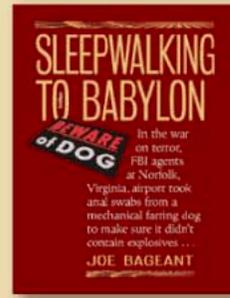
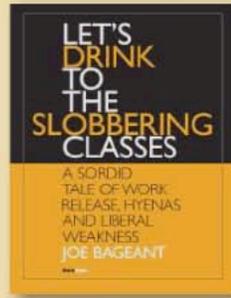
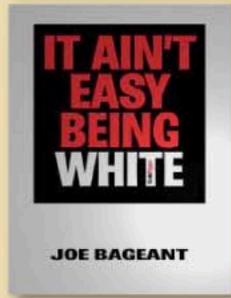
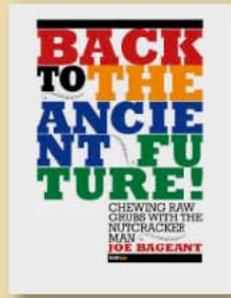
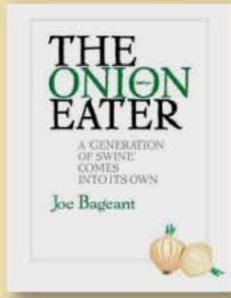
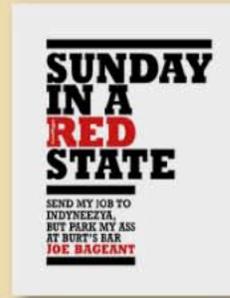
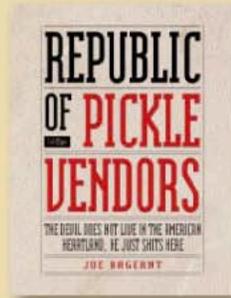
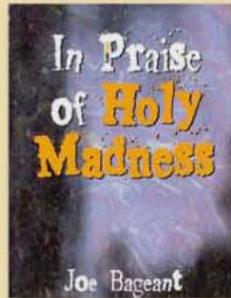
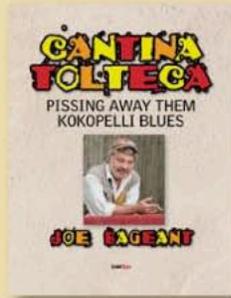
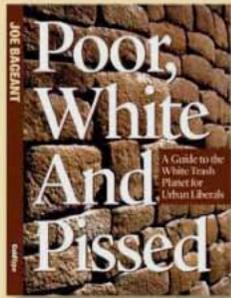
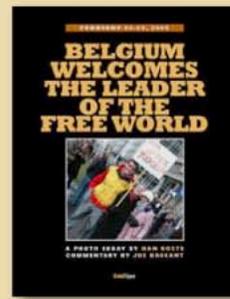
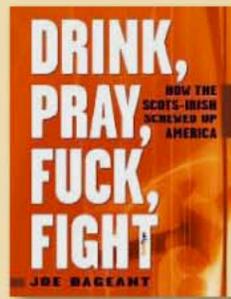
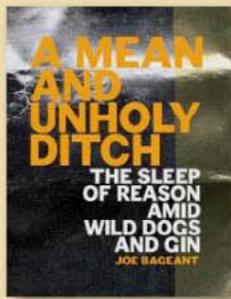
the Children’s Crusade of May 1963 and had been imprisoned in the fairground after the jails filled up. Sister Jesse Shepherd sounded as feisty and indomitable today as she must have been back in those early days of the civil rights struggle. She is at turns saddened at the enduring discrimination she witnesses all around her but hopeful also that the Christian instruction to love your neighbour will prevail. “They don’t have the dogs now”, she says. “But they are still killing us, still arresting us without purpose because our colour is black. I wish we could just learn to live as one nation and stop hating each other.”

That conviction, even in the increasingly secular times, that churches are “the beating heart” of the African American community was echoed in the eloquent and emotional eulogy of President Obama for those slaughtered in that Charlestown sanctuary by Dylann Roof. “A sacred place, this church”, he said. “Not just for blacks, not just for Christians, but for every African American who cares about the steady expansion of human rights and human dignity in this country; a foundation stone for liberty and justice for all.”

In Birmingham, Alabama – until Charlestown, the location of the deadliest racist attack on a black church – the African American community continues to show infinite patience and amazing grace as it waits for more hands to join in the work of building on that foundation stone.

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ROBERT GUMBERT

Street of lost dreams and broken hearts



In 2016 the Super Bowl came to San Francisco. The unhoused were 'urged' to move to the ironically named Division Street (right) where, city officers hoped, they would be 'invisible'. Amid the unlimited wealth and consumption of that 'super' week, the unhoused went about their lives, crowded together in their tents or sleeping rough on the ground. There were no facilities, no promises of permanent housing were given.

Division Street is where this project began and





from which it gets its name. The voices of the unhoused are integral to this project. First-person storytelling, messages left on the street, media headlines and politicians' characterisations make Division Street a collaboration between many communities.

Division Street, through photographs and words, becomes a metaphor for the 'division' of communities, between the wealth of the few and the expendability of the many, in San Francisco, the USA and across the world.

Division Street, the new book by Robert Gumpert, from publisher Dewi Lewis, is a story of lives lived on hard streets, among staggering wealth and empty promises, told through photos, found text and first-person narratives.



TOP

Peter Marshall Qualls, 47.

"I've been without a place since I was ten-and-half-years-old. We share time together and trust one another and in turn give each other security and hope."

RIGHT

Tyrone Butler, 59.

"I've been without a home for 18 years. The hardest thing about being on the streets is dealing with the activities that's out on the streets at night time. Only the strong survive and the weak, they sleep."





ABOVE
Ricky Walker, 48, and Becca Hogue, 42. Ricky has been 10 years without a home, Becca 2 years. "We all need a place to take refuge, to take a break from things and have some space, some privacy. So I equate shelter with privacy and having these things."



LEFT
Ashanti Jones, 44. "I've been on the streets all my life. They moved us out of this alley, told us to pack up, that they were sending out resources. That they were going to put us in hotel rooms. We packed well into the night and no one came, and so I said let's go in this parking lot."



ABOVE

Caleb Jay Jenkins, 60. Without a home: for 49 years. "I've never been inside, (to me home's) a big box with heat in it."

RIGHT

Paul Rogers, 59. Without a home "Off and on 41 years because that's how long my addiction has been with me. Accepting help is alright when the help comes that's really helping and not just trying to shove me out of the way."

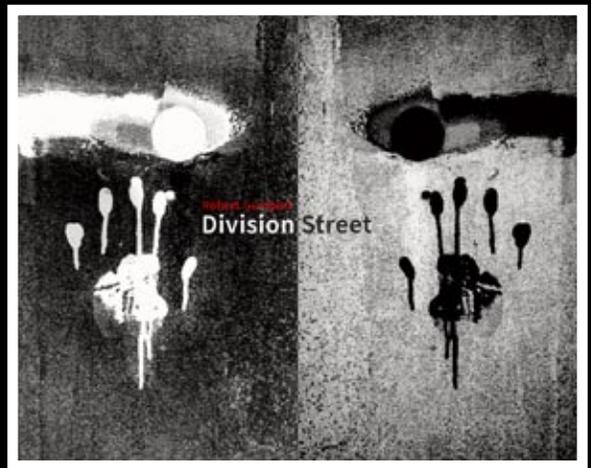




ABOVE
Moving belongings
west along 13th Street.
19 March 2015.



LEFT
Sleeping man.
Early morning on Utah
and 17th Streets.
8 November 2019.



DIVISION STREET / Robert Gumpert
Dewi Lewis Publishing / www.dewilewis.com
UK £35 / US \$49

TOM ENGELHARDT

America's two pandemics

And how they mixed and matched

Imagine that you were experiencing all of this (and by this, I mean our lives right now) as if it were a novel, à la Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year*. The famed author of *Robinson Crusoe* – Defoe claimed it had been written by the fictional *Crusoe* himself – was five years old in 1665. That was when a year-long visitation of the bubonic plague decimated London. It probably killed more than 100,000 of that city's residents or 15 percent of its population. As for Defoe, he published his “journal” in 1722, 57 years later. He wrote it, however, as if he (or his unidentified protagonist) had recorded events as they were happening in the way that all of us, whatever our ages, have been witnessing the ravages of the many variants of Covid-19 in our own all-too-dismantled lives.

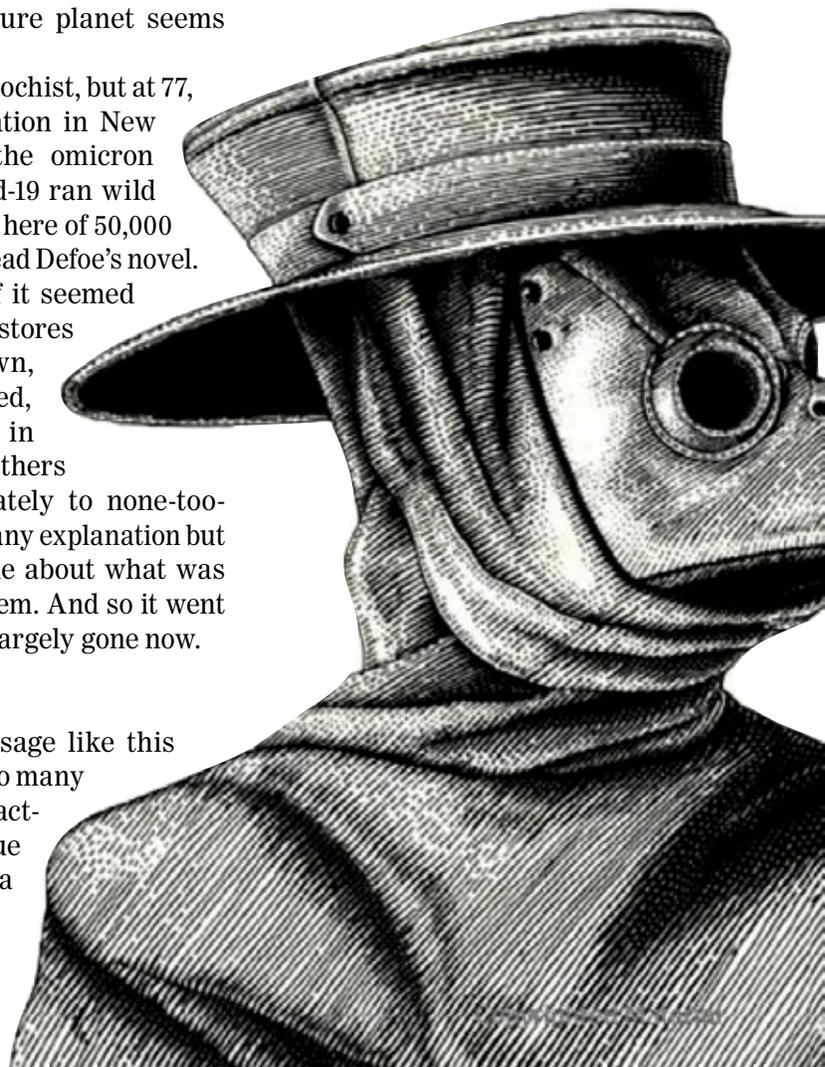
Still, give Defoe credit. As a grown-up, he may not have lived through the worst version of a plague to hit that capital city since the Black Death of 1348. He did, however, capture much that, four centuries later, will seem unnervingly familiar to us, living as we are in a country savaged by a pandemic all our own. We can only hope that, 57 years from now, on a calmer planet, some 21st-century version

of Defoe will turn our disaster into a memorable work of fiction (not that Louise Erdrich hasn't already taken a shot at it in her new novel, *The Sentence*). Sadly, given so much that's happening right now from the mad confrontation over Ukraine to the inability to stop this world from heating to the boiling point, that calmer future planet seems unlikely indeed.

Call me a masochist, but at 77, in relative isolation in New York City as the omicron variant of Covid-19 ran wild – hitting a peak here of 50,000 cases a day – I read Defoe's novel. All too much of it seemed eerily familiar: stores shutting down, nightlife curtailed, people locked in their houses, others looking desperately to none-too-wise figures for any explanation but a reasonable one about what was happening to them. And so it went then and so it's largely gone now.

I mean, a passage like this one on the way so many Londoners reacted to the plague should still ring a bell, no?

“...[N]ow led by their fright to extremes of folly... they ran to conjurers and witches, and all sorts of deceivers to know what should become of them (who fed their fears, and kept them always alarmed and awake on purpose to delude them and pick their pock-



Art: From Year of the Plague

ets)... running after quacks and montebanks... for medicines and remedies; storing themselves with such multitudes of pills, potions, and preservatives, as they were called, that they not only spent their money but even poisoned themselves beforehand for fear of the poison of the infection.”

Hey, in our time, from key figures on the right we’ve heard far too much about what Defoe referred to, so many centuries ago and all too ironically, as “infallible preventive pills against the plague”. After all, our previous president recommended that Americans use the anti-malarial drug hydroxychloroquine against Covid-19. (“ ‘I think people should [take hydroxychloroquine],” he told reporters at a White House press briefing on Saturday. ‘If it were me, in fact, I might do it anyway. I may take it... I have to ask my doctors about that. But I may take it.’”) Similarly, Fox News and various Republicans continued to plug the use of the anti-parasitic drug Ivermectin, normally given to livestock, as a miracle cure. (Neither of those drugs was anything of the sort, of course.)

In a way, in these last two years, so many of us have felt almost Robinson Crusoe-like, stranded on our own islands in the middle of a hell on Earth. We are, it seems, whatever our ages, the Covid generation, living either in painful isolation or in shoulder-to-shoulder danger of the scariest kind. But here’s the even stranger thing: Defoe and his compatriots suffered only one terrifying illness, the bubonic plague, known in earlier years as the Black Death for the black sores or “buboes”

In these last two years,
so many of us have
felt almost Robinson
Crusoe-like, stranded on
our own islands in the
middle of a hell on Earth

it caused on necks, in armpits, and in the groin.

To my mind, there is one thing that makes us different. We’ve been suffering through not one, but two plagues or pandemics in this country. Anyone in a Defoe-like mood would, I suspect, have to write two journals of the plague years to cover this painfully all-American moment of ours.

In one, as in Defoe, a spreading, shape-shifting disease would be our common enemy. After all – and we may be anything but done – Covid-19 in all its variants has so far killed, by my rough estimate, one of every 300 Americans and, according to the *New York Times*, one of every 100 of us who is 65 or older. Though the official figure for deaths stands at a staggering 886,000 Americans and continues to rise by a couple of thousand a day, the real total is undoubtedly well over a million by now, in itself a stunning disaster.

And yet, in this same period, we’ve been living through another kind of pandemic as well. Think of it as a rabid political pandemic also ravaging the country and, worse yet, using the first pandemic as a kind of growth hormone.

Here’s the strange thing: Covid-19 has gotten in the way of so much that matters in our individual lives – from school to socialising to making

a living – and yet, all too bizarrely, it’s changed so little that mattered, politically speaking, especially to the Trumpian part of America. Yes, sometimes it’s shut down much and shut off much else. Yet, ravaged by illness, the political world has, if anything, revved up in a remarkably disastrous fashion.

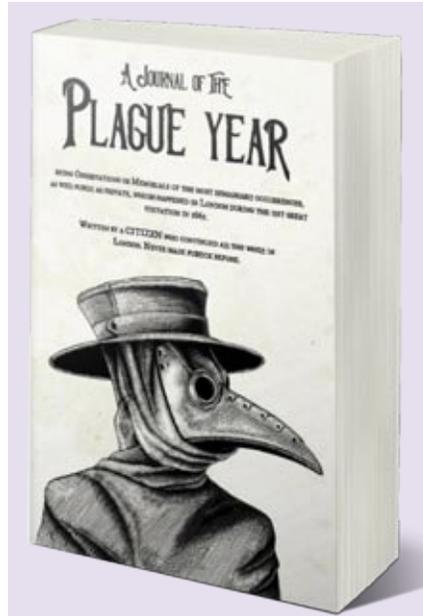
And for that, you can’t only blame the Republicans or the Trumpists among them. After all, it’s eerily true at the international level as well, with the Biden administration acting as if, in the midst of both that global pandemic and a round of unprecedented climate-change disasters, we were still on an all-too-familiar Cold War planet. The crisis in Ukraine? Honestly, you’d think we were back in the literal Cold War and that no pandemic had ever hit this world, as the Biden administration threatens to send more US troops, ships, and planes to the very edges of the Soviet Union... whoops, sorry, I meant Vladimir Putin’s Russia. No matter that we’re no longer talking about possible war in distant Afghanistan or even Iraq, but in the European heartland and between nuclear-armed powers still being devastated by a disease whose ability to slaughter has, in this country, left the casualties of the Civil War in the dust of history.

Of course, after a fashion, we’ve experienced something like this before. To put this aspect of our lives in perspective, it’s worth remembering that, in a world long after Daniel Defoe’s but significantly earlier than ours, parts of humanity fought their way through the end of World War I undaunted by the great influenza, the pandemic of that moment, then sweeping the planet. It got its name, the “Spanish Flu”, ironically enough, from a country in Europe that remained neutral during that disastrous conflict and so

was the first not to experience but to openly publish information about the plague that would, in the end, kill an estimated 50 million people worldwide!

Meanwhile, the America that delivered con man and bankruptee Donald Trump to the White House in 2016 has seemingly only been energised by the Covid disaster. So, think of the ongoing Trumpian movement as this country's second pandemic. After all, the Republicans of the Trump era and their "base" seem all too ready to rather literally tear this country apart. That, over these last two years, has meant among other things fighting anyone who might try to deal in a reasonable fashion with the first pandemic (even, in an armed and dangerous fashion, with the governor of Michigan in response to her Covid lockdown measures).

From unmasking to refusing to be vaccinated, from ignoring social distancing to denouncing vaccine mandates, Trumpian America has taken up the pandemic as its issue du jour and run madly (and I do mean madly) with it, often followed by significant parts of the population. And mind you, it's no happenstance that, during these Covid years, gun sales in this country, already high, soared to record levels, while gun violence seemed to reach pandemic heights all its own. Meanwhile, in the White House was a president who himself was a Covid superspreader, a leader who, on returning from a Covid-19 hospital stay, proudly ripped his mask off on a White House balcony. Meanwhile, increasingly armed right-wing militias and white nationalist groups like the Oath Keepers and the Boogaloo Boys are seeking to speed the way to a societal collapse.



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A Journal of the Plague Year
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Politically, as became clear indeed on January 6, 2021, our second pandemic has only continued to grow ever fiercer, ravaging this country in its own fashion. After all, in the wake of that striking attempt by militia members, white nationalists, and Trumpian supporters to destroy the US Capitol (and most of those inside it), polls suggest that ever more Republicans have come to believe violence is a reasonable means, if not the only one, to make this country their own. Wild talk of everything from insurrection to civil war has only grown as the Republican Party in these years increasingly became, both in Congress and outside it, a cult of no.

And here's the strangest thing of all, our two pandemics continue to mix and match ever more deeply and bizarrely at ever more levels.

In the process, they've fed voraciously off each other. To see the way Covid-19 has all-too-literally fed off Trumpian America, you only have to check out the death rates in areas that voted for The Donald in 2020 versus those that voted for Joe Biden. On average, they're almost three times as high. Worse yet, in the Trumpiest – that is, reddest – parts of the country, that figure is nearly six times as high. Keep in mind that we're talking about dead Americans here. And in that context, I'm sure you won't be surprised to know that, among Democrats, vaccination rates are far higher than among Republicans. Duh!

Meanwhile, on pandemic-related issues ranging from masking to social distancing, misinformation about Covid-19 to violent opposition to vaccine mandates, the second pandemic, the Trumpian one, has fed off the first in its own version of infecting America. The new Republican Party, its legislators and governors, have come to rely on issues like forbidding mask mandates in schools or vaccine mandates in businesses (or simply refusing to wear masks at all), while opposing almost any kind of shutdown vis-à-vis the pandemic to gain strength. And their power has increasingly been built on acts meant to enhance the lethal effects of Covid-19, which means that functionally they've been murderers. In other words, when it comes to the Republican Party and ever more of its followers, we're talking about a violent cult of no that seems intent on taking this country apart at the seams.

In that context, there's one obvious question to ask about either of the pandemics plaguing the United States right now: Do new variants lurk in our future? When it comes

to Covid-19, we simply don't know if omicron will sweep everything else away and, like the Spanish flu, become a milder ongoing endemic disease. Unfortunately, on a planet where the inhabitants of significant regions are still remarkably unvaccinated, the spawning of deadly new variants remains a real possibility and living in an ongoing pandemic world remains an all-too-conceivable future reality.

If only one could hope that the equivalent of the first option above was a significant possibility for our other pandemic – that it might recede into the national woodwork, becoming an endemic but relatively minor strain of American politics.

However, there, as well, new variants seem all too imagina-

An ageing Donald Trump, already booed at one of his own rallies last year, could end up ceding or losing election ground to a fiercer, younger version of himself

ble. Of course, the present strain of it, whose heartland now lies in Mar-a-Lago, Florida, remains remarkably alive and well, heading into the elections of 2022 and 2024.

It's true that an ageing Donald Trump, already booed at one of his own rallies last year for his position on vaccines, could end up ceding or losing election ground to a fiercer, younger version of himself like Flor-

ida Governor Ron DeSantis, or some other variant we have yet to see.

All of this remains unknown. The only thing we can be sure of right now is that we live in an America ever more divided and devastated by those two pandemics. On an increasingly sickly planet, our future, in other words, remains up for grabs. **CT**

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JOHN PILGER

War in Europe and the rise of pure propaganda

Having dragged Europe ‘allies’ into American wars that do not concern them, the great unspoken is that NATO itself is the real threat to European security

Marshall McLuhan’s prophecy that “the successor to politics will be propaganda” has happened. Raw propaganda is now the rule in Western democracies, especially the US and Britain

On matters of war and peace, ministerial deceit is reported as news. Inconvenient facts are censored, demons are nurtured. The model is corporate spin, the currency of the age. In 1964, McLuhan famously declared, “The medium is the message”. The lie is the message now.

But is this new? It is more than a century since Edward Bernays, the father of spin, invented “public relations” as a cover for war propaganda. What is new is the virtual elimination of dissent in the mainstream.

The great editor David Bowman, author of *The Captive Press*, called this “a defenestration of all who refuse to follow a line and to swallow the unpalatable and are brave”. He was referring to independent journalists and whistle blowers, the honest mavericks to whom media organisations once gave space, often with pride. The space has been abolished.

The war hysteria that has rolled in like a tidal wave in recent weeks

and months is the most striking example. Known by its jargon, “shaping the narrative”, much if not most of it is pure propaganda.

The Russians are coming. Russia is worse than bad. Putin is evil, “a Nazi like Hitler”, salivated the Labour MP Chris Bryant. Ukraine is about to be invaded by Russia – tonight, this week, next week. The sources include an ex CIA propagandist who now speaks for the US State Department and offers no evidence of his claims about Russian actions because “it comes from the US Government”.

The no-evidence rule also applies in London. The British Foreign Secretary, Liz Truss, who spent £500,000 of public money flying to Australia in a private plane to warn the Canberra government that both Russia and China were about to

pounce, offered no evidence. Antipodean heads nodded; the “narrative” is unchallenged there. One rare exception, former prime minister Paul Keating, called Truss’s warmongering “demented”.

Truss has blithely confused the countries of the Baltic and Black Sea. In Moscow, she told the Russian foreign minister that Britain would never accept Russian sovereignty over Rostov and Voronezh – until it was pointed out to her that these places were not part of Ukraine but in Russia. Read the Russian press about the buffoonery of this pretender to 10 Downing Street and cringe.

This entire farce, recently starring Boris Johnson in Moscow playing a clownish version of his hero, Churchill, might be enjoyed as satire were it not for its wilful abuse of facts and historical understanding and the real danger of war.

Vladimir Putin refers to the “genocide” in the eastern Donbas region of Ukraine. Following the coup in Ukraine in 2014 – orchestrated by Barack Obama’s “point person” in Kyiv, Victoria Nuland – the coup regime, infested with neo-Nazis, launched a campaign of terror against Russian-speaking Donbas, which accounts for a third of Ukraine’s population.

Overseen by CIA director John

The Russians are coming. Putin is evil, “a Nazi like Hitler”, salivated the Labour MP Chris Bryant

Brennan in Kyiv, “special security units” coordinated savage attacks on the people of Donbas, who opposed the coup. Video and eyewitness reports show bussed fascist thugs burning the trade union headquarters in the city of Odessa, killing 41 people trapped inside. The police are standing by. Obama congratulated the “duly elected” coup regime for its “remarkable restraint”.

In the US media the Odessa atrocity was played down as “murky” and a “tragedy” in which “nationalists” (neo-Nazis) attacked “separatists” (people collecting signatures for a referendum on a federal Ukraine). Rupert Murdoch’s *Wall Street Journal* damned the victims – “Deadly Ukraine Fire Likely Sparked by Rebels, Government Says”.

Professor Stephen Cohen, acclaimed as America’s leading authority on Russia, wrote, “The pogrom-like burning to death of ethnic Russians and others in Odessa reawakened memories of Nazi extermination squads in Ukraine during world war two. [Today] storm-like assaults on gays, Jews, elderly ethnic Russians, and other ‘impure’ citizens are widespread throughout Kyiv-ruled Ukraine, along with torchlight marches reminiscent of those that eventually inflamed Germany in the late 1920s and 1930s...”

“The police and official legal authorities do virtually nothing to prevent these neo-fascist acts or to prosecute them. On the contrary, Kyiv has officially encouraged them by systematically rehabilitating and even memorialising Ukrainian collaborators with Nazi German extermination pogroms, renaming streets in their honour, building monuments to them, rewriting history to glorify them, and more.”

Today, neo-Nazi Ukraine is sel-



FRONT PAGE FURY: Britain's tabloids ramp up the propaganda as the West calls for war against Russia.

dom mentioned. That the British are training the Ukrainian National Guard, which includes neo-Nazis, is not news. The return of violent, endorsed fascism to 21st-century Europe, to quote Harold Pinter, “never happened ... even while it was happening”.

On December 16, the United Nations tabled a resolution that called for “combating glorification of Nazism, neo-Nazism and other practices that contribute to fuelling contemporary forms of racism”. The only nations to vote against it were the United States and Ukraine.

Almost every Russian knows that it was across the plains of Ukraine’s “borderland” that Hitler’s divisions swept from the west in 1941, bolstered by Ukraine’s Nazi cultists and collaborators. The result was more than 20 million Russian dead.

Setting aside the manoeuvres and cynicism of geopolitics, whomever the players, this historical memory is the driving force behind Russia’s respect-seeking, self-protective security proposals, which were published in Moscow in the week the UN voted 130-2 to outlaw Nazism. They are:

- NATO guarantees that it will not deploy missiles in nations bordering Russia. (They are already in place from Slovenia to Romania, with Poland to follow)
- NATO to stop military and naval exercises in nations and seas bordering Russia.
- Ukraine will not become a member of NATO.
- the West and Russia to sign a binding East-West security pact.
- the landmark treaty between the US and Russia covering intermediate-range nuclear weapons to be restored. (The US abandoned it in 2019)

These amount to a comprehensive draft of a peace plan for all of

post-war Europe and ought to be welcomed in the West. But who understands their significance in Britain? What they are told is that Putin is a pariah and a threat to Christendom.

Russian-speaking Ukrainians, under economic blockade by Kyiv for seven years, are fighting for their survival. The “massing” army we seldom hear about are the 13 Ukrainian army brigades laying siege to Donbas: an estimated 150,000 troops. If they attack, the provocation to Russia will almost certainly mean war.

In 2015, brokered by the Germans and French, the presidents of Russia, Ukraine, Germany and France met in Minsk and signed an interim peace deal. Ukraine agreed to offer autonomy to Donbas, now the self

In Britain, the line, amplified by Boris Johnson, is that Ukraine is being “dictated to” by world leaders

declared republics of Donetsk and Luhansk.

The Minsk agreement has never been given a chance. In Britain, the line, amplified by Boris Johnson, is that Ukraine is being “dictated to” by world leaders. For its part, Britain is arming Ukraine and training its army.

Since the first Cold War, NATO has effectively marched right up to Russia’s most sensitive border having demonstrated its bloody aggres-

sion in Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and broken solemn promises to pull back. Having dragged European “allies” into American wars that do not concern them, the great unspoken is that NATO itself is the real threat to European security.

In Britain, a state and media xenophobia is triggered at the very mention of “Russia”. Mark the knee-jerk hostility with which the BBC reports Russia. Why? Is it because the restoration of imperial mythology demands, above all, a permanent enemy? Certainly, we deserve better. **CT**

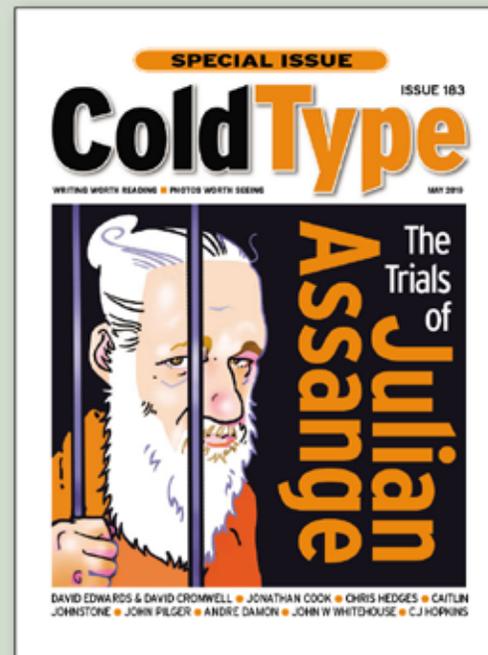
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JONATHAN COOK

Walls protecting Israel are finally crumbling

With the publication of Amnesty International's apartheid report, Israel's supporters have just one tactic left: to accuse critics of antisemitism

The walls protecting Israel are quickly crumbling. A year ago, it was Israel's most celebrated human rights group, B'Tselem. Months later, it was the New York-based Human Rights Watch, whose senior staff have often enjoyed a revolving door with the US State Department.

Now, the one speaking up is Amnesty International – an organisation widely viewed as the most authoritative arbiter of what constitutes human rights violations. Over the past year, all have reached the same conclusion: Israel is an apartheid state. According to Amnesty's new report published on February 1: "Israel's system of institutionalised segregation and discrimination against Palestinians, as a racial group, in all areas under its control amounts to a system of apartheid."

This is not just a criticism of Israel's occupation. All three groups have been pointing out for decades Israel's flagrant disregard of international law, and its likely commission of war crimes, in the occupied territories.

But Israel was little concerned, so long as public debate was confined to the occupation. Its advocates quickly learned that they could always deflect to matters of Israel's security,

by presenting any Palestinian resistance as terrorism.

Now, the consensus is shifting to entirely new terrain – a discursive battlefield where Israel has less effective weapons with which to defend itself. The biggest human rights watchdogs are agreed that everything about Israel's rule over Palestinians is connected, from its military oppression of those under occupation, to the civil legal system inside Israel that systematically confers inferior rights on the country's large minority of nominal Palestinian "citizens".

In other words, Israel's apartheid structures cannot be disentangled, separating out the occupied territories from "Israel proper". It is all part of the same, single system of rule by one ethnic-national group, Jews, designed to oppress and marginalise another ethnic-national group, Palestinians.

The divisions between Israel and the occupied territories have served a public relations purpose, hiding Israel's true intent: to dispossess Palestinians

Late in the day, the champions of human rights have fully understood that the divisions between Israel and the occupied territories are simply cosmetic. They have served a public relations purpose, hiding Israel's true intent: to dispossess Palestinians wherever they find themselves under Israeli rule.

Crucially, all the major human rights groups have now jettisoned the key artificial distinction insisted upon by Israel. Israel's premise was that its 1.8-million Palestinian "citizens" – a fifth of the population inside Israel – faced informal and unconscious discrimination, similar to that suffered by minorities in western democracies, such as the US and UK.

The message was intended to reassure: Israel's treatment of its Palestinian citizens was not perfect, but it was no worse than other liberal democratic states. That allowed it to rationalise its brutal, repressive treatment of Palestinians under occupation. The military occupation was supposedly an anomaly, forced on Israel by the need to protect its citizens and democratic structures from constant, unprovoked Palestinian violence and terrorism.

Israel's foreign minister, Yair Lapid, rehearsed exactly that line in a pre-emptive strike against Am-

NEVER FORGET:
Palestinian keys painted
on Israel's illegal
separation wall at Abu Dis.



Photo from Apartheid is A Crime, by Mattis Svensson

nesty. Shortly before the report was published, he said: “Israel isn’t perfect, but we are a democracy committed to international law, open to criticism, with a free press and a strong and independent judicial system”. For good measure, he accused Amnesty of echoing “the same lies shared by terrorist organisations”.

In Britain, the Board of Deputies of British Jews took a similar approach: “Israel is a vibrant democracy and a state for all its citizens, as exemplified by its diverse government and robust civil society.”

Except every mainstream Israeli politician vehemently rejects the idea that Israel could ever be a “state of all its citizens”. That was the expressed view of former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. And four years ago, a council of legislators even took the rare step of banning a bill from being debated in the Israeli parliament because it promoted Israel as a “state of all its citizens”.

In fact, the phrase itself is the slogan of Palestinian leaders inside Israel who have been mobilising their supporters in a campaign for

sweeping change to end Israel’s current status as a racist Jewish state. Well-worn deflection campaigns by Israel and its defenders are looking ever more threadbare.

Amnesty has now joined B’Tselem and Human Rights Watch in repudiating this narrative as a smokescreen. All have accepted that Israel’s Palestinian minority faces systematic, structural and malign discrimination – and equated that discrimination to the oppression of Black and “coloured” populations in apartheid South Africa.

In short, Israel’s racism is not an add-on or temporary. It is hard-baked into the very idea of a Jewish state.

The implication of all these apartheid reports is that Israel, as it is currently constituted, cannot be reformed. As with apartheid South Africa, there has to be a fundamental realignment of power within the region. Change has to be deep and all-encompassing. And as was the case with South Africa, it will not

happen without strong international pressure.

That’s why Amnesty has called on the UN Security Council to “impose targeted sanctions, such as asset freezes, against Israeli officials most implicated in the crime of apartheid, and a comprehensive arms embargo on Israel”.

Potentially waiting in the wings is the International Criminal Court, which is examining Israel’s violations of international law. Amnesty has called on the war crimes court to extend its deliberations to consider whether Israel is guilty of apartheid too.

This is likely to prove a decisive moment for Israel. Its narrative, and that of the human rights community, are on a collision course.

Once Israel’s security rationale for oppressing Palestinians is dismissed, as it has been by Amnesty and others by classifying Israel as an apartheid state even inside its recognised borders, then there is only one defensive position left: to call critics antisemitic.

This, of course, is exactly what

Israel and its supporters have been doing. Lapid's foreign ministry issued a press statement labelling the report "false, biased and antisemitic". Pro-Israel lobby groups variously described Amnesty as "vilifying" and "demonising" Israel. The UK's Board of Deputies accused Amnesty of "bad faith".

B'Tselem, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty all knew they would face a concerted campaign of vilification themselves if they dared to present Israel in a more truthful light – which is arguably why they delayed so long.

After all, Israel did not become an apartheid state a year ago. It has been one since 1948, when it was explicitly founded as a Jewish state, premised on the mass expulsion of Palestinians from their homeland. It was just too radioactive for the human rights community to identify Israel's apartheid character until recently.

For years, the legal group Adalah, which advocates for the Palestinian minority, has maintained an online database of Israeli laws that explicitly discriminate based on whether a citizen is Jewish or Palestinian. It has grown to more than 65 laws.

But the turning point came with the decision in 2018 of Netanyahu's ultra-nationalist government to do what its predecessors had carefully avoided: to write the systematic discrimination experienced by Israel's Palestinian citizens into a single, constitutional-type piece of legislation – the so-called Jewish nation-state law.

That broke the dam. By declaring Israel the national homeland of Jews only, the flood of apartheid reports was inevitable. It was a largely self-



DAMNING: The cover of Amnesty International's report: *Israel's Apartheid Against Palestine*. Download it at www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde15/5141/2022/en

inflicted wound. But Amnesty and the wider human rights community are still holding back from clarifying the full implications of Israel's apartheid character, as the nation-state law underscores. It states that the right to exercise "national self-determination in the State of Israel is unique to the Jewish people".

That right is reserved not just for Jews living in Israel, but for all Jews around the world. All of them – whether they support Israel or not, whether they have ever lived in the region or not – have more rights to the historic lands of Palestinians than any Palestinian does, even a so-called Palestinian "citizen" of Israel.

Fervent pro-Israel Jewish organisations in the US and Britain that are currently defending Israel from the charge of apartheid know full well that the system they seek to protect is designed explicitly to privilege them over Palestinians whose families have lived in the region for generations.

These groups have actively colluded in Israel's campaign of misdirection, one intended to shield from scrutiny an apartheid system. The next frontier in this battle – one the human rights community will need to take on urgently and bravely – is to expose this misdirection campaign for what it is, and to shame those who participate in it.

Zionist Jewish organisations inflict suffering on Palestinians by excusing and propping up Israel's apartheid system – and wrongly, like Israel, they do so in the name of all Jews.

They see themselves at war with Israel's critics, including groups such as Amnesty. The human rights community must confront this fight head-on, not shy away from it. The struggle isn't only to end Israel's catastrophic deceptions, but those of its apologists too. **CT**

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



ALL-CHANGE: The General Motors plant at Silao, where workers finally had the opportunity to pick a union of their own choice.

SAM PIZZIGATI

Mexican workers learn strength of unity

GM workers are now feeling their own power after years of living in fear

The US labour movement, after a depressing January, needed some encouraging news. That encouraging news has just come – from Mexico.

What put the damper on January? The US Department of Labor released its annual figures on “union density”, the share of America’s labour force that carries union cards. Activists across the country were expecting to see the new figures show a healthy uptick in labour’s overall ranks. The past year had, after all, been remarkably upbeat, with a new wave of union organising taking shape – and making headlines – in giant nonunion empires like Ama-

zon and Starbucks.

But new figures from the Labor Department’s Bureau of Labor Statistics showed no increase in union density at all. Instead, the union share of the nation’s private-sector workforce actually dropped, down to 6.1 percent, the lowest level in over a century. Some context: Back in the 1950s and 1960s, a full third of US private-sector workers carried union cards.

All Americans, then and now, have ample reason to care about the Labor Department’s annual union density stats. No numbers may simply have more impact on the distribution of America’s income and wealth.

In the 1960s, in a highly unionised

America, top corporate execs averaged only just over 20 times more in annual compensation than average US workers. And the take-home of those execs faced tax rates that ranged as high as 91 percent. That one-two punch of high unionisation rates and high tax rates on high incomes kept the United States a nation where the rich didn’t always win.

But that state of affairs didn’t last. By the late 1970s, America’s mid-century equality had begun to unravel. Since 1978, the Economic Policy Institute reported late last year, typical US worker pay has increased only 18 percent after taking inflation into account. Over that same span, major US corporate CEOs have seen their

compensation soar 1,322 percent.

Overall, America's richest 0.1 percent were only averaging 36 times more annual income in 1976 than the nation's bottom 90 percent. By 2018, that top 0.1 percent was grabbing 196 times more.

What does any of this have to do with Mexico? A good bit more than most Americans may realise. For over a quarter-century now – ever since the 1994 NAFTA trade agreement started eliminating economic barriers between Mexico, Canada, and the United States – US corporate chiefs have been moving their manufacturing south of the border. This shifting has cost US workers substantial numbers of jobs, particularly in states like Michigan and California.

But, more strikingly, the new trade dynamics have strengthened the hand of major US employers. Corporate honchos, notes economist Jeff Faux, welcomed NAFTA by threatening to leave for Mexico if workers voted for union representation or, if they already had a union, didn't accept lower wages and benefits.

"In the midst of collective bargaining negotiations", Faux adds, "some companies would even start loading machinery into trucks that they said were bound for Mexico."

What gave those threats credibility? What's made Mexico so appealing to US CEOs? The low wages that top American corporate execs can get away paying to Mexican workers. One example: At the massive General Motors plant in Silao, a small city in central Mexico's industrial heartland, Jesus Barroso currently makes the equivalent of just over \$23 a day, after 11 years on the job. Similarly experienced GM workers in the United States can

CTM's lockgrip over labour relations in Mexico started cracking when the reform-minded Morena party swept into office nationally in 2018

make ten times as much.

What keeps wages in Mexico so low? Mexico's corrupt traditional union powerhouse, the Confederación de Trabajadores de México, has played a key role. Leaders of unions connected to this confederation, the CTM, have essentially served as pliant junior partners to the PRI political party, the ruling party for most of Mexico's modern history. With PRI support, CTM leaders have signed sweetheart contracts with employers that have kept wages low and workers in the dark.

But CTM's lockgrip over labour relations in Mexico started cracking when the reform-minded Morena party swept into office nationally in the 2018 elections. CTM had suddenly lost its political patron, and rank-and-file Mexican workers had a national administration actually interested in protecting their rights, via both new laws and the serious enforcement of already existing labour statutes.

Meanwhile, midway through 2020, the successor trade agreement to NAFTA went into full effect. This new agreement has one important saving grace: a series of provisions, pushed hard by US-based unions, that aim to help workers freely choose the unions that represent them.

Early February saw these provisions put to their test when, in Silao's massive General Motors plant, over

6,500 workers finally had the opportunity to pick a union of their own choice. The former union at the plant, a corrupt CTM local, had negotiated a sweetheart deal that had workers labouring on 12-hour shifts four days – or nights – a week. The strains only intensified when Covid hit and the plant re-opened without the safeguards workers wanted.

"We felt like they were sending us into a slaughterhouse", activist Silao worker Israel Cervantes told the email weekly of the México Solidarity Project. "We held several protests and zoom press conferences to let the public know that vehicles count more to GM than human lives."

GM management didn't appreciate either those protests or moves by Cervantes and fellow activists to support striking US GM workers by refusing to work overtime. Cervantes and a number of fellow activists soon found themselves fired.

"GM didn't tell us they were terminating us for organising, since that would be illegal", explains Cervantes. "Instead, they used different pretexts for different workers. For me, after 13 years on the job, they called me into the office at 10.30 at night and told me I had been 'selected' to not work there anymore. They accused me of doping and went ahead and terminated me even though, at my own expense, I took a drug test that came out negative."

Those terminations didn't stop the determination of the plant's workers to organise for real change. "We know that US auto workers own cars", Alejandra Morales Reynoso, a single mom who started at the Silao plant a dozen years ago, noted last year in an interview with the México Solidarity Project. "Why can't we be paid enough to own a car? Some of us can hardly pay the rent, and our houses don't even have sewage! We know that the GM millionaires with

their mansions and big cars could easily pay us well.”

Last summer, Morales Reynoso and other activists at the Silao plant organised to take advantage of their new rights under the Morena government and the USMCA trade pact. They campaigned for – and won – a vote to invalidate the contract deal GM’s CTM union had foisted upon them. But their new independent union – the Sindicato Independiente Nacional de Trabajadoras y Trabajadores de la Industria Automotriz, or SINTTIA – still had to gain the official rights to bargain a new contract.

The vote to decide those bargaining rights took place at the beginning of February. Four unions appeared on the ballot: the independent SINTTIA, a recognisable CTM affiliate, and two other unions “there”, notes a *Labor Notes* analysis, “to divide the vote.” GM officialdom made no secret of its preference. The company, SINTTIA activists charge, gave only the CTM-linked unions easy access to workers and, *Labor Notes* reports, fired one 20-year veteran at the plant who had been actively “flyering and signature-gathering in support” of SINTTIA.

But worker activists like Alejandra Morales Reynoso – who led the bargaining rights campaign as SINTTIA’s general secretary – had the respect of their fellow workers. They also had the support of trade unions and champions of labour rights from around the world, points out Jeff Hermanson, the lead organiser in Mexico for the Solidarity Center, a US -based global worker rights organisation.

This international labour solidarity, says Hermanson, included support from US groups ranging from the United Auto Workers to the *Labor Notes* organising centre and the México Solidarity Project network. The election itself brought

Corrupt unions like CTM,
“facilitate and enable
the brutal exploitation
of workers, but the real
winner and the real culprit
is the US corporate elite”

supporting labour observer delegations from across the hemisphere, with eight trade unionists representing GM local unions in Brazil.

What all these SINTTIA supporters understand: All over Mexico, state-of-the-art plants like GM Silao sit surrounded by workers living in poverty, the “whole reason”, Hermanson notes, why companies like GM are investing in places like Silao in the first place. Corrupt unions like CTM, he goes on, “facilitate and enable the brutal exploitation of workers, but the real winner and the real culprit is the US corporate elite.”

The run-up to the GM Silao election to challenge that elite had moments of high tension. Three unfriendlies, SINTTIA leader Alejandra Morales Reynoso told the *New York Times*, came by her home “to threaten her over the campaign.” Canada’s auto workers union also charged that CTM officials “engaged in vote-buying.”

But the actual balloting went smoothly. Labour officials in both the Biden administration and Mexico’s Morena government had taken serious steps to guarantee the vote’s fairness. The vote’s stunning outcome: The Silao GM workers gave their overwhelming support to SINTTIA. The independent union won over three-quarters of all the votes cast.

What happens next? The outcome

in Silao, write *Bloomberg* business reporters Andrea Navarro and David Welch, “could start to break the CTM’s longstanding hold on Mexican labour wages and begin the long process of bringing pay closer to what workers make in the US and Canada.”

The SINTTIA victory could recast the Mexican labour landscape, agree US labour journalists Luis Feliz Leon and Dan DiMaggio, “inspiring more workers to organize independent, democratic unions.”

Mexico’s new labour order, notes the Solidarity Center’s Jeff Hermanson, will not come overnight. Just putting fully in place the infrastructure for democratic workplace decision making will take several years. But that logistical reality, Hermanson continues, should not in any way subtract from the significance of SINTTIA’s victory. He likens the importance of the Silao workers struggle to the landmark 1936-37 “sit-down strike” of GM workers in Flint, Michigan.

“In Flint, as in Silao, GM workers organised underground for years before standing up – or sitting down – en masse, overcoming the fear and repression that had held them hostage for a decade or longer,” says Hermanson. “The fear began to melt away as the workers felt their own power.” Those workers in Flint sparked a labour upsurge that laid the foundation for the more equal USA of the mid-20th century. The workers in Silao may now have lit the spark for an entire more equal hemisphere. **CT**

Sam Pizzigati co-edits *Inequality.org*. His latest books include *The Case for a Maximum Wage* and *The Rich Don’t Always Win: The Forgotten Triumph over Plutocracy that Created the American Middle Class, 1900-1970*.

JOHN W. WHITEHEAD & NISHA WHITEHEAD

Dystopia disguised as democracy

The ways in which freedom in the United States is an illusion

We are no longer free. We are living in a world carefully crafted to resemble a representative democracy, but it's an illusion.

We think we have the freedom to elect our leaders, but we're only allowed to participate in the reassurance ritual of voting. There can be no true electoral choice or real representation when we're limited in our options to one of two candidates culled from two parties that both march in lockstep with the Deep State and answer to an oligarchic elite.

We think we have freedom of speech, but we're only as free to speak as the government and its corporate partners allow.

We think we have the right to freely exercise our religious beliefs, but those rights are quickly overruled if and when they conflict with the government's priorities, whether it's COVID-19 mandates or societal values about gender equality, sex and marriage.

We think we have the freedom to go where we want and move about freely, but at every turn, we're hemmed in by laws, fines and penalties that regulate and restrict our autonomy, and surveillance cameras that monitor our movements.

We think we have property interests in our homes and our bodies, but there can be no such freedom when the government can seize your property, raid your home, and dictate what you do with your bodies.

We think we have the freedom to defend ourselves against outside threats, but there is no right to self-defence against militarised police who are authorised to probe, poke, pinch, taser, search, seize, strip and generally manhandle anyone they see fit in almost any circumstance, and granted immunity from accountability with the general blessing of the courts.

We think we have the right to an assumption of innocence until we are proven guilty, but that burden of proof has been turned on its head by a surveillance state that renders us all suspects and over-criminalisation which renders us all

lawbreakers. Police-run facial recognition software that mistakenly labels law-abiding citizens as criminals. A social credit system (similar to China's) that rewards behaviour deemed "acceptable" and punishes behaviour the government and its corporate allies find offensive, illegal or inappropriate.

We think we have the right to due process, but that assurance of justice has been stripped of its power by a judicial system hardwired to act as judge, jury and jailer, leaving us with little recourse for appeal. A perfect example of this rush to judgment can be found in the proliferation of profit-driven speed and red light cameras that do little for safety while padding the pockets of government agencies.

We have been saddled with a government that pays lip service to the nation's freedom principles while working overtime to shred the Constitution.

By gradually whittling away at our freedoms – free speech, assembly, due process, privacy, etc. – the government has, in effect, liberated itself from its contractual agreement to respect the constitutional rights of the citizenry.

Under the new terms of this revised, one-sided agreement, the government and its many opera-

There is no right to self-defence against militarised police who are authorised to manhandle anyone they see fit

tives have all the privileges and rights and “we the people” have none.

Sold on the idea that safety, security and material comforts are preferable to freedom, we’ve allowed the government to pave over the Constitution in order to erect a concentration camp. The problem with these devil’s bargains, however, is that there is always a catch, always a price to pay for whatever it is we valued so highly as to barter away our most precious possessions.

We’ve bartered away our right to self-governance, self-defence, privacy, autonomy and that most important right of all: the right to tell the government to “leave me the hell alone.”

In exchange for the promise of safe streets, safe schools, blight-free neighbourhoods, lower taxes, lower crime rates, and readily accessible technology, health care, water, food and power, we’ve opened the door to militarized police, government surveillance, asset forfeiture, school zero tolerance policies, license plate readers, red light cameras, SWAT team raids, health care mandates, overcriminalisation and government corruption.

In the end, such bargains always turn sour.

We asked our lawmakers to be tough on crime, and we’ve been saddled with an abundance of laws that criminalise almost every aspect of our lives. So far, we’re up to 4500 criminal laws and 300,000 criminal regulations that result in average Americans unknowingly engaging in criminal acts at least three times a day.

We wanted criminals taken off the streets, and we didn’t want to have to pay for their incarceration. What we’ve gotten is a nation that boasts the highest incarceration rate



in the world, with more than 2.3 million people locked up, many of them doing time for relatively minor, non-violent crimes, and a private prison industry fuelling the drive for more inmates, who are forced to provide corporations with cheap labor.

We wanted law enforcement agencies to have the necessary resources to fight the nation’s wars on terror, crime and drugs. What we got instead were militarized police decked out with M-16 rifles, grenade launchers, silencers, battle tanks and hollow point bullets—gear designed for the battlefield, more than 80,000 SWAT team raids carried out every year (many for routine police tasks, resulting in losses of life and property), and profit-driven schemes that add to the government’s largesse such as asset forfeiture, where police seize property from “suspected criminals.”

We fell for the government’s promise of safer roads, only to find ourselves caught in a tangle of profit-driven red-light cameras, which ticket unsuspecting drivers in the so-called name of road safety while

ostensibly fattening the coffers of local and state governments. Despite widespread public opposition, corruption and systemic malfunctions, these cameras are particularly popular with municipalities, which look to them as an easy means of extra cash.

We’re being subjected to the oldest con game in the books, the magician’s sleight of hand that keeps you focused on the shell game in front of you while your wallet is being picked clean by ruffians in your midst.

This is how tyranny rises and freedom falls.

With every new law enacted by federal and state legislatures, every new ruling handed down by government courts, and every new military weapon, invasive tactic and egregious protocol employed by government agents, “we the people” are being reminded that we possess no rights except for that which the government grants on an as-needed basis.

We can no longer maintain the illusion of freedom.

As I make clear in my book *Battlefield America: The War on the American People* and in its fictional counterpart *The Erik Blair Diaries*, “we the people” have become “we the prisoners.” **CT**

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WILLIAM ASTORE

America's disastrous 60-year war

Reflections on three generations of conspicuous destruction
by the military-industrial complex

In my lifetime of nearly 60 years, America has waged five major wars, winning one decisively, then throwing that victory away, while losing the other four disastrously. Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq, as well as the Global War on Terror, were the losses, of course; the Cold War being the solitary win that must now be counted as a loss because its promise was so quickly discarded.

America's war in Vietnam was waged during the Cold War in the context of what was then known as the domino theory and the idea of "containing" communism. Iraq and Afghanistan were part of the Global War on Terror, a post-Cold War event in which "radical Islamic terrorism" became the substitute for communism. Even so, those wars should be treated as a single strand of history, a 60-year war, if you will, for one reason alone: the explanatory power of such a concept.

For me, because of President Dwight D. Eisenhower's farewell address to the nation in January 1961, that year is the obvious starting point for what retired Army colonel and historian Andrew Bacevich recently termed America's Very Long War (VLW). In that televised speech, Ike warned of the emergence of a military-industrial

complex of immense strength that could someday threaten American democracy itself. I've chosen 2021 as the VLW's terminus point because of the disastrous end of this country's Afghan War, which even in its last years cost \$45-billion annually to prosecute, and because of one curious reality that goes with it. In the wake of the crashing and burning of that 20-year war effort, the Pentagon budget leaped even higher with the support of almost every congressional representative of both parties as Washington's armed attention turned to China and Russia.

At the end of two decades of globally disastrous war-making, that funding increase should tell us just how right Eisenhower was about the perils of the military-industrial complex. By failing to heed him all these years, democracy may indeed be in the process of meeting its demise.

Several things define America's disastrous 60-year war. These would include profligacy and ferocity in the use of weaponry against peoples who could not respond in kind; enormous profiteering by the military-industrial complex; incessant lying by the US government (the evidence in the Pentagon Papers for Vietnam, the missing WMD for the invasion

of Iraq, and the recent Afghan War papers); accountability-free defeats, with prominent government or military officials essentially never held responsible; and the consistent practice of a militarised Keynesianism that provided jobs and wealth to a relative few at the expense of a great many. In sum, America's 60-year war has featured conspicuous destruction globally, even as wartime production in the US failed to better the lives of the working and middle classes as a whole.

Let's take a closer look. Militarily speaking, throwing almost everything the US military had (nuclear arms excepted) at opponents who had next to nothing should be considered the defining feature of the VLW. During those six decades of war-making, the US military raged with white hot anger against enemies who refused to submit to its ever more powerful, technologically advanced, and destructive toys.

I've studied and written about the Vietnam War and yet I continue to be astounded by the sheer range of weaponry dropped on the peoples of Southeast Asia in those years – from conventional bombs and napalm to defoliants like Agent Orange that still cause deaths almost half a century after our troops finally bugged



Bomber dropping bombs in Operation Linebacker during the Vietnam War.

out of there. Along with all that ordnance left behind, Vietnam was a testing ground for technologies of every sort, including the infamous electronic barrier that Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara sought to establish to interdict the Ho Chi Minh trail.

When it came to my old service, the Air Force, Vietnam became a proving ground for the notion that airpower, using megatons of bombs, could win a war. Just about every aircraft in the inventory then was thrown at America's alleged enemies, including bombers built for strategic nuclear attacks like the B-52 Stratofortress. The result, of course, was staggeringly widespread devastation and loss of life

at considerable cost to economic fairness and social equity in this country (not to mention our humanity). Still, the companies producing all the bombs, napalm, defoliants, sensors, airplanes, and other killer products did well indeed in those years.

In terms of sheer bomb tonnage and the like, America's wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were more restrained, mainly thanks to the post-Vietnam development of so-called smart weapons. Nonetheless, the sort of destruction that rained down on Southeast Asia was largely repeated in the war on terror, similarly targeting lightly armed guer-

rilla groups and helpless civilian populations. And once again, expensive strategic bombers like the B-1, developed at a staggering cost to penetrate sophisticated Soviet air defences in a nuclear war, were dispatched against bands of guerrillas operating in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria. Depleted uranium shells, white phosphorus, cluster munitions, as well as other toxic munitions, were used repeatedly.

Again, short of nuclear weapons, just about every weapon that could be thrown at Iraqi soldiers, al-Qaeda or ISIS insurgents, or Taliban fighters in Afghanistan, would be used, including those venerable B-52s and, in one case, what was known as the MOAB, or mother of all bombs. And

again, despite all the death and destruction, the US military would lose both wars (one functionally in Iraq and the other all too publicly in Afghanistan), even as so many in and out of that military would profit and prosper from the effort.

What kind of prosperity are we talking about? The Vietnam War cycled through an estimated \$1-trillion in American wealth, the Afghan and Iraq Wars possibly more than \$8-trillion (when all the bills come due from the War on Terror). Yet, despite such costly defeats, or perhaps because of them, Pentagon spending is expected to exceed \$7.3-trillion over the next decade. Never in the field of human conflict has so much money been gobbled up by so few at the expense of so many.

Throughout those 60 years of the VLW, the military-industrial complex has conspicuously consumed trillions of taxpayer dollars, while the US military has rained destruction around the globe. Worse yet, those wars were generally waged with strong bipartisan support in Congress and at least not actively resisted by a significant “silent majority” of Americans. In the process, they have given rise to new forms of authoritarianism and militarism, the very opposite of representative democracy.

Paradoxically, even as “the world’s greatest military” lost those wars, its influence continued to grow in this country, except for a brief dip in the aftermath of Vietnam. It’s as if a gambler had gone on a 60-year losing binge, only to find himself applauded as a winner.

Constant war-making and a militarized Keynesianism created certain kinds of high-paying jobs (though not faintly as many as peaceful economic endeavours would have). Wars and constant preparations for the same also

Just about every weapon
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drove deficit spending since few in Congress wanted to pay for them via tax hikes. As a result, in all those years, as bombs and missiles rained down, wealth continued to flow up to ever more gigantic corporations like Boeing, Raytheon, and Lockheed Martin, places all too ready to hire retired generals to fill their boards.

And here’s another reality: very little of that wealth ever actually trickled down to workers unless they happened to be employed by those weapons makers, which – to steal the names of two of this country’s Hellfire missile-armed drones – have become this society’s predators and reapers. If a pithy slogan were needed here, you might call these the Build Back Better by Bombing years, which, of course, moves us squarely into Orwellian territory.

Speaking of George Orwell, America’s 60-Year War, a losing proposition for the many, proved a distinctly winning one for the few and that wasn’t an accident either. In his book within a book in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Orwell wrote all-too-accurately of permanent war as a calculated way of consuming the products of modern capitalism without generating a higher standard of living for its workers. That, of course, is the definition of a win-win situation for the owners. In his words:

“The essential act of war is de-

struction, not necessarily of human lives, but of the products of human labour. War is a way of shattering to pieces, or pouring into the stratosphere, or sinking in the depths of the sea, materials which might otherwise be used to make the masses too comfortable, and hence, in the long run, too intelligent. Even when weapons of war are not actually destroyed, their manufacture is still a convenient way of expending labour power without producing anything that can be consumed [by the workers].”

War, as Orwell saw it, was a way of making huge sums of money for a few at the expense of the many, who would be left in a state where they simply couldn’t fight back or take power. Ever. Think of such war production and war-making as a legalised form of theft, as Ike recognised in 1953 in his “cross of iron” speech against militarism. The production of weaponry, he declared eight years before he named “the military-industrial complex”, constituted theft from those seeking a better education, affordable health care, safer roads, or indeed any of the fruits of a healthy democracy attuned to the needs of its workers. The problem, as Orwell recognized, was that smarter, healthier workers with greater freedom of choice would be less likely to endure such oppression and exploitation.

And war, as he knew, was also a way to stimulate the economy without stimulating hopes and dreams, a way to create wealth for the few while destroying it for the many. Domestically, the Vietnam War crippled Lyndon Johnson’s plans for the Great Society. The high cost of the failed war on terror and of Pentagon budgets that continue to rise today regardless of results are now cited as arguments against Joe Biden’s “Build Back Better” plan. President

Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal arguably would have never been funded if today's vast military-industrial complex, or even the one in Ike's day, had existed in the 1930s.

As political theorist Crane Brinton noted in *The Anatomy of Revolution*, a healthy and growing middle class, equal parts optimistic and opportunistic, is likely to be open to progressive, even revolutionary ideas. But a stagnant, shrinking, or slipping middle class is likely to prove politically reactionary as pessimism replaces optimism and protectionism replaces opportunity. In this sense, the arrival of Donald Trump in the White House was anything but a mystery and the possibility of an autocratic future no less so.

All those trillions of dollars consumed in wasteful wars have helped foster a creeping pessimism in Americans. A sign of it is the near-total absence of the very idea of peace as a shared possibility for our country. Most Americans simply take it for granted that war or threats of war, having defined our immediate past, will define our future as well. As a result, soaring military budgets are seen not as aberrations, nor even as burdensome, but as unavoidable, even desirable – a sign of national seriousness and global martial superiority.

It should be mind-blowing that, despite the wealth being created (and often destroyed) by the United States and impressive gains in worker productivity, the standard of living for workers hasn't increased significantly since the early 1970s. One thing is certain: it hasn't happened by accident.

For those who profit most from it, America's 60-Year War has indeed been a resounding success, even if also a colossal failure when

Despite the wealth being
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it comes to worker prosperity or democracy. This really shouldn't surprise us. As former President James Madison warned Americans so long ago, no nation can protect its freedoms amid constant warfare. Democracies don't die in darkness; they die in and from war. In case you hadn't noticed (and I know you have), evidence of the approaching death of American democracy is all around us. It's why so many of us are profoundly uneasy. We are, after all, living in a strange new world, worse than that of our parents and grandparents, one whose horizons continue to contract while hope contracts with them.

I'm amazed when I realise that, before his death in 2003, my father predicted this. He was born in 1917, survived the Great Depression by joining Franklin Roosevelt's Civilian Conservation Corps, and worked in factories at night for low pay before being drafted into the Army in World War II. After the war, he would live a modest middle-class life as a firefighter, a union job with decent pay and benefits. Here was the way my dad put it to me: he'd had it tough at the beginning of his life, but easy at the end, while I'd had it easy at the beginning, but I'd have it tough at the end.

He sensed, I think, that the American dream was being betrayed, not by workers like himself, but by corporate elites increasingly consumed by an ever more destructive form of

greed. Events have proven him all too on target, as America has come to be defined by a greed-war for which no armistice, let alone an end, is promised. In 21st-century America, war and the endless preparations for it simply go on and on. Consider it beyond irony that, as this country's corporate, political, and military champions claim they wage war to spread democracy, it withers at home.

And here's what worries me most of all: America's very long war of destruction against relatively weak countries and peoples may be over, or at least reduced to the odd moment of hostilities, but America's leaders, no matter the party, now seem to favour a new cold war against China and now Russia. Incredibly, the old Cold War produced a win that was so sweet, yet so fleeting, that it seems to require a massive do-over.

Promoting war may have worked well for the military-industrial complex when the enemy was thousands of miles away with no capacity for hitting "the homeland", but China and Russia do have that capacity. If a war with China or Russia (or both) comes to pass, it won't be a long one. And count on one thing: America's leaders, corporate, military, and political, won't be able to shrug off the losses by looking at positive balance sheets and profit margins at weapons factories. **CT**

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JOHN FEFFER

Suicide truckers

The ‘Freedom Convoy’ in Canada wants to spread its anti-government, antisocial, and ultimately self-defeating messages far and wide

Once upon a time there were three people in a boat, out in the middle of the sea. It was a beautiful day, and the sea was calm. Two of the people were fishing contentedly.

The third removed a drill from his bag and started to make a hole in the bottom of the boat.

“What are you doing?!” the other two exclaimed in horror.

“It’s none of your business”, the third person replied, continuing to drill. “I’m making the hole underneath my own seat.”

It is a fundamental American principle that all citizens have the inalienable right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. That’s an easy enough principle to uphold if all of us are sitting in our own boats far enough away from everyone else so that our fishing lines don’t get tangled together. If we’re stupid enough or sufficiently self-destructive to sink our own boats, so be it. The only person to suffer is the wielder of the drill.

Hermits, a few lonely survivalists, and those unfortunate enough to be locked in solitary confinement might be able to make the case that their actions affect only themselves.

The rest of us, however, are all in the same boat, and that boat is

called “society”. To live together in this boat, we have to obey certain rules. And one of those is to leave our drills at home in the interests of public health.

The latest incarnation of the suicidal driller is the Canadian trucker who not only refuses to get vaccinated for his or her own good as well as the good of everyone else but has also decided to hold the entire city of Ottawa hostage and block traffic and trade at border crossings between the United States and Canada.

The “Freedom Convoy” began at the end of January with a small number of Canadian truckers protesting a requirement to be vaccinated to transport goods across the border into the United States. The Canadian government has mandated that federal employees and workers in key sectors (law enforcement, health care) be vaccinated against COVID-19. Truckers in general are not required to be vaccinated.

But if they want to cross the border with the United States, they need to get jabbed. That’s not only the Canadian law, it’s the law in the United States, too.

Both laws seem eminently reasonable. Judging by the bad behaviour of some of the protesters in Ot-

tawa – breaking traffic laws, blaring their horns and spewing diesel at all hours, demanding food from homeless shelters, harassing the masked – these are exactly the type of folks you’d expect to drive across the border with a cough and a stuffy nose and infect everyone at a truck stop all the while proclaiming that “it’s none of your business what I do.”

Let’s be clear: these protesters are a minority. Most Canadian truckers – upwards of 90 percent – are vaccinated. Further, the protests are not popular among Canadians: 65 percent of those polled view the truckers as representing a small minority of the selfish. Further, the protests are truly quixotic, for they have persisted even as Ottawa has begun to loosen vaccine restrictions with the receding of the omicron wave.

As for the “evil” vaccine mandates that the truckers oppose, they worked. They contributed to “lifting Canada’s vaccination rate to one of the highest in the world, protecting vulnerable sectors of society such as hospitals and long-term care and helping us achieve one of the lowest rates of death in the developed world”, reports Adam Miller at CBC.

Who can argue with success? Apparently, some can....

The Canadian government ini-



CRY FREEDOM: Trucker demonstrators play street hockey at the February protest in Ottawa.

tially adopted a laissez-faire attitude toward the protesters, issuing a few tickets and hoping that the movement would run out of fuel. When that didn't happen, thanks to supporters on both sides of the border sending them money and diesel, the government of Justin Trudeau moved against the truck blockades. On February 13, police arrested several people and cleared away the rest of the protesters at the Ambassador Bridge in Windsor, Ontario, which is a key economic link to Detroit and the United States.

Not long after this action, Trudeau declared a national emergency, the first such declaration in more than 50 years (Trudeau's father Pierre

invoked an earlier version of the act in 1970 in response to the kidnapping of a government official and a British diplomat). Trudeau now has enhanced powers to end the blockades and the protests that are continuing throughout the country. The emergency declaration coincided with the police arresting 11 people associated with protests in Alberta who had a small arsenal of weapons that they apparently were willing to use to keep their blockade going.

The protests that began with a critique of government overreach have prompted the government to do just that to maintain public or-

der. The Trudeau government has already implemented new financial restrictions to reduce even further the money supply flowing to the protesters.

Some civil libertarians have sided with the truckers. Legal pundit and perennial contrarian Jonathan Turley has championed their free speech and suggested that their acts, like those of the #BlackLivesMatter protests, fall into the same category of "good trouble" that lawmaker John Lewis famously advocated. Turley has it exactly wrong. Lewis was praising activists making personal sacrifices to improve the common good. He was not referring to people like the Canadian truckers, who are

asking all of society to make sacrifices for their own individual good.

If this were just a Canadian matter, it would merit little attention (sorry, neighbour!). But if Canada can experience such a convulsion – moderate, polite Canada – then it does not bode well for the rest of the world.

Alas, even Canada has its intolerant, reactionary minority. The founder of the Proud Boys, Gavin McInnes, is originally from Canada, and white supremacist podcaster Stefan Molyneux, extremist Faith Goldy, and alt-right activist Lauren Southern all live there today. The far right experimented with a trucker convoy in Ottawa two years ago – United We Roll – that supported fossil fuel projects and had links to various hate groups. And now a whole new cadre of right-wing activists is coming to the fore around the current convoy.

Look, it's still Canada. The alt-right People's Party has exactly zero members in parliament. Without any obvious national leaders, the truckers have had to fall back on waving Trump banners. The contagion of the convoy will probably not spread very far in Canada. But it could prove more infectious elsewhere.

It has been a hard sell for right-wing populists to elevate the January 6 rioters to hero status given their treason, their violence against the police, and their calls at the time of the riot to lynch a very right-wing vice president. Truck drivers, on the other hand, come across as the voice of the heartland. As such, the "Freedom Convoy" has become a symbol for anti-vaxxers, the far right, and anti-globalist activists the world over.

In addition to attracting millions of dollars in support from 52,000 US contributors, the "Freedom Convoy" has already spawned US copycats. A group called Convoy to Save Amer-

Like the January 6 insurrectionists, the Canadian truckers took advantage of a city that did not take the threat seriously

ica mobilised protesters at a bridge heading north out of Buffalo in support of the Canadian truckers. And now, spurred on by Donald Trump and his minions, a US convoy of freedom-loving truckers was preparing to converge on Washington, DC, though not likely in time to disrupt Joe Biden's first State of the Union address on March 1.

Such a US convoy has attracted the support of the usual ragtag of right-wing libertarians (like Sen. Rand Paul (R-KY), untethered pundits (like Tucker Carlson), and out-of-work actors (like Ricky Schroder). The bottom line is that the illiberal elite – Wharton-educated Trump, Yale-educated Sen. Josh Hawley (R-MO), Harvard-educated Sen. Tom Cotton (R-AK), Stanford-educated financier Peter Thiel – are always in search of "authentic" voices of the people to mask their rich-boy elitism.

But their timing is off. As the omicron variant fades, so does the urgency of vaccine mandates. The "freedom fever" that has overcome a significant portion of the right-wing fringe – with some libertarians and confused leftists thrown in for diversity – is an opportunistic disease. It prompted millions in the United States and Europe to stage anti-immigration rallies until COVID (or Trump) took the issue off the

table. It mutated into an obsession with paedophilia via QAnon that seems to have fragmented into near-irrelevance. After the 2020 election, it created a manic "anti-steal" movement that has had no real-world impact though it continues to infect the Republican Party.

Like the January 6 insurrectionists, the Canadian truckers took advantage of a city that did not take the threat seriously. But that trick won't work again. Brussels, for instance, cordoned off the city this week from incoming truckers, nipping any vehicle blockade in the bud. Washington now also has sufficient advance warning.

Yet this "freedom fever" hasn't run its course. The Ottawa variant will pass. Other, more powerful mutations will inevitably appear as governments try to impose mandates of one sort or another, particularly in response to climate change. It's no surprise that immense gas-guzzlers are the vehicle of choice to bring an anti-government, anti-regulation, anti-science message to the capitals of the world.

The far right will "keep on truckin'" in its efforts to stop governments – not from building up militaries, launching wars, reinforcing surveillance systems, or abridging the human rights of minority groups but actually, in the case of the pandemic and climate change, acting to improve the common good. Throughout these shenanigans, the far right will be chanting "freedom, freedom", louder and louder, to conceal the sound of the drill boring through the bottom of the boat. **CT**

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Art: Wikipedia.org



Contemporary depiction of South Africa's 1922 Rand Revolt from *Le Petit Journal* newspaper.

TREVOR GRUNDY

When workers battled profit-hungry mine owners

March 1922: The month that Communists joined hands with Afrikaners to fight profit-hungry mine owners in South Africa

1922 was quite a year. In India, Gandhi was sentenced to six years in prison for sedition. In Egypt, Tutankhamun saw daylight for the first time in a few thousand years. Mussolini and 24,000 of his blackshirt followers marched on Rome and in England a little-known poet called TS Eliot wrote The Wasteland. Not to be outdone, South Africa had the Rand Revolt.

The 1922 Rand Revolt has its origin in events that took place thousands of miles away from South Africa in the years that followed the end of the First World War in 1918.

In his book *South Africa – A Modern History*, the historian T.R.H. Davenport tells us that at the end of

1921 deflationary policies in Britain, the USA, and other countries including South Africa, restored the relative value of their currencies at the expense of gold.

As a result, the South African mine-owners found it difficult to face the fall of the gold price because of a marked increase in costs since 1914, and in May 1920 21 mines, about half of the Rand gold industry, employing 10,000 whites and more than 80,000 Africans, were in danger of becoming unprofitable.

The post-war situation was made worse because during the world war, wages for white miners rose in step with the cost of living, while wages for blacks remained static.

In February 1920 a strike broke out after the arrest of two black miners who had the temerity to agitate for a pay increase. Twenty-

one of the country's 35 mines and around 71,000 African workers were involved.

Says Davenport: "It was led mainly by Shangaan and Pedi elements, a number of whom lived outside the compounds and thus had political contact. But despite its widespread nature, and the fact that it was the climax of several years' unrest, the strike was quickly put down".

It is important to remember that this was just three years after the 1917 Russian Revolution. In South Africa and many other parts of the world, long-ignored workers and a growing number of intellectuals believed they wouldn't have to wait long to see the reality of the Biblical and Marxian prophecies about the first coming last and the last coming first.

Communists in South Africa –

most of them English-speaking expatriates – were quick to make political capital of the worsening situation throughout the mining industry, telling indigenous mineworkers how badly they were being treated by the country’s wealthy “Randlords” and “Hoggenheimer” mining house owners. In 1920, 21,455 whites employed on the mines earned a total of £10.64-million, whereas 179,000 blacks earned just £5.96-million.

Faced with economic collapse, the mining houses realised that the annual wage bill was an area in which costs could be cut to meet rising expenditure. The grey area of semi-skilled employment went under the microscope for the first time.

It soon became obvious that there were plenty of blacks with sufficient “know-how” to do jobs reserved for whites. Mining house bosses looked twice at an agreement they’d made with white miners in 1918, an agreement not to change things and keep whites earning wages well above those of their black counterparts.

But in November 1921, in face of the growing economic crisis, the Chamber of Mines gave notice of its intention to abandon the status quo agreement by eliminating a colour bar in any semi-skilled work. As soon as the Chamber of Mines gave notice that it would be abandoning the agreement and would be replacing 2,000 semi-skilled white men with cheap black labour, the white miners reacted.

Their jobs and pay packets were threatened by the removal of the colour bar. Sporadic strikes were launched at the end of 1921 but these did not become widespread until the end of that year.

A report about the Rand Revolt on the website South African History Online says that because of the



WHEN CULTURES MEET: Sandbags are used to barricade the streets as Communists joined forces with Afrikaners to battle greedy mine-owners in Johannesburg in 1922.

large number of mines and men living in and around Fordsburg, Johannesburg, trade unions had become active in this area.

This set the scene for the revolt in Fordsburg. At this time some trade union members were attracted by the spirit of socialism and others became communists. The leader of the Communist Party, W.H. (“Comrade Bill”) Andrews, urged a general strike. Meanwhile, a group of Afrikaner revolutionaries organised commandos under the leadership of the “Federation of Labour.”

Men who saw themselves as red-hot communists now shared a similar goal with men who went on to lay the paving stones that led to the victory of Dr Malan and his National Party in 1948 and the arrival of apartheid.

The New Year (1922) saw a strike on the collieries of the Transvaal, which soon spread to the gold mines of the Reef. By January 10, stoppage of work in mining and allied trades was complete.

The following month, protracted negotiations with the South African Industrial Federation broke down when men under the Action Group umbrella set up barricades.

The *Star* newspaper described

how mob violence spread alarmingly with bands of white men shooting and bludgeoning unoffending Africans and men of mixed race (coloureds) as through they were on a rat hunt.

A general strike was proclaimed on Monday March 6, 1922. Two days later, the strike turned into open revolution as communist/Afrikaner miners attempted to capture Johannesburg.

On March 8, led by semi-skilled Afrikaner miners, white workers attempted to take over the Johannesburg post office and the power station but were met with strong resistance from the police (also mainly Afrikaners).

On March 10, a series of explosions signalled the advance of “Red commandos” and an orgy of violence started. The *SA On Line* report says: “To quell this, the Union Defence Force was called out, as well as the aircraft of the fledgling SAAF and the artillery. By this time, Brakpan was already in the hands of the rebels and pitched battles were raging between the strikers and the police for the control of Benoni and Springs.”

Aeroplanes strafed rebels and bombed the Workers’ Hall at Beno-

ni, as rebels besieged the Brakpan and Benoni police garrisons. At Brixton, 1,500 rebels surrounded 183 policemen and besieged them for 48 hours. From the air, pilots observed the plight of the beleaguered Brixton policemen. Swooping over them, they dropped supplies, and then returned to bomb the rebels. Martial law was proclaimed and burgher commandos were called up from the surrounding districts. Prime Minister General Jan Smuts, who had sided with the mine owners a month earlier, was blamed for allowing the situation to get so out of hand.

On Sunday March 12, military forces and citizens attacked the rebels, taking 2,200 prisoners. Three days later, the artillery bombarded the strikers' stronghold at Fordsburg Square and in the afternoon of March 15 it fell to the government. Before committing suicide, the two Communist leaders Fisher and Spendiff, left a joint note, "We died for what we believe in – The Cause."

In *The Afrikaners - Biography of a People*, Hermann Giliomee, Professor of History at the University of Stellenbosch, says that not all the radical non-Afrikaners workers were dogmatic communists. "They tended to see the strike as a fight between free white labour and black slave labour. They believed that victory alone could prevent white "race suicide."

One of the best remembered symbols of the strike was the banner declaring "Workers of the world unite and fight for a white South Africa." But vague calls for a white South Africa were not popular among a



D.C. Boonzaier, one of the most brilliant cartoonists in South Africa, would have felt quite at home in the Third Reich. His cartoons were inspired by a fierce hatred of the greed of the mining magnates. He often depicted bewildered urban poor whites as scorned and exploited by unscrupulous capitalists, portrayed by a repulsive 'Hoggenheimer' figure. Boonzaier and other cartoonists denied 'Hoggenheimer'; was Jewish but you don't have to be a rocket scientist to get the message.

large section of the strikers, for the capitalist mine-owners and shareholders were also white.

However the centenary of the Rand Revolt is marked in South Africa (March 2022) it should be remembered as a calamity that inflicted suffering on every section of the South African community. At least 200 were killed, and more than 1,000 people were injured, while 15,000 men were put out of work and gold production slumped. In the aftermath, some of the rebels were deported and a few were executed for deeds that amounted to murder.

Smuts was widely criticised for his severe handling of the revolt and was defeated in the 1924 general election, which gave Hertzog's National Party and the Labour Party (supported by urban white Afrikaner workers) an opportunity to form a

pact. And at the end of revolt, white miners were forced to accept the mine owners' terms unconditionally. Gold production increased because of the use of a higher proportion of African labour, along with lower wages for whites, and the introduction of new labour-saving devices.

So did the Rand Revolt do anything to damage apartheid?

Not really, although three important Acts were passed that gave increasing employment opportunities to whites and introduced programme of wider African segregation.

The first was the Industrial Conciliation Act of 1925, the second was the Wage Act and the third was the Mines and Works Amendment Act of 1926 which firmly established the principle of the colour bar

in certain mining jobs.

As some remember a great hinge moment in South African history, others are only too happy to forget.

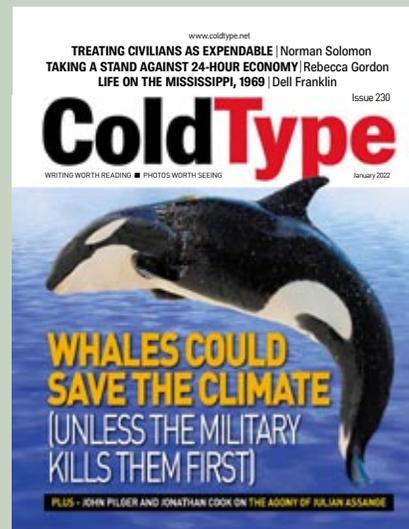
Can you imagine what would have happened if indigenous Communists from all races and Afrikaners from all sections of that strange community had formed an alliance and joined hands and embarked on a class - rather than race - war in South Africa?

Does anyone want to walk that road again today?

Ernest Renan's words from the 19th-century, the age of nation-building in Europe, comes to mind: "Being a nation is to agree about what to forget." **CT**

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