

INSIDE: CUTTING IN LINE WHILE BLACK ● LEG LOST
IN LAGOON ● SNUFFING GRANDMA ● AIDING AND
ABETTING WAR CRIMES ● MY 1933 NIGHTMARE

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A film's tragedy of omissions

John Pilger tells how a new movie distorts the truth about Australia's
complicity in the murder of six journalists in East Timor

The **ColdType** READER



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My 1933 nightmare

David Michael Green is worried about right wing propaganda, its effect on unsophisticated US voters, and what might be the end product of the nonsense that is being preached and believed

The events of recent decades have been ominous. The events of recent weeks more so. It's not so much, I guess, the visage of obese, over-fifty, white men angrily wrecking even the tattered remnants of the democratic process in this country that is most disturbing. We've seen that before.

I think it's the willful ignorance translated into incoherent, and in fact ironically self-defeating, rage that I find most discouraging. Can we really live in a country populated by so many fools, people who can so readily, proudly and belligerently be made into tools of their own destruction? Can the greatest political, economic, cultural and military power on the world's stage possibly be so incredibly backward at its core?

Consider this passage: "The America I know and love is not one in which my parents or my baby with Down Syndrome will have to stand in front of Obama's 'death panel' so his bureaucrats can decide, based on a subjective judgment of their 'level of productivity in society,' whether they are worthy of health care. Such a system is downright evil."

These words were written by a person who might well now be vice-president of the United States, had the economic crash of our time come a few months later. And who, had that in fact transpired, and had

one old man named McCain sometime later then met his actuarially not-improbable death, could have become the American president and leader of the free world.

So, okay, maybe that horror scenario is not so novel. After all, Nixon was in the White House for six years. And what was George W. Bush, really, other than Sarah Palin in trousers?

But what seems to me new about this moment is the political road rage, the thuggishness of masses of Americans who not only are venting about insane nonsense, not only are undermining their own interests acting as marionettes of laughing corporate predators, and not only are taking down democracy around themselves in order to do so, but are in fact also destroying the entire Enlightenment project of rationality-based management of public affairs as well. The single most frightening characteristic of this movement, to my mind, is that fact that no amount of evidence or logic could persuade these folks to abandon the lies they've attached themselves to, like a pit bull clamped to the leg of some poor SOB's pants.

What does it take to get someone to the point that they believe that the US Congress is passing a healthcare reform bill that will allow the government to exterminate seniors? What does it take for them to impute that motive to a president from

Can we really live in a country populated by so many fools, people who can so readily, proudly and belligerently be made into tools of their own destruction?

What do you have to do to humans to get them so stupefied that they believe Obama's Hawaiian birth was some sort of conspiracy, replete with fake 1961 newspaper announcements?

the feeble Democratic Party? And, at that, one of the most Milquetoastian creatures to hit Washington since Hubert Humphrey ran for president acting like he was a guy named Hubert Humphrey? From Minnesota, no less.

What do you have to do to humans to get them so stupefied that they believe Obama's Hawaiian birth was some sort of conspiracy, replete with fake 1961 newspaper announcements? What sort of powerful drugs does one have to be on to make the argument that this rather considerably conservative president is a socialist? And then to call him a fascist in your next breath, blissfully unaware that the chasm separating the two ideologies not only makes them wholly different, but, indeed, oppositional. (You know, like in World War II. Maybe they've even heard of that.)

In fact, this is not a matter of stupidity, though there's loads of that to go around. But I bet that when it comes to finding arcane deductions to insert into their tax forms, these folks are actually quite clever. I bet a lot of them could reel off sports statistics or bible verses that would put your head in a fog. No, it's not stupidity. Something else is going on here.

It's certainly not a matter of factuality, either. It's astonishing to imagine that anyone might perceive the hopelessly flimsy Obama administration – even if it wasn't directly following the folks who brought you the Dick Cheney vision of executive power – as some sort of dictatorial Bonapartist project. Are we even talking about the same human being here? Do they really mean the Obama who keeps trying to be bipartisan while Republicans trash him viciously at every juncture (including even members of Congress questioning the legitimacy of his American birth)? Do they really mean the guy who continually defers to Congress to shape the major legislative initiatives he claims to be in favor of? Are we talking about the dude who lets a handful of Blue Dog Democrats roll him at every turn? This, even after eight years of Bush,

we're supposed to believe is some sort of totalitarian imperial president hell-bent on bringing fascism to America???

No, this isn't about lack of intellect or the remotest correspondence to reality. It seems pretty clear to me that this is almost entirely about fear. This is the empire crashing, and the former master class within it crashing as well. Both are falling to ordinariness and worse. They always were ordinary, of course, and always tools for exploitation by economic predators, but at least back in the day it wasn't such a struggle to be middle class. And, most importantly, they could always feel good by telling each other that at least they were better than the hated bitches, darkies and fags. Oh, and Arabs. Beating them up, literally and figuratively, was (and remains) a good way to remind yourself of that superiority.

But now even that small bit of compensation is gone. Your country can't win a war against a bunch of third world ragheads. Your boss is cutting your salary again. The womenfolk have their own source of income now, and no longer have to put up with your blundering sexual advances to keep a roof over their heads. Perverts are marrying each other left and right. And now – WTF? – there's some Harvard-educated spade in the White House, along with, even worse, his uppity-looking Harvard-educated all-superior-like even spadier woman.

White males challenged

Of course, this has been going on since the 1970s, as America's post-war hegemony began to erode internationally, and within the country white males were being challenged for their domestic dominance as well. These "Reagan Democrats" – i.e., consummately selfish pricks who were happy to take government largesse when it was helping to bring them into the middle class, but then immediately pulled the ladder up behind themselves afterwards, demanding tax cuts – began to lash out politically, responding to any line of crap that would harmonize with their embarrassing victimization trope

by promising a feel-good response offering the muscular bludgeoning of women and dark people, both at home and abroad. In reality, of course, they were voting for a political movement that was talking tough-guy nationalism and scapegoating gays and other out-groups, but purely as a mask for further savaging the prosperity of these very idiot voters supporting their own undoing. In exchange for some cheap rhetoric and the occasional third-world war, they lost their unions, they lost their good jobs to cheap overseas (and, of course, violently non-organized) labor, they lost government benefits like inexpensive higher education, and they lost a society where the gap between the middle class and economic elites wasn't on the order of a standard-issue banana republic.

So what's different today? I think there are big differences – at least of degree – on six fronts.

First, there is a marriage of convenience today between the economic oligarchy and regressive politicians which makes the era of Dwight Eisenhower look like Sweden by comparison. I would say the single most fundamental fact of American politics in our time is that economic elites have walked away from the long-standing grand bargain of the 1930s through the 1970s. They are, simply put, no longer satisfied to be ridiculously wealthy, and now demand to be obscenely so. Instead of looking at the middle class as a source of national pride, it is for them an irritant to see even that small pittance of money in other people's hands. And, thus, they are trying (and succeeding) to reverse the basic deal that brought so much prosperity to so many American families in the mid-twentieth century, seeking a return to the good old days of Herbert Hoover and Calvin Coolidge. Today's Republican Party has become simply an instrument of that process – all the rest is window-dressing for marketing purposes. Perhaps the best exemplar of this imperative was the (so far) unsuccessful play at privatizing Social Security. Wall

Street looks at that sitting mountain range of money – within view, but just beyond reach – in sheer ball-busting frustration. It is one of the few government activities (as opposed to healthcare, military hardware, prisons, etc. etc.) that the overclass hasn't yet been able to profitize. Why should seniors have that money, they growl over brandy and cigars, when billionaires could instead? In short, the whole purpose of the political right has shifted dramatically in the past three decades. Now, it's entirely about the money.

Second, the level of deceit has grown exponentially. Americans are now being told lies of astonishing proportions, as both the 'birther' and 'deather' movements of recent weeks make plain. Before those it was Obama the socialist, Obama the fascist, Obama the sell-out apologist for America, Obama the secret Muslim, Obama the underminer of national security, Obama the pal of terrorists, and so on, and so on. It's to the point now that I feel sorry for satirists (including me). What can you possibly make up to top these amazing idiocies? Obama the Martian imposter of a homo sapien? Obama the JFK assassin? Obama the twentieth 9/11 hijacker? (Who secretly parachuted out at the last moment, and was picked up in the Hudson by a nuclear-powered speedboat driven by Saddam, and then transferred onto a black helicopter that landed minutes later on the roof of the UN!)

Third, the sophistication of presentation has grown dramatically. The right has really learned how to market its nonsense in a barrage that only enhances credibility from repetition. You get it on the radio, on TV, from politicians, at church, on your computer and cell phone, in your mailbox and at the school board meeting. This is a full-court press by clever people who know how to market soap flakes and the human kind as well. There are many examples of this, but one of the most clever has been the defining of wholly corporate center-right political figures such as Bill Clinton or

They are, simply put, no longer satisfied to be ridiculously wealthy, and now demand to be obscenely so. Instead of looking at the middle class as a source of national pride, it is for them an irritant to see even that small pittance of money in other people's hands

STRANGE TIMES

In the past, you could understand why a few crackers in 'Bama, third-grade education and all, could be seduced into blamin' the nigras for their lousy low-rent lives and joining up with the KKK. But look at the audiences today for Limbaugh, Beck, Hannity and the rest of the scary monsters all over television and radio

Barack Obama as extreme leftists, and the defining of the mainstream media as hopelessly biased toward liberalism. Perhaps as much as any other factors, these moves have employed framing and intimidation to effectively eliminate any real progressive ideas from the national political discourse. Bravo, boys. If it all wasn't so sickeningly pernicious, I'd have to give them a standing ovation for cleverness and, sadly, success.

Fourth, the level of credulity is breathtaking. In the past, you could understand why a few crackers in 'Bama, third-grade education and all, could be seduced into blamin' the nigras for their lousy low-rent lives and joining up with the KKK. But look at the audiences today for Limbaugh, Beck, Hannity and the rest of the scary monsters all over television and radio. These are giant crowds of tens of millions, especially collectively counted, and I don't think these people are watching and listening just to laugh at the bozos on the air.

Fifth, speaking of whom, what in the world are these freaks doing on the air? What in the world happened to this country such that all this massive deceit has gone mainstream in the media and the Republi-con Party? It's astonishing today, from the perspective of prior decades, what comes out of the mouths even of leadership figures in one of America's two major political parties, and what goes unchallenged as conventional wisdom. There have always been regressive predators about in American politics, to be sure. But in years past they would have been identified as such and marginalized accordingly. Today, they are more likely to become president or Speaker of the House, and a slavishly obedient media dares not correct even the most obscene lies having the most dangerous consequences (can you say "Iraq"?).

Finally, unlike prior decades, the progressive counter-narrative has all but vanished from the mainstream. The Democratic Party is nothing more than the sorta not-Republican Party, and stands for nothing other than a quieter and more slowly-

unfolding version of the GOP's crimes. Nobody ever votes Democratic anymore. They vote against the Republicans when they rise to their very most noxious worst behavior. We have a president who is supposed to be a radical leftist, and says almost nothing to combat the fascist tide of thuggery now threatening the country. Instead, he continues to seek approval from Republicans who never give it to him, game him at every turn, and repay his conciliatory efforts by asking for investigations into his birth certificate. Senator Chris Dodd responded to recent Reichstag-burning events with this helpful bromide: "It's a challenge, no question about it, and you've got to get out there and make the case. This is not the time for the faint-hearted." After which he continued to lead the very faintest-of-heart in their deafening silence. Even supposedly liberal activist groups don't demand very much anymore, other than the protection of the status quo. For example, there is pretty much no serious player in or out of government right now talking about a single-payer system at this once-per-century occasion of momentous potential change in the American healthcare system.

Violent insanity

The upshot of all this is a predatory-when-not-defunct political system going so far off the rails that it is now migrating from insanity to violent insanity. Just ask your (former?) local abortion provider. Just ask your congressional representative, if you can penetrate the police escort now necessary to keep these people from becoming the victims of mob rule.

This should not be taken lightly. There is huge anger out there, being stoked incessantly by those who profit from it, in one way or another. Most frightening of all, it is, as far as I can see, completely impervious to rational discourse. Suppose you could put a mountain of indisputable evidence in front of the eyes of those who believe Obama is seeking to murder seniors. Does anyone think any of these folks could actu-

ally be persuaded to abandon that shockingly absurd fallacy?

And this is, at the end of the day, the scariest aspect of all concerning the current political moment. America now possesses a massive cohort of people who have simply transcended rational discourse – the sine qua non of democracy, and the real deity worshiped by Enlightenment figures like those who founded the country. Two-and-a-half centuries later, and we’re moving rapidly backwards, toward the seventeenth century, and away from democracy, rule of law and the marketplace of ideas, debated and thoughtfully considered.

Everybody talks about fascism nowadays, not least those on the right who remarkably manage to call Barack Obama a fascist in the same breath as they label him a socialist. The term has been beaten into near meaninglessness from ubiquitousness of application. (Could this be another extremely clever semantics ploy of the right-wing marketing machine, taking the term out of use now that it is legitimately applicable, by over- and ab-using it? Damn, these guys are good.)

Still, I’ve seen the video clips from recent congressional constituent meetings.

I saw the ones from the Sarah Palin rallies in 2008. I remember the 2000 Brooks Brothers riot, one of the most despicable acts in American history, which resulted – because of one of the most cowardly acts in American history – in shutting down vote-counting in Miami. I saw at least two purple-hearted American war heroes turned into national security threats by a team of cowards who avoided war when it was their turn. None of the rabble on the right could make the Grand Canyon size leap to see that for what it plainly was. Today I see the incoherent rage, the senseless foaming at the mouth that not only doesn’t fit reality, but in fact runs completely contrary to it. I see the current attempts to intimidate the government and to shut down the discussion of issues.

And I have to ask, do those people not resemble Brown Shirts more than anything else one can bring to mind?

And is our current political moment not beginning to stink of Berlin, 1933? **CT**

David Michael Green is a professor of political science at Hofstra University in New York. More of his work can be found at his website, www.regressiveantidote.net

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A film's travesty of omissions

John Pilger tells how a new movie distorts the truth about Australia's complicity in the murder of six journalists in East Timor

A holocaust happened in East Timor, telling us more about rapacious Western power, its propaganda and true aims, than even current colonial adventures

On 30 August it was a decade since the people of East Timor defied the genocidal occupiers of their country to take part in a United Nations referendum, voting for their freedom and independence. A “scorched earth” campaign by the Indonesian dictatorship followed, adding to a toll of carnage that had begun 24 years earlier when Indonesia invaded tiny East Timor with the secret support of Australia, Britain and the United States.

According to a committee of the Australian parliament, “at least 200,000” died under the occupation, a third of the population.

Filming undercover in 1993, I found crosses almost everywhere: great black crosses etched against the sky, crosses on peaks, crosses in tiers on the hillsides, crosses beside the road. They littered the earth and crowded the eye.

A holocaust happened in East Timor, telling us more about rapacious Western power, its propaganda and true aims, than even current colonial adventures.

The historical record is unambiguous that the US, Britain and Australia conspired to accept such a scale of bloodshed as the price of securing Southeast Asia's “greatest prize” with its “hoard of natural resources”. Philip Liechty, the senior CIA operations officer in Jakarta at the time of the invasion,

told me, “I saw the intelligence. There were people being herded into school buildings by Indonesian soldiers and the buildings set on fire. The place was a free fire zone ... We sent them everything that you need to fight a major war against somebody who doesn't have any guns. None of that got out ... [The Indonesian dictator] Suharto was given the green light to do what he did.”

Britain supplied Suharto with machine guns and Hawk fighter-bombers which, regardless of fake “assurances”, were used against defenceless East Timorese villages. The critical role was played by Australia. This was Australia's region. During the second world war, the people of East Timor had fought heroically to stop a Japanese invasion of Australia.

Their betrayal was spelled out in a series of leaked cables sent by the Australian ambassador in Jakarta, Richard Woolcott, prior to and during the Indonesian invasion in 1975. Echoing Henry Kissinger, he urged “a pragmatic rather than a principled stand”, reminding his government that it would “more readily” exploit the oil and gas wealth beneath the Timor Sea with Indonesia than with its rightful owners, the East Timorese.

“What Indonesia now looks to from Australia ...,” he wrote as Suharto's special forces slaughtered their way across East Timor, “is some understanding of their at-

titude and possible action to assist public understanding in Australia”.

Two months earlier, Indonesian troops had murdered five newsmen from Australian TV near the East Timorese town of Balibo.

On the day the capital, Dili, was seized, they shot dead a sixth journalist, Roger East, throwing his body into the sea. Australian intelligence had known 12 hours in advance that the journalists in Balibo faced imminent death, and the government did nothing.

Intercepted at the spy base, Defence Signals Directorate (DSD) near Darwin, which supplies US and British intelligence, the warning was suppressed so that it would not expose western governments' part in the conspiracy to invade and the official lie that the journalists had been killed in “crossfire”.

The secretary of the Australian Defence Department, Arthur Tange, a notorious cold warrior, demanded that the government not even inform the journalists' families of their murders. No minister protested to the Indonesians. This criminal connivance is documented in *Death in Balibo, Lies in Canberra*, by Desmond Ball, a renowned intelligence specialist, and Hamish McDonald.

Complicity erased

The Australian government's complicity in the journalists' murder and, above all, in a bloodbath greater proportionally than that perpetrated by Pol Pot in Cambodia has been cut almost entirely from a major new film, *Balibo*, which has begun its international release in Australia.

Claiming to be a “true story”, it is a travesty of omissions. In eight of sixteen drafts of his screenplay, David Williamson, the distinguished Australian playwright, graphically depicted the chain of true events that began with the original radio intercepts by Australian intelligence and went all the way to prime minister Gough

Whitlam, who believed East Timor should be “integrated” into Indonesia.

This is reduced in the film to a fleeting image of Whitlam and Suharto in a newspaper wrapped around fish and chips. Williamson's original script described the effect of the cover up on the families of the murdered journalists and their anger and frustration at being denied information and despair at Canberra's scandalous decision to have the journalists' ashes buried in Jakarta with ambassador Woolcott, the arch apologist, reading the oration. What the government feared if the ashes came home was public outrage directed at the West's client in Jakarta. All this was cut.

The “true story” is largely fictitious. Finely dramatised, acted and located, the film is reminiscent of the genre of Vietnam movies, such as *The Deer Hunter*, which artistically airbrushed the truth of that atrocious war from popular history. Not surprisingly, it has been lauded in the Australian media, which took minimal interest in East Timor's suffering during the long years of Indonesian occupation.

So enamoured of General Suharto was the country's only national daily, the *Australian*, owned by Rupert Murdoch, that its editor-in-chief, Paul Kelly, led Australia's principal newspaper editors to Jakarta to shake the tyrant's hand. There is a photograph of one of them bowing.

I asked Balibo's director, Robert Connolly, why he had cut the original Williamson script and omitted all government complicity. He replied that the film had “generated huge discussion in the media and the Australian government” and in that way “Australia would be best held accountable”. Milan Kundera's truism comes to mind: “The struggle of people against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting.” **CT**

John Pilger will receive the Sydney Peace Prize on 5 November. His latest book, “Freedom Next Time,” is now available in paperback

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Cutting in line while Black

Michael I. Niman tells what hapened when a former student went home to Kennett, in the deep south state of Missouri

While on leave from college in January 2007, Heather Ellis went shopping with her cousin at the local Kennett Wal-Mart. She left in handcuffs, allegedly bleeding

In a perfect world, Heather Ellis would seem like a source of pride for her hometown of Kennett, Mo. As a high school honor student she earned a position on the National Honor Roll and was recognized as a National Achievement Scholar while rounding out her American heartland persona as a cheerleader, a member of the Volleyball and Track teams, the Drama Club, the Spanish Club and her high school band. After graduating high school, she left Kennett, continuing her education at Maryville College and Xavier University, where she was recognized for her leadership abilities.

The problem is that this isn't a perfect world – and some folks in Kennett, Mo., apparently didn't appreciate the return from college of a dignified young black woman with a sense of social justice and an expectation to be treated with dignity and respect.

While on leave from college in January 2007, Heather Ellis went shopping with her cousin at the local Kennett Wal-Mart. She left in handcuffs, allegedly bleeding, after, according to prosecutors, cutting to the front of the checkout line and disturbing the peace of two white Wal-Mart employees.

Now, more than two years later, she's facing trial on multiple felony counts stemming from that fateful January evening –

and the Ku Klux Klan has come to town.

To put this odd prosecution into context, we need to look at Kennett, located in rural Dunklin County, four miles from the Arkansas border in Missouri's "Boot Heel Region." Kennett's official government website boasts a six paragraph "city history," devoting one of those paragraphs to the county's 1862 defection to the Confederacy. Dunklin County is adamantly conservative, with Republicans handing Mike Huckabee an almost three-to-one victory over John McCain.

Today Dunklin County is 89% white and 9% black. Sticking with Missouri's history of never repealing its laws banning marriages between white folks and Asians or blacks, 88% of Dunklin County's voters recently voted for new marriage restrictions, this time aimed at gays.

This is the Dunklin County Heather Ellis returned to from Xavier University for winter break. It was near closing time when Ellis and her cousin David got on line to check out at the Kennett Wal Mart. There were two checkout lanes open. Ellis got on one line, David on the other.

When David's line moved quicker, Ellis claims she moved over and joined him. The Kennett Police Department's arrest report states that Ellis "broke in line" and "walked to the front of the line, to the cash register attendant, apparently because she did not

want to wait in line.”

At least two white customers reportedly objected to Ellis joining David on line. One, according to Ellis, pushed and verbally accosted her. An off-duty Kennett Police officer working as a Wal Mart security guard came over to the line. Ellis claims she told the cashier to go ahead and ring the upset customer out ahead of her. By Ellis’s account however, the cashier, after ringing the upset customer out, refused to ring Ellis out, instead proceeding to ring other customers out. The Wal Mart shift manager walked over and told Ellis to leave the store. By all accounts she refused to leave and demanded to be rung out like the other customers, hence she was charged with trespassing. Ellis subsequently wrote, “I felt like I was part of the civil rights movement – I thought I had traveled in a time capsule and was living in Mississippi in the 1960s.” The guard radioed his fellow police officers. David telephoned his mother. Police and relatives were now en-route to the stand-off.

The police arrived and Ellis was allowed to pay for her goods. According to Ellis, however, the cashier refused to give her the change she was due.

The arresting officer claims that the Wal Mart shift manager demanded Ellis be removed from the store, but that Ellis told him, “I’m not going nowhere until I get my f***ing change back.” Ellis denies the language the arrest report attributes to her, but both she and the police are in agreement that Wal-Mart was withholding her change, with the arresting officer adding, “So I stood by while the cashier attendant handed the belligerent female her change.” “Belligerent” being the core of the “peace disturbance” charge.

In her statement, Ellis wrote that she was hopeful the officers would give her “a little support” with her demand for her change. She added that “they didn’t provide any,” which is corroborated by the arresting officer’s statement that he “stood by” while Ellis was apparently being provoked by the Wal-

Mart cashier, with her manager at her side.

Once outside of the store, according to Ellis’s subsequent complaint, five Kennett police officers proceeded to torment her with racist and misogynist slurs as she and David walked to their car. Ellis claims that while still walking to her car, she suggested to the police that they instead harass “drug dealers and crack heads,” rather than “taxpaying citizens.” The police report claims she refused repeated requests to “calm down” and was “not receptive to these simple requests.” As her aunt arrived by car, the officers arrested Ellis – quite violently, by her account, lifting her off the ground and tossing her into a police car as her aunt helplessly stood by and watched while herself allegedly being threatened with arrest. Heather’s mother arrived at the police station in time to witness what she describes as her daughter being pulled out of the car by her hair and slammed against a wall. Ellis was charged with resisting arrest and two felony counts of assaulting subsequently uninjured law enforcement officers. That was in January 2007.

Charges dismissed

The Dunklin County prosecutor dismissed charges against Ellis in early December of 2007. At this point the family thought their legal nightmare was over. One month later, shortly after New Year’s Day of 2008, however, the prosecutor re-filed charges and issued an arrest warrant and extradition order to take Ellis in as a wanted felon. At press time, Ellis is still facing a zealous prosecution and up to 15 years in a Missouri prison. Friends and relatives, such as her 83-year-old grandmother, claim that they’ve received harassing visits from representatives of the Dunklin County Prosecutor’s Office fishing for dirt on Ellis. The white Wal-Mart customer Ellis accuses of pushing her was never charged. Other white customers and Wal-Mart employees are listed in police reports as the victims of Ellis’s “peace disturbance.”

Ellis and her supporting witnesses claim

As her aunt arrived by car, the officers arrested Ellis – quite violently, by her account, lifting her off the ground and tossing her into a police car as her aunt helplessly stood by and watched while herself allegedly being threatened with arrest

A Kennett police officer handed a rally organizer a Ku Klux Klan business card, then echoed the text of the card by telling her she just received a “social visit” from the KKK and warning her that the next visit would not be social

that she was racially targeted by Kennett Police officers who repeatedly called her a “nigger” and a “bitch” both before and during her arrest. Her narrative also indicates that three Wal-Mart employees apparently mistreated and baited her based on the fact that she was black. Ellis and her cousin David were the only black folks present, with all the Wal-Mart workers and customers, as well as the five Kennett police officers, being white. Ellis’s supporters argue that the zealous two-and-a-half-year prosecution of the case, accusing her of two felony assaults despite the lack of a single injured victim, is also racially motivated. They support their claim with a litany of what they argue are similar racially motivated prosecutions conducted by the Dunklin County prosecutor’s office over the last two decades, which they contrast with weak prosecution and light sentencing of violent white criminals during the same time period.

The Klan wears blue?

In June 2009, the local NAACP chapter organized a rally to protest what they argue is racist police violence directed against Heather Ellis. According to Jesse Bonner, president of the NAACP chapter, “Kennett is still set in the old ways and racism is still strong down here.” According to Bonner, the situation “is mind boggling,” with the black community in Kennett feeling as if they were “back in the 1960s in the middle of the civil rights struggle.”

The depth of the struggle ahead of Kennett’s black residents was driven home, according to Bonner, during the rally when a Kennett police officer handed a rally organizer a Ku Klux Klan business card, then echoed the text of the card by telling her she just received a “social visit” from the KKK and warning her that the next visit would not be social. According to the local newspaper, *The Dunklin Democrat*, Kennett police were just making organizers aware that such cards had been scattered around downtown and that they were actively removing them from the streets. In

essence, the official line has the police investigating Klan activity by turning over their evidence to organizers of a protest against alleged racist police misconduct. Interestingly, there are no current allegations of any Klan activity in the area that doesn’t involve the Kennett Police Department.

Bonner summed up the situation in Kennett, calling it “intolerable” and describing an alarming “tension in the air.” Like Ellis, Bonner had spent considerable time away from what he describes as a racist climate in Kennett, having served nine years in the military. And like Ellis, he became accustomed to being treated with a dignity that he claims black folks in Kennett often don’t experience. His response was to become active with the NAACP and the civil rights movement, which he argues, is still in the midst of a struggle – at least in Kennett. Ellis’s response appears to be the simple demand to receive her change at Wal-Mart.

After the rally, Bonner and the NAACP ignored the supposed KKK warning and joined Ellis’s family and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in calling for an FBI investigation into the Kennett Police Department and the Dunklin County Prosecutor’s office. The American Civil Liberties Union has also become involved, at this point observing the situation, lending support to the Ellis family and contacting the US Justice Department Civil Rights Division and the US Attorney’s Office formally requesting investigations.

Wal-Mart officials have so far refused to comment on the case or clarify their role in the prosecution of Heather Ellis. They won’t answer questions about the actions of their employees in the events leading up to Ellis’s arrest or whether or not they have conducted an investigation into allegations of possible racial bias at their Kennett store. At press time, the Dunklin County Prosecutor is still pursuing felony charges against Ellis. With the charges pending, a school district that offered Ellis a position as a teacher and track coach, withdrew its offer.

CT

Dr. Michael I. Niman is a professor of journalism at Buffalo State College in New York. This article was published by The Progressive Populist, September 1, 2009

My acid trip with Squeaky Fromme

Paul Krassner remembers an adventure with one of Charles Manson's girls

Lynette "Squeaky" Fromme, a member of the Charles Manson family, was released on parole from a federal prison in Texas last month after serving 34 years behind bars for the attempted assassination of President Gerald Ford in 1975. Squeaky did not participate in the Tate/LaBianca killings, which I began investigating in 1971.

Manson was on Death Row – before capital punishment was repealed (and later reinstated, but not retroactively) in California – so I was unable to meet with him. Reporters had to settle for an interview with any prisoner awaiting the gas chamber, and it was unlikely that Charlie would be selected at random for me.

In the course of our correspondence, there was a letter from Manson consisting of a few pages of gibberish about Christ and the Devil, but at one point, right in the middle, he wrote in tiny letters, "Call Squeaky," with her phone number. I called, and we arranged to meet at her apartment in Los Angeles. On an impulse, I brought several tabs of acid with me on the plane.

Squeaky resembled a typical redheaded, freckle-faced waitress who sneaks a few tokes of pot in the lavatory, a regular girl-next-door except perhaps for the unusually challenging nature of her personality, plus the scar of an X that she had gouged and burned into her forehead as a visual re-

minder of her commitment to Charlie. That same symbol also covered the third eyes of her roommates, Manson family members Sandra Good and Brenda McCann.

"We've crossed ourselves out of this entire system," Squeaky explained.

They all had short hairstyles growing in now, after having completely shaved their heads. They continued to sit on the sidewalk near the Hall of Justice every day, like a coven of faithful nuns bearing witness to Manson's martyrdom.

Sandy Good had seen me perform at The Committee Theater in San Francisco a few years previously. Now she told me that when she first met Charlie and people asked her what he was like, she had compared him to Lenny Bruce and me. It was the weirdest compliment I ever got, but I began to understand Manson's peculiar charisma.

With his sardonic rap, mixed with psychedelic drugs and real-life theater games such as "creepy-crawling" and stealing, he had deprogrammed his family from the values of mainstream society, but reprogrammed them with his own perverted philosophy, a cosmic version of the racism perpetuated by the prison system that had served as his family.

Manson had stepped on Sandy's eyeglasses, thrown away her birth control pills, and inculcated her with racist insensibility.

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MANSON'S GIRL

“It certainly levels the high to worry about getting stabbed while fucking the Manson ladies in the bunkhouse at the Spahn Ranch – I’ve found that the only satisfactory position is sitting up, back to the wall, facing the door”

Although she had once been a civil rights activist, she was now asking me to tell John Lennon that he should get rid of Yoko Ono and stay with “his own kind.”

“But,” I said, “they really love each other.”

“If Yoko really loved the Japanese people,” Sandy replied, “she would not want to mix their blood.”

The four of us ingested those little white tablets containing 300 micrograms of LSD, then took a walk to the office of Laurence Merrick, who had been associated with schlock biker exploitation movies as the prerequisite to directing a sensationalist documentary, *Manson*.

Squeaky’s basic vulnerability emerged as she kept pacing around and telling Merrick that she was afraid of him. He didn’t know we were tripping, but he must have sensed the vibes. He may even have gotten a touch of contact high. I engaged him in conversation about movies. We discussed the fascistic implications of *The French Connection*.

He said, “You’re pretty articulate—”

“For a bum,” I finished his sentence, and we laughed.

Next we went to the home of some friends of the family, smoked a few joints of soothing grass, and listened to music. They sang along with the lyrics of “A Horse With No Name” – which I figured was about heroin – “In the desert you can’t remember your name, ‘cause there ain’t no one there to give you no pain.” I was basking in the afterglow of the Moody Blues’ “Om” song when Sandy began to speak of “the gray people” – regular citizens going about their daily business – that she had been observing from her vantage point on the corner near the Hall of Justice.

“We were just sitting there,” she said, “and they were walking along, kind of avoiding us. It’s like watching a live movie in front of you. Sometimes I just wanted to kill the gray people, because that was the only way they would be able to experience the total Now.”

That was an expression that Manson had borrowed from Scientology. When ranch-hand Shorty Shea was killed, he was first tied up, a few of the girls gave him blowjobs, and when he climaxed, his head was chopped off because he had reached the Now. Later, Sandy said, “I didn’t mean it literally about killing the gray people. I was speaking from another dimension.”

She told me that prosecutor Vincent Bugliosi once snarled at her as she kept her vigil outside the courthouse: “We’re gonna get you because you sucked Charlie Manson’s dick.” Bugliosi also accused Squeaky of threatening him during the trial, although reporters who witnessed a confrontation between them on that street-corner heard him threaten to send her to the gas chamber. The girls just sat there on the sidewalk and laughed. They knew that oral-genital relations did not constitute a capital offense.

When we returned to their apartment, Sandy asked if I wanted to take a hot bath. I felt ambivalent. One of the defense attorneys had told me that he participated in a memorable threesome with Squeaky and Sandy, but I had also been told by a reporter, “It certainly levels the high to worry about getting stabbed while fucking the Manson ladies in the bunkhouse at the Spahn Ranch – I’ve found that the only satisfactory position is sitting up, back to the wall, facing the door.”

Visions of the classic shower scene in *Psycho* flashed through my mind, but despite the shrill self-righteousness that infected their True Believer Syndrome, these women had charmed me with their apparent honesty and humor, not to mention their distorted sense of compassion. They sensed my hesitation, and Squeaky, not Sandy, confronted me.

“You’re afraid of me,” she said, “aren’t you?”

“Not really. Should I be?”

Sandy tried to reassure me: “She’s beautiful, Paul. Just look into her eyes. Isn’t she beautiful?”

Squeaky and I stared silently at each other for a while – I recalled that Manson had written, “I never picked up anyone who had not already been discarded by society” – and eventually my eyes began to tear. There were tears in Squeaky’s eyes too. She asked me to try on Charlie’s vest. It felt like a bizarre honor to participate in this family ceremony. The corduroy vest was a solid inch thick with embroidery – snakes and dragons and devilish designs including human hair that had been woven into the multi-colored patterns.

Sandy took her bath, but instead of getting into the tub with her – assuming her invitation had included that – I sat fully dressed on the toilet and we talked, while I tried not to ogle her pert nipples. “What’s that scar on your back?” I asked.

“It’s from a lung operation.”

Later, Brenda asked for another tab of acid to send Manson in prison. She ground it into powder which she glued to the stationery with vegetable dye, adding the notation, “Words fly fast,” explaining that Charlie would know what it meant. She stayed up late that night, writing letters to several prisoners with the dedication of a polygamous war wife.

Squeaky visited me a few times in San Francisco. On the way to lunch one day, she lit a cigarette, and I told her about the

series of advertisements by which women were originally conditioned into smoking: a woman standing next to a man who was smoking; next, a woman saying to the man, “Blow some my way”; and finally a woman smoking her own cigarette. Squeaky simply smiled, said, “Okay,” and dropped her cigarette on the sidewalk, crushing it out with her shoe.

Another time, when I attempted to point out a certain fallacy in her logic, she responded, “Well, what do you expect from me? I’m crazy!”

She told me that she had been beaten up by members of the Mel Lyman family from Boston because she wouldn’t switch her allegiance to them, even though they’d had plans to break Manson out of jail by means of a helicopter while his trial was taking place.

“They’re well organized,” she said.

Squeaky mailed me her drawing in red ink of a woman’s face with a pair of hands coming out of her mouth. Written in script was the song lyric, “Makes me wanna holler, throw up both my hands....” **CT**

Paul Krassner’s latest book is “Who’s to Say What’s Obscene: Politics, Culture & Comedy in America Today”, with a foreword by Arianna Huffington, available at www.paulkrassner.com

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Snuffing grandma

A nation of children roots for the mafia, writes **Joe Bageant**

If insurance corporation profits are one third of the cost of health care, and all insurance corporations do is deliver our money to health care providers for us (or actually, do everything in their power to keep the money for themselves), why do we need insurance companies at all?

Every day I get letters asking me to weigh in on the health care fracas. As if a redneck writer armed with a keyboard, a pack of smokes and all the misinformation and vitriol available on the Internet could contribute anything to the crap storm already in progress. Besides that, my unreasoned but noisy take on this issue is often about as welcome as a fart in a spacesuit. None of which has ever stopped me from making a fool of myself in the past. So here goes.

There ain't any healthcare debate going on, Bubba. What is going on are mob negotiations about insurance, and which mob gets the biggest chunk of our taxpayer dough. The hoo-ha is about the insurance racket, not the delivery of health care to human beings. It's simply another form of extorting the people regarding a fundamental need – health.

Unfortunately, the people have been mesmerized by our theater state's purposefully distracting and dramatic media productions for so long they've been mutated toward helplessness.

Consequently, they are incapable of asking themselves a simple question: If insurance corporation profits are one third of the cost of health care, and all insurance corporations do is deliver our money to health care providers for us (or actually, do everything in their power to keep the money for themselves), why do we need insurance companies at all?

Answer: Because Wall Street gets a big

piece of the action. And nobody messes with the Wall Street Mob (as the bail-out extortion money proved). Better (and worse) presidents have tried. Some made a genuine effort to push universal health care through Congress. Others expressed the desire publicly, but after getting privately muscled by the healthcare industry, decided to back off from the idea. For instance:

Franklin Roosevelt wanted universal healthcare.

Harry Truman wanted universal healthcare.

Dwight Eisenhower wanted universal healthcare.

Richard Nixon wanted universal healthcare.

Lyndon Johnson wanted universal healthcare.

Bill Clinton wanted ... well we can't definitely say ... because he made sure that if the issue blew up on him, which it did, Hillary would be left holding the turd. Is it any wonder that woman gets so snappy at the slightest provocation? First getting left to hold the bag on health care, then the spots on that blue dress ...

Ideological cupcake land

So why did American liberals believe Obama would bring home the healthcare bacon? Because they live in an ideological cupcake land. It's a big neighborhood, a very special place where "Your vote is important," and "by electing the right candidate, you can change our beloved nation."

Most of America lives in this neighborhood, even though they've never personally met, a place where the shrubbery and flowerbeds of "values" and "hope" bloom. Hope that our desires coupled with the efforts of a good and decent president can affect "change."

Evidently these voters never heard the old adage, "Hope in one hand and piss in the other, and see which one fills up first." However, the slaughter of the innocents by the healthcare lobby has pretty much extinguished the political usefulness of the word hope. Nobody, especially Obama, uses it now.

The first on-stage scuffle of the Obama administration, government assured health care, quickly settled down into the familiar scenario of very rich and powerful people in expensive suits "finding middle ground," otherwise known as the status quo. Single payer health care soon became "a consumer government alternative to private insurance," and is now "a system of health cooperatives." Next comes "slightly better health insurance – but not medical services – than before, from the same insurance companies at twice the price; don't worry though, we are increasing your tax load so you can afford it."

The televised screaming matches, having served their purpose, are over now. The presidency and the nation have settled back into the normalcy of the officially sanctioned state consciousness and its curious non-language, one modified and shaped daily by corporate and government symbiosis.

Over generations we've come to internalize this imagistic language, which is quite theatrical when heated up for public consumption and dully bureaucratic when attention is to be avoided. But always it is void of content and any sort of truth. In the corporately managed theater state, it's not whether a thing is true that matters, but how it sounds and looks and what you call it. Call end of life counseling a "death panel," and you've just turned mercy and

choice into one more Great Satan.

In the end though, healthcare American style comes down to the preferences of two elite castes, Congress and corporate powers, neither of which can exist without the other. Corporations need the government to sanction their methods of extracting wealth from the public. Congress needs corporations to finance its campaign chariot races. Right now members of Congress have an excellent chance of putting the arm on healthcare industry lobbyist for some real cash:

Senator Smedley Heathwood: "Oh, I dunno, I'm sort of liking Obama's alternative."

Godzilla Health Care Inc.: "Here, take this suitcase full of gold bullion, call me if you run short. And remember, we've got that 'Life is a preexisting condition' bill coming up in the Senate soon."

Siamese twins, joined at the hip, they share the same goal, preservation of control – the government's social control and the corporations' economic control. And you cannot have one without the other.

Reforming a mafia

Obama got elected on hope of reform, despite that one cannot reform a mafia, only pay increased extortion moneys. He's fortunate that it was not a genuine demand for reform, just hope. Likewise, we're fortunate we did not demand reform because we're not going to get it.

Obama doesn't have to reform the healthcare industry mob. All he has to do is look like he took a shot at it, and hope he's convincing enough. What we've seen is probably his best shot, too. Why not? There is always the off chance it might work, in which case his "presidential legacy" would be assured. And if it doesn't, well, the serious progressives who are screeching mad at him now will still have to vote for him as the incumbent in 2012. Or learn to love somebody like Mitt Romney, Sarah Palin, Mike Huckabee, Jeb Bush, Rick Santorum (take your pick) or some as-yet-unknown

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MOB NEGOTIATIONS

Killing Grandma is far more entertaining to our imaginations than say, guaranteed access to chest screens and blood pressure medicine. Two generations into this national infantilization, it's now the only national life we know – the ideological spectacle made real

the GOP drags out from under the hen house and ballyhoos as a “new face.” Luckily, Dick Cheney is out of the question, barring a coup by the far right wing of the schizophrenic GOP. But still, after Palin, one shudders at the prospects.

Whatever happens, we will not see the Congress stand up against the extortion of the people by the healthcare industry. We will not see even the most ordinary kind of healthcare declared as a human right, as it is in so many other nations. We will see, however, greater access to the public treasury by the insurance corporations.

Every nation in the world is now party to at least one treaty that addresses health as a human right, including the conditions necessary for the delivery of health services. Healthcare is a right under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Hell, even Saddam Hussein provided healthcare.

That Americans cannot grasp this fundamental aspect of human rights (but then, we cannot even get child nutrition, or limiting the number of times you can taser an old lady in an airport, out of the starting gate) and join the civilized world to assure its people of such things is testimony. Testimony that we live in a vacuum exclusive of the accepted standard of mercy and decency common to civilized democratic nations elsewhere. Testimony that even we the citizenry would rather maintain and spread lies than accept truths such as most people in countries with universal healthcare would not ever give it up in favor of the US system.

Mass hallucination

Most of all though, it is testimony that we live under an induced mass hallucination where spectacle replaces facts, information and common sense. In place of actionable information, we are served up screaming red faces ... angry mobs manufactured for TV protesting “government interference in the people’s health care choices.” One must wonder what inchoate anger is really being tapped by the organizers of these strange

“citizen protests.” As usual, the straw boogeyman of socialism is once more invoked. “Oh my god! I’ll have to give up my \$1,100 a month insurance bill, which only pays 80% of my insurance costs AFTER I pay the initial \$5,000 of those costs! If that ain’t Joe Stalin all over again, I don’t know what is! We get the false media drama of “death panels.”

And being captives of spectacle and hyperbole, we friggin love it. The idea of death panels plays to our childish attraction to the extreme and entertaining. Killing Grandma is far more entertaining to our imaginations than say, guaranteed access to chest screens and blood pressure medicine. Two generations into this national infantilization, it’s now the only national life we know – the ideological spectacle made real.

To steal a page from Guy Debord, society has become ideology. We live in an antidialectical false consciousness, imposed at every moment on everyday life as spectacle. We are held in thrall. Our faculty of ordinary encounter has been systematically broken down. In its place we now have our unique social hallucination. Never do we encounter anything directly, yet we get the illusion of encounter. This includes encounter with each other. Anyone who lives in meatspace with his or her fellow Americans could not deny 57 million of them health. In this society no one is any longer capable of recognizing anyone else. Instead, we see others as the screamers at the town hall meetings, or as communists who want to give free health care to illegals and establish death panels. Or as Christian fundamentalists, or as liberals or conservatives. Or as celebrities or as nobodies.

But most importantly, whenever we must come reach any significant agreement as human beings, whether it be about something as globally insignificant as US domestic policy (we are only 6% of the world population, and though it hasn’t soaked in yet to most Americans, we’re also broke and owe the Chinese loan shark a wad) or as significant as global warning,

we immediately cede the field to ideology. We simply don't know how to do anything else.

Ideology has utterly triumphed. It has separated us from ourselves and built itself a home inside our consciousness, from whence it operates now as our reality. There is no going back, only forward. Given that we are a nation of children who prefer to close our eyes and make a hopeful wish with Tinkerbelle, rather than give hope the piss test, then let us hope to high hell. We may as well go for broke. So let us hope that, in going forward, new and unforeseen developments in the national consciousness occur.

Developments that offer an escape from this one so deeply colonized by the corporo-political machinery we created – and which

in turn recreated us. One that will break us loose from enthrallment. Maybe collision with a giant asteroid. Or that Garth Brooks will be barred from making a fifth comeback tour. That's one hope. A consciousness shattering event by American standards. Another hope is for an absolute and total collapse of the system.

At this point, I'll take what I can get.

CT

Joe Bageant is the author of the best selling "Deer Hunting With Jesus: Dispatches from America's Class War" (Random House, 2007) and a frequent contributor to the BBC and other international media. A selection of his writings and commentary from working class Americans may be found at www.JoeBageant.com

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"Not since Orwell and Chomsky has perceived reality been so skilfully revealed in the cause of truth." – John Pilger

NEWSPEAK in the 21st Century

by David Edwards and David Cromwell

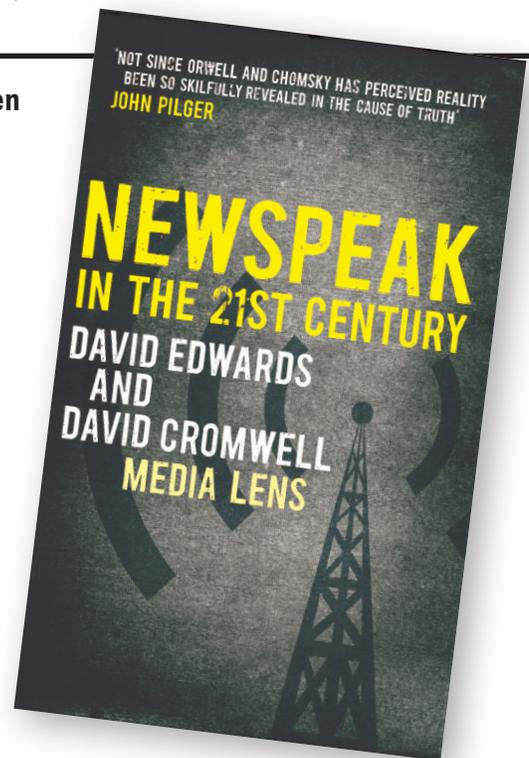
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Since 2001, Media Lens has encouraged thousands of readers to challenge the filtered and distorted version of the world provided by major newspapers and broadcasters. The media responses, collected in Newspeak, are an exposé of the arrogance and servility to power of our leading journalists and editors, starring Andrew Marr, Alan Rusbridger, Roger Alton, Jon Snow, Jeremy Bowen and even George Monbiot.

Picking up where the highly acclaimed and successful **Guardians of Power** (2006) left off, Newspeak is packed with forensic media analysis, revealing the lethal bias in "balanced" reporting. Even the "best" UK media - the Guardian, the Independent, Channel 4 News and the BBC - turn

out to be cheerleaders for government, business and war.

Alongside an A-Z of BBC propaganda and chapters on Iraq and climate change, Newspeak focuses on the demonisation of Iran and Venezuela, the Israel-Palestine conflict, the myth of impartial reporting and the dark art of smearing dissidents.



Leg lost in lagoon

South African author **R.W. Johnson** tells how swimming in an idyllic lagoon almost cost him his life

Eventually I decided I had to see a doctor, but things were so bad that I fell repeatedly while trying to get to the car and had to half-crawl across the garage to get in

In early March, while staying at our holiday cottage in Trafalgar on South Africa's KwaZulu-Natal south coast, I went swimming, as has been my habit for many years, in the idyllic Mpenjathi lagoon. The lagoon looks pretty much the way it did when Vasco da Gama first saw it; the lower south coast and Trafalgar in particular are unspoiled – we frequently get duikers as well as monkeys in our garden.

As I neared the shore I hit my foot painfully on a submerged rock; a quick inspection showed that several toes were bleeding. I waded ashore, got home quickly and showered. The bleeding soon stopped but the next day my whole foot was sore. I tried to ignore it but matters rapidly got worse and soon I was running a fever and felt so ill I was giddy and unsteady on my feet. Eventually I decided I had to see a doctor, but things were so bad that I fell repeatedly while trying to get to the car and had to half-crawl across the garage to get in. How I managed to drive the 12 kilometres to Port Edward remains a mystery – I was lurching all over the road. Arriving at the offices of Dr Chetty, whose board advertises him as a dokotela (Zulu for 'doctor') trained in Mysore, I found several other patients ahead of me but stumbled over to the receptionist's desk and explained that I was seriously ill.

Dr Chetty was wonderful. He immediately laid me on a table, gave me a drip, and in no time at all an ambulance had been arranged to take me to Margate Hospital. It turned out later – a great stroke of luck – that Dr Chetty had once before seen a patient suffering from what I had: necrotising fasciitis, caused by flesh-eating bacteria which rapidly invade and poison the body (the other man had died, as is normal with this disease). Almost certainly the reason the lagoon was polluted with such a deadly organism was to do with the dumping of raw sewage by communities living upriver.

Only months later was I able to Google necrotising fasciitis and find a long list of famous people who died from the disease, usually within 24 or 48 hours of contracting it. The medics at Margate muttered something about amputation but I was too far gone to say more than 'whatever it takes.' My conscious memory stops there – I was too ill and too sedated to participate in the drama that followed.

Flew from Moscow

My wife, Irina, was teaching at Moscow's new School of Economics when she heard the news and straight away flew back to Durban. She rang Margate from the airport and asked whether I was still alive. 'He is critical,' they said. She explained that it would take her 90 minutes to drive to the

hospital: would I still be alive then? ‘He may – or may not be. He’s very, very critical.’ They had amputated the toes on my left foot and then, when the leg continued to swell, amputated my leg at the knee. But the poison had already invaded other parts of my body and all my systems – kidneys, lungs, heart etc – began to switch off. Multiple organ failure: that is, I began to die – that’s what dying is. I came close to fulfilling one of Woody Allen’s ambitions: ‘I don’t mind dying,’ he once said, ‘I just don’t want to be there when it happens.’

My blood pressure kept shrinking to levels where it was thought I must die at any moment. To counter the septicaemia I was shot full of antibiotics and to prevent my blood pressure falling too far I was given adrenalin. When Irina arrived my chances of survival were less than 30 per cent. I rallied twice, only for crises to follow each time. My brother and children flew in and there were anguished discussions about where I should be buried.

My surgeon, Dr Otto, and his colleagues at Margate undoubtedly saved my life. Yet I needed not only a ventilator and a dialysis machine, but also a hyperbaric chamber, which Margate didn’t have, so Irina decided to move me to St Augustine’s Hospital in Durban. I deteriorated further, and my left leg was amputated above the knee. To make things worse, the overdose of adrenalin, though it had saved my heart, had badly damaged the fingers of both hands – on my left hand three fingertips are blackened with dry gangrene and have lost all feeling – and the toes of my right foot. I also had bedsores on my head and bottom. Doctor friends warned Irina not to get her hopes up – the odds against my survival were still daunting.

I drifted in and out of consciousness a number of times but my first memory is of waking up in St Augustine’s intensive care unit in the first week of April with tubes controlling all my functions, unable to talk, and learning for the first time that I was missing a leg. Irina tells me that when it

was explained to me that my leg had gone, I cried, but I have no memory of that. The regular morphine injections gave me the most terrifying and sophisticated nightmares I have ever experienced. Irina, my daughter and brother were all there and I communicated by tracing a spidery scrawl on a pad – my muscles had atrophied so much that I lacked the strength to write a sentence or lift an arm over my head.

Irina was at my bedside all hours of the day and night. I could never have recovered without her. Gradually things got a little better and some of the tubes came out, and then, one wonderful day, the dialysis was over. Better still, I moved out of the ICU – but then had to return because of persistent nausea and vomiting. Happily, this didn’t last long. I began to do more and more physio and exercise to rebuild my muscles; I followed the news and was able to learn about the progress of the book I had just published. Despite or possibly because of my complete inability to do any of the usual promotional work, the book was selling well and there were many nice reviews. That made a real difference.

Evicted by insurance company

After two more months in hospital I was basically evicted by my insurance company, Discovery Health, which refused to continue to pay for me to be there, though I was far from ready to leave. It was a gloomy business realising how threadbare my care policy was, as huge medical bills poured in of which they paid only a fraction. Discovery wanted me to go to a ‘step-down facility’ (which no one at the hospital had ever heard of) in a high-crime area. We decided that if we were thrown out it would be better to go back to the beach cottage at Trafalgar and take our chances.

In the meantime it was sobering to read of the ANC’s proposed new National Health Insurance scheme, which would forcibly conflate the public and private health sectors. Under ANC management the public sector has deteriorated very

To make things worse, the overdose of adrenalin, though it had saved my heart, had badly damaged the fingers of both hands – on my left hand three fingertips are blackened with dry gangrene and have lost all feeling – and the toes of my right foot

Poisoned by journalism schools

Chris Hedges reads a new book on the media and disagrees with the author's arguments and reasoning

I have spent most of my life locked in the embrace of two of the most sanctimonious institutions in America — the church and the press. They each bow down before their self-created holy creeds, never tire of trumpeting their supposed virtues, which they hold up as the highest good, and are blind to their glaring inadequacies and mounting irrelevance. They are also, in a time of seismic cultural change, dying.

Alex S. Jones, in his new book *Losing the News: The Future of the News That Feeds Democracy*, is a believer. Jones, a former reporter for the *New York Times* and the author, along with Susan E. Tift, of *The Trust: The Powerful and Private Family Behind The New York Times*, defends the traditional press and castigates those who fail to acknowledge its contribution to our open society, its high ethical standards and the work and skill that go into producing the news. Jones believes that newspapers are the best guardians of what he calls the “news of verification” as opposed to what he calls the “news of assertion.” The “news of assertion,” he writes, “is mostly on display these days in prime time on cable news channels and in blogs.”

The technology of the Internet, like the earlier technologies of radio and television, is a phantom. It is a convenient and simplistic way to explain a cultural shift.

**LOSING THE NEWS:
The Future of the News
that Feeds Democracy**

Alex Jones
Oxford University Press \$24.95

To limit a discussion of news to technology, as Jones often does, means we simply have to find a way to plug the old bolt of newsprint and traditional reporting into the new machine of the Internet. But what is happening is far more revolutionary. We are entering an age in which the electronic image, endowed with the ability to manufacture its own reality, has thrust us into a state of collective self-delusion. We are embarking on a frightening, post-literate world where we confuse how we are made to feel with knowledge. The death of newsprint is intimately tied to this shifting landscape, including the parallel decline of the publishing industry. And the solution is not to cling to the outdated ethic of newspaper reporting but to adjust this ethic to confront a new cultural landscape.

“Traditional journalists have long believed that this form of fact-based accountability news is the essential food supply of democracy and that without enough of the healthy nourishment, democracy will weaken, sicken, or even fail,” he writes. Jones

To limit a discussion of news to technology, as Jones often does, means we simply have to find a way to plug the old bolt of newsprint and traditional reporting into the new machine of the Internet. But what is happening is far more revolutionary

FLAWED MEDIA

The best journalists in the South were not those who sought balance but those who wrote for the abolitionist papers

concedes that “newspapers that sought to retain readers by investing in their newsrooms have not been able to show that this strategy pays off with a surge in circulation. The argument that quality will keep readers is not one that can easily be demonstrated.” He excoriates the corporate overlords of most newspaper chains for placing profit over content and pleads for a return to the ethic of news as a public trust.

The newspaper elites, like all dying elites, have built ideological and physical monuments to themselves – look at the new \$600 million *New York Times* headquarters – in the same way the pharaohs decided to construct massive pyramids to their own immortality at the very moment Egyptian civilization fell into irrevocable decline. These elites celebrate a past greatness and era of moral probity that never really existed. Those running newspapers remain blind to their own systemic flaws, which saw them serve as propagandists for the invasion of Iraq and consistent apologists for the criminal class on Wall Street. They have proved unable to adjust to a changing landscape and have become objects of ridicule, as *The Daily Show* illustrated when it visited the offices of the *New York Times*.

Blunting truth

Objectivity, the sacred creed that Jones and the old elite hold up as the highest good, has as often been used to blunt truth as disseminate it. The creed of objectivity, as Jones points out, “sprang mostly from the commercial interests of newspaper moguls in the 19th century, who wanted to sell papers to as many people as possible.” Objectivity worked as long as there were two clear, discernible sides, but this bifurcation of reality is in fact quite rare. Reality never quite lends itself to this simplicity. The creed of objectivity, which treats human reality the way the scales of justice treat a court case, has often stymied reporting, especially about the oppressed. It elevates the oppressors and the oppressed to the same moral level and obscures the truth.

This pleases the power elite and mollifies the corporate advertisers but frequently does little for journalism.

The *New York Times's* commitment to “objective” journalism, for example, clouded the reality of the lynching of blacks in the South. Read these stories now and you shudder at their mendacity and heartlessness. More than 4,000 African-American men and women were hanged, shot, mutilated, burned alive or killed in other horrible ways by white mobs between 1880 and 1947. And the articles, while they report the lynching, also report what historians have now found to be lies: that these black men raped white women. The *Times* in an editorial in 1894 decried those who take the law into their own hands. However, the paper wrote, “the crime for which Negroes have frequently been lynched [rape], and occasionally been put to death with frightful tortures, is a crime to which Negroes are particularly prone.” The paper proposed that the states do the hanging legally. Balance becomes, in moments like these, repugnant.

The best journalists in the South were not those who sought balance but those who wrote for the abolitionist papers. “Being caught in the south with an abolitionist paper in the 1830s,” as Jones notes, “much less publishing one, was a crime punishable the first time by imprisonment or the lash. A second offense usually meant death. In 1837, a mob in Alton, Illinois – just across the river from St. Louis – murdered the editor of the *St. Louis Observer*, an abolitionist newspaper.” This is the spirit, shunned by the corporate managers of large newspapers and rejected by “objective” journalists, that we will have to recapture if journalism is to endure. It is the spirit, in an age of precipitous cultural and political decline, of open and direct confrontation, one embodied by the greatest reporters, such as I.F. Stone, who spent most of his career as a pariah because he exhibited the moral autonomy most mainstream reporters lacked. If we champion moral autonomy rather than the

dead creed of objective journalism, we may save the press. This requires replacing the managers of most newspapers with people who have not been poisoned by journalism schools and rigid newspaper stylebooks. It requires an open commitment to reform and justice that defies the corporate state.

The *New York Times's* coverage of the Israeli massacre of Palestinians in Gaza earlier this year is the modern equivalent of the paper's reporting on lynching. A Feb. 3, 2009, article titled "Story of the Gaza war, told by a village," by reporters Ethan Bronner and Sabrina Tavernise, uses the same faux objectivity to obscure truth. Nearly every other paragraph – and to be fair to Bronner and Tavernise the foreign desk probably demanded this – offers the official Israeli version of the attack. Never mind that the Israeli spokesman was not in the village of El Ataba.

This objective style, the heart of modern newspaper reporting, neutralizes the eyewitness testimony. It permits the paper to include sentences such as "The war in Atatra tells the story of Israel's three-week offensive in Gaza, with each side giving very different versions. Palestinians describe Israel's military actions as a massacre and Israelis attribute civilian casualties to a Hamas policy of hiding behind its people." Believe what you want to believe. Palestinians simply become the new "Negroes."

Or look at the coverage about health care. Reporting should begin with the factual understanding that our for-profit health care system is the problem. It should begin with the understanding that when it is destroyed we can debate real alternatives. But objectivity ensures that health insurance corporations, which quite literally profit from human suffering and death and which reward and promote employees for denying costly coverage to people who are ill, have the power and clout to shape how we perceive the debate.

And years from now when readers look back on articles about the suffering of the Palestinians or those denied health care,

if there are any people left who read, they will be as disgusted as we are with the paper's "objective" accounts about lynching.

News organizations are flooded with statistics and facts released by the government and corporations that purport to be objective. These facts often determine what gets written and how we report about daily events. But these statistics and facts – such as the *New York Times* saying in a recent news story that only 10 percent of Americans do not have health care – are partial truths. They let readers draw conclusions that are often false.

Useless standards

The absurd preoccupation with the stock market and the housing market as reliable guides for growth and our living standards is a partial truth. The rise in stock and home values, at least before the current downturn, was not a lie, but the idea that rising stock prices meant rising prosperity was a lie. It is one of the reasons news organizations were as clueless about the looming economic meltdown as they were about the effects of occupying Iraq. The "objective" standards by which they measure society are often useless.

Their approach allows them to report accurate details – often fed to them by public relations firms that work for corporate or political interests – but give a misleading picture of the whole. Truth becomes, through objectivity, the principal vehicle of falsehood. And the traditional press, which as Jones points out adopted "objectivity" not to raise journalism to a higher plane but to increase its profits, is clinging to a flawed system of reporting as corporations, which they had sought to placate, walk away from newsprint.

Papers, at least the ones that did not openly battle for greater justice, initially became very profitable. They did some great reporting although they also filled their pages with a lot of junk. They worked hard to appeal to the elite, and this meant fleeing from confrontations that could alienate

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FLAWED MEDIA

There was a Faustian bargain accepted by newspaper owners that allowed them, for a time, to make good money. This bargain turned reporters into members of the middle class. It made these publishers rich

the established structures of power.

“The public relations industry was born and has boomed,” Jones writes, “in a world of ostensibly objective journalism. The main purpose of PR is to place information favorable to a client in a context of news so that it has more credibility with the public than the same message might have if it were presented in the form of a paid advertisement or from a clearly self-interested source.”

These papers could be an important corrective force in our democracy and could give an important platform to investigative reports. But objectivity hurt as much as it helped. It usually denied a clear and strong voice to the oppressed and obscured important truths. Jones concedes, in a rather chilling aside, that his family newspaper in Greeneville, Tenn., opposed the civil rights movement. This is not a small admission. It lies at the heart of the weakness of the traditional press. And a black resident of Greeneville who grew up during segregation might not share Jones’ nostalgic view of the paper.

There was a Faustian bargain accepted by newspaper owners that allowed them, for a time, to make good money. This bargain turned reporters into members of the middle class. It made these publishers rich. But this era is over and the ethic that sustained it must be demolished if the press is to recover its thunder and importance in American society.

Corporations no longer need newspapers to disseminate their propaganda. The corporations are slashing their advertising and have plunged newspapers into crisis. The huge profit margins of newspapers, once over 20 percent, have given way to steady quarterly declines and losses.

The managerial elite of newspapers have proved morally and intellectually bankrupt. They cloyingly plead with the power elite to save them rather than turn and chart a new course. Katharine Weymouth, the publisher of the *Washington Post*, recently planned to sell pricey tickets to lobbyists and corporate overlords that would allow them to

dine with her and some of her key reporters at salons in her home. She was doing what all publishers are doing, appealing to the elite for salvation. Her proposed salons, when they became public, were canceled, but she no doubt will find other ways to reach out to the powerful and rich. This route means inevitable extinction.

If Weymouth, rather than inviting the heads of the for-profit health care industry and other executives to intimate dinners, unleashed her reporters on that industry and allowed them to report bluntly on it, she would begin to restore the diminished stature of the press. But this kind of courage comes with a financial cost that Weymouth and other publishers appear unwilling to accept.

It is by shattering the creed of objectivity, by standing unapologetically in the swelling ranks of the poor and powerless and challenging corporate power, that journalism will survive. This does not mean that the press should become apologists for the oppressed, who have as many failings as any other class of human beings, or not report honestly. But it does mean that we should rediscover who it is we are speaking for and what we are trying to do. It means that the press should become openly confrontational with the power elite.

This journalism will never bring in huge revenues. It, by its nature, makes corporations and those in power uncomfortable and angry. But it is the only journalism, discounting the celebrity gossip and trivia that masquerade as journalism, that will survive.

The great city newspapers will probably vanish. I will miss them as much as Jones will. The loss of these papers will, as Jones fears, leave huge holes in our public knowledge and weaken our democracy. Reporters will suffer financially. They will struggle without health insurance. They will be unable to send their children to elite colleges. Their home mortgages will be foreclosed. Few young reporters will be able to afford journalism school. Journalists will no lon-

ger be members of the professional class. They will write out of this experience with a clarity that may not be “objective” but will be compelling, real, vibrant and far more truthful.

“My nightmare scenario is one of bankrupt newspapers, news by press release that is thinly disguised advocacy, scattered and ineffectual bands of former journalists and sincere amateurs whose work is left in obscurity,” Jones writes, “and a small cadre of high-priced newsletters that serve as an intelligence service of the rich and powerful.”

But I like to think of the decline differently. I like to think that those reporters from older eras who knew that slavery and segregation were evil, who hated the baton-wielding goons hired to beat striking workers, who reported on inhuman conditions from the mills, factories and mines of the robber barons, who believed that el-

evating the oppressors to the same moral level as the oppressed was indefensible, will be resurrected as a new generation. Reporters, real reporters, will continue to report even as newspapers die and the airwaves are dominated by trash. Their voices may be marginal amid the din of celebrity culture and spectacle. It will not be easy. But a reporter is a personality type. Reporters are curious, brave and wired with an innate need to be heard. And while they may not be the dominant voices in our degraded culture, they will persist – long after Weymouth and most other publishers have become pathetic footnotes – to rescue our trade from oblivion. **CT**

Chris Hedges, who was a newspaper reporter for two decades, most of them with the New York Times, is the author of “Empire of Illusion: The End of Literacy and the Triumph of Spectacle.”

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HURWITT’S EYE

Mark Hurwitz

Western-style Democracy in the bag

Democratically elected President Zelaya is kidnapped in the middle of the night and removed from Honduras by order of powerful business interests despite having the support of the majority of Hondurans



And because of powerful business interests most U.S. politicians vote against including single-payer in the new healthcare plan despite it having the support of the majority of Americans



The Afghanistan gap: Press vs. public

Norman Solomon reminds us that, as with a previous war in Vietnam, the public doesn't share the media's enthusiasm for the continuation of a fight the US seems unable to win

In early 1968, after several years of massive escalation of the Vietnam War, the *Boston Globe* conducted a survey of 39 major US daily newspapers and found that not a single one had editorialized in favor of US withdrawal from Vietnam

Recently, a lot of media stories have compared President Johnson's war in Vietnam and President Obama's war in Afghanistan. The comparisons are often valid, but a key parallel rarely gets mentioned – the media's insistent support for the war even after most of the public has turned against it.

This omission relies on the mythology that the US news media functioned as tough critics of the Vietnam war in real time, a fairy tale so widespread that it routinely masquerades as truth. In fact, overall, the default position of the corporate media is to bond with war policymakers in Washington – insisting for the longest time that the war must go on.

In early 1968, after several years of massive escalation of the Vietnam War, the *Boston Globe* conducted a survey of 39 major US daily newspapers and found that not a single one had editorialized in favor of US withdrawal from Vietnam. While millions of Americans were actively demanding an immediate pullout, such a concept was still viewed as extremely unrealistic by the editorial boards of big daily papers – including the liberal New York Times and Washington Post.

A similar pattern took shape during Washington's protracted war in Iraq. Year after year, the editorial positions of major dailies have been much more supportive of

the US war effort than the American public.

In mid-spring 2004, a *Wall Street Journal/NBC* poll was showing that “one in four Americans say troops should leave Iraq as soon as possible and another 30 percent say they should come home within 18 months.” But as usual, when it came to rejection of staying the war course, the media establishment lagged way behind the populace.

Despite sometimes-withering media criticism of the Bush administration's foreign policy, all of the sizable newspapers steered clear of calling for withdrawal. Many favored sending in even more troops. On May 7, 2004, *Editor & Publisher* headlined a column by the magazine's editor, Greg Mitchell, this way: “When Will the First Major Newspaper Call for a Pullout in Iraq?”

Today, the gap between mainline big media and the grassroots is just as wide. Top policymakers for what has become Obama's Afghanistan war can find their assumptions mirrored in the editorials of the nation's mighty newspapers – at the same time that opinion polls are showing a dramatic trend against the war.

While a recent *ABC News-Washington Post* poll found that 51 percent of the public says the war in Afghanistan isn't worth fighting, the savants who determine big

media's editorial positions insist on staying the course.

Recycled from the repetition-compulsion department, a spate of new hand-wringing editorials has bemoaned the shortcomings of Washington's allied leader in the occupied country. Of course the edifying pitch includes the assertion that the Afghan government and its armed forces must get their act together. (Good help is hard to find.)

"President Obama has rightfully defined success in Afghanistan as essential to America's struggle against Al Qaeda," the *New York Times* editorialized on Aug. 21. Yet Al Qaeda, according to expert assessments, is scarcely present in Afghanistan any more. There are dozens of countries where that terrorist group or other ones could be said to have a much larger presence. Does that mean the US government should be prepared to wage war in all of those countries?

Paragraph after paragraph of the editorial proclaimed what must be done to win the war. It was all boilerplate stuff of the sort that has littered the editorial pages of countless newspapers for many years during one protracted war after another – in Vietnam, in Iraq and in Afghanistan.

When congressional leaders and top administration officials read such editorials, they can take comfort in finding reaffirmed support for their insistence on funding more and more war. If only public opinion would cooperate, there'd be no political problem.

But, increasingly, public opinion is not cooperating. While the media establishment and the political establishment appear to belong to the same pro-war affinity group, the public is shifting to the other side of a widening credibility gap.

In a word, the problem – and the threat for the press and the state – can be summed up as democracy.

Now, one of the pivotal questions is what "liberal" and "progressive" online organizations will do in the coming months. Many are led by people who privately understand that Obama's war escalation is

on track for cascading catastrophes. But they do not want to antagonize the leading Democrats in Washington, who contend that more war in Afghanistan is the only viable political course.

Will that undue deference to the Obama administration continue, despite the growing evidence of disaster and the sinking poll numbers for the war?

A cautionary note for those who assume that the impacts of public opinion will put a brake on the accelerating US war in Afghanistan: That assumption is based on a misunderstanding of how the USA's warfare state really functions.

Under the headline "Someone Tell the President the War Is Over," the *New York Times* columnist Frank Rich wrote: "A president can't stay the course when his own citizens (let alone his own allies) won't stay with him." That was way back in August 2005. <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/08/14/opinion/14rich.html>

(The next day, I wrote a piece headlined "Someone Tell Frank Rich the War Is Not Over.") <http://www.commondreams.org/views05/0815-24.htm>

The war on Vietnam persisted for several horrific years after the polls were showing that most Americans disapproved. The momentum of a large-scale and protracted US war of military occupation is massive and cataclysmic after the engine has really been gunned.

That's one of the most chilling parallels between the wars in Vietnam and Afghanistan. The news media are part of the deadly process. So are the politicians who remain hitched to some expedient calculus. And so are we, to the extent that we go along with the conventional wisdom of the warfare state. **CT**

Norman Solomon is the author of many books including "War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death," which has been adapted into a documentary film. For more information, go to: www.normansolomon.com

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Iran vs Honduras: A subtle difference

David Manning looks at the disparity in the Irish media's reporting of recent events in Iran and Honduras

Readers were spared personal accounts of violence and imprisonment, they were not compelled by footage of youthful street protests and more importantly, they were offered no clear cut narrative of good vs evil, democratic vs autocratic

The furore over Mahmoud Ahmadi-njad's apparent success in the recent Iranian presidential elections tells us a few important things about how the dominant media feels democratic deficiencies, alleged or otherwise, should be reported.

According to the *Irish Times*, Iran's "suffocating theocracy" sustained a crisis of legitimacy "after it lost the trust of millions of Iranians" following the "stolen elections" of 12th June.

Readers were warned that the continued protests against the result posed serious risks for "opposition sympathisers, faced with the prospect of more broken heads, and worse." The regime had "reverted to barbarism" – opting to corroborate the voting slip with the "baton and teargas." Yet, despite this threat of violence, "tens of thousands again returned to the streets in defiance of an interior ministry ban," in a display of "resistance" that has "rocked the country."

Opinion pieces recounted personal stories of the plight of dissenters within the "democratic rebellion": one "highly regarded social scientist" stood "baselessly accused of working with a US research organisation to foment a "velvet revolution" to overthrow the Iranian government," while another was gunned down "collapsing like a young faun shot by poachers" as

she watched street protests.

Clearly the possibility of election fraud is considered a very serious matter, offering, according to the *Irish Times*, a "case study in the argument between interventionists and those who say political change must be allowed to develop autonomously within authoritarian regimes." Important enough then to potentially justify compromising a country's sovereignty. Yet, at the very same time the media magnifying glass was coinciding with US gun sights by focusing on Iran, a much clearer case of repression was occurring in Latin America.

This time though, readers were spared personal accounts of violence and imprisonment, they were not compelled by footage of youthful street protests and more importantly, they were offered no clear cut narrative of good vs evil, democratic vs autocratic. In this instance, anti-democratic violence is somehow mitigated by spurious justification.

Late in June "amid the rattle of gunfire" a military coup overthrew the democratically-elected government of Honduras. The President, Manuel Zelaya, was kidnapped and exiled to Costa Rica. He currently resides across the border from Honduras in Nicaragua, where he is attempting to negotiate the terms of his return.

The military response to ongoing protests that followed the coup has resulted in

a number of confirmed deaths, with scores injured, 45 in just one single day. The OAS, the EU, the UN and numerous world leaders have publicly condemned the coup and sought to put pressure on the coup leaders to relinquish their grip on power and allow the elected president to return.

All this has been reported by the Irish media, in so far as copying and pasting wire stories constitutes reporting. Surprisingly, though, the passion and arguably unfounded certainty of the reporting on Iran is no where in evidence this time round.

The *Irish Times's* first article on the coup led with the following overview: "The Honduran Supreme Court said it had ordered the army to oust Mr Zelaya today because of his unlawful plan to hold a public vote on presidential re-election."

Another *Irish Times* article reported that Zelaya was thrown out of the country after he "upset the army by trying to win re-election." The *Irish Independent*, too, described "a left-winger overthrown by a military-led coup for trying to extend his time in office."

Skewed reporting

From the outset then, the narrative is skewed in favour of the coup leaders: the "Supreme Court" ordered the removal of Mr Zelaya when "fears were confirmed" that the president intended to hold a public vote on term limits. In fact, the vote was "designed to assess the public mood for a constitutional referendum that would allow Honduran presidents to serve more than one term."

It was a constitutional change that Zelaya could not have availed of since even "if the November referendum had been held and passed, the same ballot would have elected a new president and Zelaya would have stepped down in January... The most that could be said is that if a new constitution were eventually approved, Zelaya might have been able to run for a second term at some future date."

Mass protests and mass strikes followed

the coup, causing the military to respond with a violently imposed curfew, under the cover of widespread censorship. Yet far from highlighting the oppressiveness of this prison state control the media reported that the coup leaders had put the country "under lockdown" as they "attempted to return the country to a state of order." RTE, the national TV broadcaster, uncritically voiced the concerns of the coup leaders, now referred to as the "interim government," who initiated the curfew simply to counter "open threats by groups who seek to provoke disturbances and disorder... and to protect the people and their goods."

The *Irish Examiner* went to great lengths to manufacture some semblance of balance in order to justify the existence of an "interim government" as opposed a military backed regime. Describing a "showdown" between sides – the *Examiner* pitted Mr Zelaya's supporters, "mostly the country's poor and middle class" against "the largely well-to-do backers of the coup that ousted him." A more lopsided balancing act would be hard to come by.

On 6th July an attempted return by President Zelaya was scuppered when his plane was refused permission to land. Protesters who had gathered to welcome the exiled president were instead greeted at the main airport in the capital Tegucigalpa by military gunfire, leaving two dead.

Yet, unlike the Iranian "young faun shot by poachers", media reports chose to focus on the excuses for killing unarmed protesters. They were "trying to break down a perimeter fence" and attempting to "storm the runway" explained the *Irish Independent*, devoting only a single sentence to the murdered protesters. RTE, similarly, described how troops "fended off" thousands of Mr Zelaya's supporters.

Even the basic facts of the coup were to be disputed. Not until half way through the first *Irish Times* report on the coup does the reader hear the perspective of the elected leader; even then, his account is somehow put in doubt: "The president told Venezu-

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MEDIA HYPOCRISY

These subtle differences in reporting between Iran and Honduras expose to some small degree how a history of western intervention, delineated by outright support or passive acceptance of countless coups against popular governance, can be repeated over and over without public outrage.

ela-based Telesur television station that he was ‘kidnapped’ by soldiers.” The word ‘kidnapped’ placed in quotation marks, as if a president led by soldiers to plane in his pyjamas and transported out of his own country against his will did not reasonably constitute kidnapping.

The next day the *Irish Times* expanded on the wire story, filling in some gaps, and inadvertently evoking images of an unappreciative Late Late Show holiday winner: “troops came for Mr Zelaya, an ally of socialist Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez, around dawn and took him from his residence.” He was then “whisked away” to Costa Rica.

Even the choice of complementary facts accompanying reports appears to lend misplaced credibility to the ousters, for instance one report ended with the loaded factoid: “Recent opinion polls indicate public support for Mr Zelaya has fallen as low as 30 per cent.”

This marked perhaps the first time opinion polls have been used to justify armed takeover of government, a fact that must have sent shivers up Ireland’s Taoiseach [Prime Minister] Brian Cowen’s spine.

Despite this lacklustre reporting style, the gravity of the situation is not lost on many reporters. The coup is recognised as “a key test for democracy in Latin America.” A simple question, according to US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, of “whether democracy in Honduras continues.” Yet opinion writers have not been as expectedly vocal in calling for US mediation and / or intervention, depending on their political bent. Despite the fact the “United States still has 600 troops stationed at Soto Cano air base,” and more interestingly, that the two generals who led the coup were themselves trained by the US military in the infamous US School of the Americas.

Historical context, too, is limited to vague and misleading comments such as:

“Honduras was a staunch US ally in the 1980s when Washington helped Central American governments fight left-wing guerrillas,” which falsely indicates US support for Central American democracy. In reality this supposedly benevolent alliance was in fact the operation of turning “Honduras into a base for the US attack against [the popular left wing Sandinista government of] Nicaragua.”

US-backed coup

And while journalists go to great pains to mention that Zelaya is a friend of the “radical” “socialist” president and US Latin America region arch-enemy Hugo Chavez, they somehow fail to mention the US backed attempt to oust Chavez in 2002.

These subtle differences in reporting between Iran and Honduras expose to some small degree how a history of western intervention, delineated by outright support or passive acceptance of countless coups against popular governance, can be repeated over and over without public outrage. A nuance that is best summed up, again with continuing predictability, by “the authoritative and independent commentator and analyst on important events,” the *Irish Times*: “There is a conflict of rights at stake. Which one should have precedence? – defending the existing single four-year term or allowing an existing president to sound out voters’ opinions on making a constitutional amendment so that he can seek a second one?”

Clearly then, if the ‘paper of record’ deems that a proposed constitutional amendment paired with low opinion ratings spells military coup, Brian Cowen should really be packing for a few weeks in the sun. **CT**

David Manning is co-editor of MediaBite, a Dublin-based media watchdog – www.mediabite.org – and a contributor to the Irish Left Review

Covering for Cheney: The Post and torture

Ray McGovern on the *Washington Post's* persistence in highlighting the 'successes' of waterboarding and other forms of torture

EXTRA! Read all about it in the *Washington Post*: Torture worked; Cheney and torture practitioners vindicated; morale at CIA harmed.

It seems coverage of the Bush administration's "war on terror" has been put back on track by the editors of the *Washington Post* and their "sources," who appear determined to highlight the supposed successes of waterboarding and other forms of torture.

At the end of August, the *Post* markedly increased its effort to "catapult the propaganda" (to borrow a phrase from former President George W. Bush). When the wind is still, Nazi propaganda chief, Joseph Goebbels can be heard cheering from the grave.

Frankly, I was wondering when this return to form would happen at the *Post*. I was surprised to see *Post* journalists recently losing their grip, so to speak, and falling into the practice of reporting real facts – like the sickening revelations in the long-suppressed CIA Inspector General's report on torture.

Apparently they have now been reminded of the biases of the newspaper's top brass, forever justifying the hardnosed "realism" of the Bush administration as it approved brutal and perverse methods for stripping the "bad guys" of their clothes, their dignity, their sense of self – all to pro-

tect America.

Hooded, threatened with a cocked gun and an electric drill, deprived of sleep for long periods, beaten, kept naked or dressed in diapers, forced into painful stress positions, locked in tiny boxes and subjected to the near-drowning of waterboarding, the terrorism suspects were supposed to be terrorized into what the CIA psychologists called "learned helplessness."

And to read the *Washington Post's* account, it all worked, transforming alleged 9/11 mastermind Khalid Sheik Mohammed from a "truculent enemy" into what the CIA considered its "preeminent source" on al-Qaeda.

The *Post* made the story of this transformation – "How a Detainee Became an Asset: Sept. 11 Plotter Cooperated After Waterboarding" – its lead story on Saturday, August 29. To drive home the central point, the *Post* declared that "this reversal occurred after Mohammed was subjected to simulated drowning and prolonged sleep deprivation, among other harsh interrogation techniques."

But the story contained some weird contradictions that might have given pause to a less credulous – or less biased – newspaper. For example, the *Post's* two unnamed sources who told the tale of Mohammed's transformation depicted him as anything but a broken man suffering from "learned

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TORTURED JOURNALISM

It turns out that many of these “ex-CIA officials,” cited in the *Post* article, are folks with the most to lose if Attorney General Eric Holder starts unraveling the sordid tale of torture, assassination, kidnapping, you name it over which they had purview and in which they were involved

helplessness,” terrified of more torture. Instead, Mohammed, known as KSM, is described as holding forth like a professor in a lecture hall, pontificating about Greek philosophy and criticizing his American students for their shortcomings. “In one instance, he scolded a listener for poor note-taking and his inability to recall details of an earlier lecture,” the *Post* wrote.

So, instead of a cowering figure induced to talk out of fear that he might be subjected to a 184th session of waterboarding, Mohammed appears to be a boastful narcissist who views himself as a historic figure – exactly the sort of interrogation subject who would be susceptible to flattery and other successful, non-violent strategies favored by experienced FBI interrogators.

If the “learned helplessness” had worked – and was the reason Mohammed was talking – would he really have risked scolding an American interrogator, like an angry teacher chastising an inattentive schoolboy?

However, that is not a question the *Post* asks or its editors apparently want the readers to think much about. The story is written as if the *Post* writers Peter Finn, Joby Warrick and Julie Tate are seeking expiation for their sins of writing fact-and-document-based stories in recent days.

Back to the steno pool

The *Post* management, it seems, is determined to return to its past practice of acting as stenographers for the CIA’s PR machine. On August 30, the *Post* had its steno pad out again, taking dictation about how torture investigations were harming CIA morale. The story, titled “Ex-Intelligence Officials Cite Low Spirits at CIA: IG Report’s Release, Looming Investigation Into Detainee Interrogations Blamed” by Walter Pincus and Joby Warrick, filled nearly half of Page Two.

The CIA is the only agency of the U.S. government that elicits the *Post*’s hand-wringing concern about its morale and “spirits.” It’s as if CIA officers were fragile

Southern belles at risk of being overcome by “the vapors” if a harsh word is uttered in the parlor.

It’s hard to recall any similar concern expressed by the *Post* over poor morale at other government offices, say, the Environmental Protection Agency when President George W. Bush was ignoring evidence of global warming or the Justice Department when Attorney General Alberto Gonzales was firing prosecutors for not going after Democrats.

But the delicate “spirits” of the CIA work force are something that the *Post* never ceases to worry about. So Pincus and Warrick ran to some “ex-CIA officials” to gauge the morale damage that the torture disclosures had caused.

It turns out that many of these “ex-CIA officials,” cited in the *Post* article, are folks with the most to lose if Attorney General Eric Holder starts unraveling the sordid tale of torture, assassination, kidnapping, you name it over which they had purview and in which they were involved.

The *Post* article was accompanied by a photo of A.B. “Buzzy” Krongard, who laments that “morale at the agency is down to minus 50.” To their credit, I suppose, Pincus and Warrick do note that Krongard was the “third-ranking CIA official at the time of the use of harsh practices,” but there is no specific statement that Krongard and other worriers about CIA morale just might have some huge self-interest in discouraging investigations.

Post readers are not alerted, for instance, to Krongard’s history as the official who gave Blackwater, the ex-CIA-official-dominated firm sometimes called Assassination Inc., its initial contract, nor that he joined Blackwater’s Board of Directors after retiring from the CIA. Nor that with the help of his brother, the State Department’s Inspector General, he helped block congressional inquiries into alleged Blackwater illegalities.

Instead, the *Post* treats Krongard as a reliable source and the Obama administra-

tion's release of torture-related documents as a policy blunder.

"One former senior official said President Obama was warned in December that release of the Justice Department memos sanctioning harsh interrogation methods would create an uproar that could not be contained," the Post reported, quoting the official as saying:

"They [the White House] thought that it would be a two-day story; they were wrong."

"Warning" the President of the United States! Who's running this country, anyway?

Loving the inquisition

On the August 29 front-page story, the *Post* was even more obvious about which side it was taking on the issue of torture and the efficacy of using brutal methods to extract information.

Warming the cockles of Dick Cheney's heart, the *Washington Post* was "confirming" that waterboarding and sleep deprivation worked – just as we were told by Sen. Lindsey Graham, Republican of South Carolina, on May 13 at a hearing on detainee interrogation that included an implicit tip of the hat to all manner of infamous torture past: "The Vice President [Cheney] is suggesting that there was good information obtained, and I'd like the committee to get that information. Let's have both sides of the story here. I mean, one of the reasons these techniques have survived for about 500 years is apparently they work."

Five hundred years takes us proudly back to the Spanish Inquisition when the cardinals at least had no problem calling a spade a spade. Their term for waterboarding was *tortura del agua*. No euphemism like "enhanced interrogation technique" or EIT, for short.

As for Cheney's earlier claim that two CIA documents would prove that the EITs were effective – the two were released last week, and they prove nothing of the kind. Together with others, they do indicate that

detainees like KSM provided important intelligence on al-Qaeda and its plans. But they fail to support the contention that it was the use of harsh techniques (as opposed to traditional interrogation methods) that yielded the information.

The *Washington Independent's* Spencer Ackerman, who has been covering all this like a blanket, notes that the two documents actually suggest that non-abusive interrogation techniques were primarily responsible for eliciting the most important information cited in the two documents.

In short, Cheney is no closer to proving that "torture works," than he was before the release of those two documents to which he gave so much fanfare. Indeed, given how the two fizzled out, he is now farther away from making that case, except in the eyes of senior editors at the *Washington Post* and other outlets of the Fawning Corporate Media (FCM).

Water and sleep

For years now, the FCM has largely succeeded in trivializing "water torture." So who's afraid of a little water? Don't those Muslims know how to hold their breath, like we do at Rehoboth? And besides, we waterboarded our own troops in training, without adverse effect. Are Americans so dumbed down that they cannot see the difference between a U.S. military training exercise, during which a simple gesture will stop the torture, and the real thing?

And how well did torture work on KSM? If one examines the record more carefully, it turns out that the alleged 9/11 mastermind was uncooperative and deceptive during the torture. When U.S. authorities finally let KSM be interviewed by the Red Cross, he said this (which was shoehorned onto page 6 of the *Post*, presumably to provide the article some semblance of "balance"): "During the harshest period of my interrogation I gave a lot of false information in order to satisfy what I believed the interrogators wished to hear in order to make the ill-treatment stop. I later told interro-

In short, Cheney is no closer to proving that "torture works," than he was before the release of those two documents to which he gave so much fanfare

TORTURED JOURNALISM

One hears things like: We've all gone without sleep – preparing for exams, for example. We know what it's like, and it's no big deal. And, anyway, these are bad guys. Not so fast. It's difficult to say that sleep deprivation is worse than waterboarding, but it is just as torturous

gators that their methods were stupid and counterproductive. “I'm sure that the false information I was forced to invent in order to make the ill-treatment stop wasted a lot of their time.”

Ask FBI investigators and others sent on wild goose chases to check out such “information”; in candid moments they will corroborate what KSM has to say on that key point.

Getting what you want

It boggles the mind what information one can extract by torture. A U.S. Army interrogator with long experience in conducting interrogations, and in training others in traditional Army techniques, recently told me this: “Give me no restrictions, and allow me to use non-traditional techniques, and I promise you I can get a detainee to confess to having launched, solo, not one but two successful suicide bombings!”

The FCM's dismissive attitude toward waterboarding goes in spades for sleep deprivation. One hears things like: We've all gone without sleep – preparing for exams, for example. We know what it's like, and it's no big deal. And, anyway, these are bad guys. Not so fast. It's difficult to say that sleep deprivation is worse than waterboarding, but it is just as torturous. Much can be learned from Darius Rejali, a scholar who is one of the world's leading thinkers and writers on torture and its consequences. The paragraphs that follow are drawn largely from his book, *Torture and Democracy*.

Israeli terrorist and later prime minister, Menachem Begin, describing the sleep deprivation inflicted on him when he was a prisoner of the KGB as a young man, observed that anyone subjected to this condition knows that “not even hunger or thirst are comparable to it.”

Experts now agree that sleep deprivation is a basic, and potentially dangerous, physiological-need state, similar to hunger or thirst and as basic to survival. Sleep-deprived people are highly suggestible (a condition not unlike drunkenness or hyp-

nosis), making sleep deprivation ideal for inducing false confessions.

Rejali gives a 15th-century Italian lawyer “credit” for introducing this technique into the Inquisition's toolkit. But Inquisitional interrogators soon became aware of the unreliable character of information acquired through sleep deprivation, and the preferred technique became the rack.

The Gestapo used sleep deprivation among other “Verschärfte Vernehmungen” – sharpened interrogation techniques. Against whom? You guessed it; against “Terroristen.”

Sleep deprivation also was in the quiver of British interrogators in Northern Ireland in the 1970s and is still included in current Israeli procedures. And after 9/11, the CIA and the military were authorized to take the technique out of mothballs and apply it in interrogations — with terrific results, if you believe Page One of the *Washington Post*.

For additional context, it may be worth citing what Rejali says about the experience of using sleep deprivation in the U.S.: “American courts finally barred sleep deprivation for domestic policing during World War II. In 1941 Tennessee police subjected one suspect to sleep deprivation and interrogation for thirty-six hours until he confessed he had killed his wife.... “In 1944, the Supreme Court not only tossed out the confession as unacceptable in any democratic society,” but drew a link between sleep deprivation and “the practices of certain foreign nations dedicated to... physical or mental torture.”

Political Correctness

Khalid Sheik Mohammed was captured as the writers of the 9/11 Commission were preparing their report. If we think he was the mastermind behind the attacks, then ask him why he did it, was their understandable request. The answer was quite telling.

Mohammed had attended North Carolina A&T in Greensboro; thus, initial spec-

ulation regarding his motive centered on the supposition that he had suffered some gross indignity accounting for his hatred for America. Not so. Rather, as the 9/11 Commission reported on page 147: “By his own account, KSM’s animus toward the United States stemmed not from his experience there as a student, but rather from his violent disagreement with U.S. foreign policy favoring Israel.”

The August 31 *Washington Post* article offers a revisionist view. It seems Mohammed’s initial response was found to be politically incorrect by implicating “U.S. foreign policy favoring Israel.” Perhaps after a few more sessions of waterboarding or a few more days of sleep deprivation he came up with a more acceptable explanation of his motivation. Or perhaps the *Post* has been selective in picking and choosing among the various things that came out of reports from his interrogation.

In any event, without so much as a word as to why his story has changed, the *Post* now would have us believe that the following is the real reason: “KSM’s limited and negative experience in the United States – which included a brief jail stay because of unpaid bills – almost certainly helped propel him on his path to becoming a terrorist,” according to the [CIA] intelligence summary. “He stated that his contact with Americans, while minimal, confirmed his view that the United States was a debauched and racist country.”

A telling revision, indeed.

But let’s also look for a moment at “de-

bauched and racist” on its own merits. Could the hated Khalid Sheik Mohammed be speaking some truth here? If he and other Middle Eastern Muslims looked and dressed more like us, would it be so easy to demonize them – and to torture them?

Would the *Washington Post*’s editors be so supportive if representatives of a more favored ethnic or religious group were stripped naked before members of the opposite sex, put in diapers, immobilized with shackles in stress positions for long periods, denied sleep and made to soil themselves?

In my view, racism is very much at play here.

And “debauched?” Just read the CIA Inspector General report and decide for yourself.

And please: don’t stop with a “Tsk, tsk; those interrogators were certainly debauched.” We – all of us – let it happen. We – all of us – need to ensure that our country does not descend again into such depravity.

The only way to do that is to hold ALL the rotten apples accountable, from the top to the bottom of the proverbial barrel. **CT**

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Gone fishing

George Monbiot tells how he set out to catch all his own fish, and live the wild life again

After years away from the water, I was ready to start fishing again, but I wanted to catch only fish I could eat

Kayaking saved me. Living in Oxford, without a car, I felt throttled by the ringroad, the city's concrete necklace. I was heartsick, dried up, deprived of nature. At weekends I would explore the city's green spaces or cycle far out into the countryside. But I found only sterility: pasteurised parks, perfect rows of rape and wheat, woods picked clean by pheasants.

Walking beside a stream one day, I realised that the land might be dead, but the water was alive. I bought an old fibreglass kayak for a tenner and dragged it down to the Thames. As soon as I sat in it I felt I belonged there.

Oxford was built on a swamp. Though wrung from the ground, the water is still there. It has been forced into a labyrinth of drains and feeders, most of them unknown, overgrown, blocked by rubbish and fallen trees. I set out to explore them all. I pushed through rush-choked channels scarcely wider than my boat. I found backwaters no one had navigated for years. I stumbled across cannabis gardens and camouflaged shelters where fugitives lived. I dragged my kayak out of the water and through the branches of fallen trees. I would come home covered in mud and duckweed, scratched to ribbons and thrilled to be alive. I saw mink, roe deer, water rails, kingfishers, dabchicks, sandpipers, the debris of fish and clams

eaten by otters, all within the bounds of the city.

From the water, everything looked different. Curtained by trees, fish-shadowed, a channel between the park and ride and the dump became a tributary of the Amazon. Abandoned behind railway fences, buried on the edge of playing fields, anonymously skirting business units, I found places I had never imagined possible, a parallel world as different as the other Oxford dreamt up by Philip Pullman.

In these hidden corners I also saw great shoals of chub and bream, a giant carp slurping at scum in a neglected drain, barbel furrowing away upriver. But I wasn't interested. After years away from the water, I was ready to start fishing again, but I wanted to catch only fish I could eat.

It was fishing that cemented my love of the natural world. When I was a boy I would sit on the riverbank, seldom catching much, gazing at the insects and the birds. Even more than trying to catch them, I loved watching the fish. The thrill of seeing a vast lazy tail appear beneath a sunken tree, or the dark backs of dace flicking in and out of the shadows, the long head of a pike emerging from the darkness – this was all the world I needed. While other children fantasised about Space or treasure islands, I submerged myself in the dim green cosmos beneath the water, guessed

at but never fathomed. But now there was something else I wanted: a way out of the planet-eating food economy.

I love food, but I hate the way it is produced. There used to be a surplus of allotments in Oxford: I took on five and became an urban smallholder. But I had more or less given up eating fish. I knew that commercial fishermen possess a mysterious power over governments, which ensures that quotas are set too high, reefs can be smashed by beam trawlers, dolphins, turtles and albatrosses snared and discarded as bycatch. I knew that to participate in this trade is to help destroy the ecosystems I love. If I was to eat fish, I would have to catch my own.

I was assisted by another environmental crisis. Someone had released red signal crayfish into the Thames, and they had proliferated, wrecking the ecosystem. But perch, which have firm, clean flesh a bit like sea bream, loved them. In some of the places I found, they hung under the trees in great lunking shoals of two- or three-pounders. I bought a tiny telescopic rod and some little gold spinners. Wherever I found a deep pool, I would tie my boat to an overhanging tree and cast into the gloomiest places. I soon began to catch fish on every trip.

Cruised like a tractor

One day I was fishing in my favourite spot, but the perch had vanished. I cast beneath the far bank, and my spinner became snagged. I tugged to try to extract it and the thing I had hooked cruised off like a tractor: slow but unstoppable. My ridiculous little fishing rod curved down into the water. When at last the monster's head broke the surface, I saw that its eyes were six inches apart. Eventually I dragged the biggest pike I had ever seen into the boat. It had teeth like daggers and filled the cockpit. I returned it to the water as quickly as possible.

It was then that I realised what a kayak could do. You can launch it from anywhere

and catch just about anything. I found that some kayakers had been catching tuna, sharks and giant skate from their boats. I didn't want to hunt those species, but I did want to become self-sufficient in fish. Three years ago, disaffected with urban life, I moved to mid-Wales. I started to put my plan into effect.

On a good day, a mile out to sea, you can see the whole of Cardigan Bay. It's smooth, shallow and sandy, and almost devoid of sheltered places from which to launch. But apart from a few crabbers and a small but very destructive fleet of scallop dredgers, there's scarcely any commercial fishing here.

I bought a sea kayak specially rigged for fishing and began to investigate. There are plenty of species here – from whitebait to basking sharks – but I wanted to pursue only those whose numbers are high. I might take the occasional bass or bream or plaice, but I would not subsist on them.

Mackerel still pour into the bay in summer. When you can find them, they are easy to catch. There are big shoals of herring in the winter, though kayak fishing is more dangerous then. The reefs hold plenty of small pollock. The best species to hunt would be dogfish: a small scavenging shark whose population has exploded all round the coast, thanks to the offal and bycatch dumped by the fishing industry. But dogfish have green eyes like cats, and you must hit them again and again to kill them; I cannot fish for them. There is one other species which no one seeks, even though it cooks very nicely. It's the most dangerous animal in British waters. It has formed a fair portion of my diet over the past three seasons - I'll explain in a moment.

My challenge, though, was to find a common fish that I can pursue all the year round. There is one obvious candidate. The estuaries swarm with grey mullet. They live here all the time and hardly anyone fishes for them. There's a reason for this: they are widely considered impossible to catch.

The first two summers were terrible.

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FINDING SANCTUARY

Every year a few hundred people have the misfortune to tread on a lesser weever. It's a small fish which buries itself at the water's edge at low tide. When it feels threatened it raises its dorsal fin, which contains three spikes, grooved and charged with poison. The pain is said to be excruciating – rather like a scorpion sting

Rain and gales lashed the coast. On the rare days when the wind dropped, the swell was often big enough to roll the boat over even far out at sea. This isn't particularly dangerous if you're a good swimmer and keep your head, but it made fishing almost impossible.

I soon discovered that the kayak fisher in Cardigan Bay faces three hazards. The first is an offshore wind. You can make way against a force 4 or 5, but not for long and not if it strengthens. I was prepared for this and haven't yet been caught out.

The second is landing. Keeping a surf kayak perpendicular to the waves is easy. But fishing kayaks are much longer, which means that the stern gets knocked round by the breaking waves and the boat skates. In even a moderate sea you're likely to get tipped. That's fine as long as you know what to do: duck down and flatten yourself on the sand until the kayak washes over you. If you stand up too soon, the next wave will bring the boat down on your head. But if you wipe out in a heavy sea you don't have time to duck. Once my boat buried its nose in the shingle then somersaulted over me, almost knocking me out. After that I resolved not to try fishing in a major swell again.

The third hazard is the most interesting, and the most dangerous. I came across it on my first fishing trip, just half a mile off the coast. I had made a frame out of hazel wood, bought some nylon twine and some feathers, and set out to catch mackerel. I found the fish almost straight away and started bringing them up in ones and twos, iridescent, tiger-striped, fast, fierce and stupid. Then I hooked something which felt different.

While the mackerel dashed around crazily, this thing simply stayed down and shook its head. You could feel the vibrations all the way up the line. I brought it to the surface and saw that it was about 18 inches long and thin – almost eel-like – and mottled brown and white. I had no idea what it was. As I lifted it out of the

water it started thrashing madly. I swung it in towards my free hand, but just before I grabbed it some ancient alarm, long buried in the basal ganglia, went off. I dropped the fish on the boat and, pulling up my bare feet, studied it as it rattled around the deck. I thought I knew every species in British waters, but I had never seen anything like this. Fins ran the length of its body, shimmering purple and green. It had a snake's stripes on its flanks, bug eyes on the top of its head and a huge, upturned mouth. Suddenly, from some long-forgotten book or poster, the name swam into my mind.

You might have heard of its nearest relative. Every year a few hundred people have the misfortune to tread on a lesser weever. It's a small fish which buries itself at the water's edge at low tide. When it feels threatened it raises its dorsal fin, which contains three spikes, grooved and charged with poison. The pain is said to be excruciating – rather like a scorpion sting – and can last for days.

Sting can kill

The greater weever is much the same, but the sting is worse. If you have a weak heart, it can kill you. A local woman sat on one that someone had landed on a charter boat and spent six weeks in a wheelchair. Most people survive, but if you are stung in a kayak you will not make your own way back to land. The pain and toxic shock would make paddling impossible.

I managed, after nearly falling out of the boat, to shake this beast off the hook. Now I always carry a club with me. Whenever I catch a weever I draw it against the side of the kayak and hit it very hard. When it's dead the dorsal fin relaxes and you can bring it aboard. It makes an excellent curry or bouillabaisse: it has firm white flesh rather like monkfish.

I have painted a grim picture so far, but don't let it put you off. To fish from a kayak is to become an animal: calm, cunning and free. On the first day that Dominick Tyler, the Guardian's photographer, joined me,

we were idling about, looking for mackerel not far from the shore, when he pointed to a disturbance in the water. Seven finned backs rolled through the surface like greased wheels. The usual collective nouns – pod and school – strangely compressed and buttoned down, are all wrong. This was an exhilaration of dolphins. We followed them for two miles along the coast. They came up behind us and exploded from the water; they leapt together and crossed in mid-air. We never lost touch with them: even when they dived we could see the smooth scars of turbulence they left on the surface.

Tracking fish means following the birds. The gannets never lie. I have seen them hang against an emerald sky at twilight, white crucifixes shot with the last of the light, then fold their wings and fall like darts into the water. Sometimes, surrounded by a flock of living thunderbolts, I have felt the spray on my face as they plumed into the sea. They always find the fish.

Shearwaters are less trustworthy. They skim along the coast from Skokholm or Bardsey, and work the water all day, gliding just above the waves, as they can land only at night. It has taken me three years to decide that the shearwaters and I have been chasing each other, each convinced that the other one knows where the fish are.

Sometimes the birds take me far out to sea. Three miles off the coast, hearing just the cry of gulls and the tipping of the waves, I find the place of comfort I have always sought. This is my altar, my sanctuary. Here at last I can live the wild life of the spirit.

When I catch mackerel, I always eat some on the beach. The best way to cook them is not to. Raw mackerel straight from the boat is the best fish I've ever tasted. After a day in the fridge it is scarcely worth eating. The second best way to cook mackerel is as follows. Land them; gut them; stuff them with wild thyme from the shingle slacks behind the beach; roast them on a driftwood fire. Sometimes I throw beach parties where I bring a grill and nothing else.

We take turns to set out through the waves and catch fish for the barbecue.

Fishing like this is hard. I love it and I believe it is the right thing to do, but I would hesitate to recommend it unless you are fit and don't mind a bit of weather. The number of kayak fishers seems to double every year, but as many people struggle to get to the other side of the car park, it's unlikely to become the nation's favourite hobby, let alone a common means of subsistence.

Sometimes the catch scarcely replaces the energy I've used. Occasionally I find a monster shoal, so dense that I can fill my bags in half an hour. But self-sufficiency means taking fish throughout the year. The mackerel leave in October and don't return until May. I freeze some of the catch, but it doesn't last beyond December. I will eat fish for only part of the year unless I can find a way to catch grey mullet.

Because mullet live in the estuaries, you can fish for them on days (and this means most of the winter) when it would be too dangerous to take the kayak onto the open sea. You can also use a canoe, which is easier to anchor than a kayak and has more room for tackle and spare clothing. The only problem is working out how the hell to get them. I know of people who have resorted to crossbows and shotguns.

Ancient technique

But I did my research, and eventually I learnt about an ancient technique which scarcely anyone uses. I'm not going to tell you what it is, in case you buggers spoil the fishing, but it involves a mobile lure you have to make yourself. I launched my canoe into the Dyfi estuary with Dominick just after low water slack.

The Dyfi at low tide is a sandy desert split by a thousand channels. Some of them lead into a wilderness of mud and cockle-shells. Others eventually wind into the main river. Sitting in the canoe, you have no idea where you are going: the only clue is the taste of the water.

In a channel somewhere among the

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FINDING SANCTUARY

As I unhooked it, I noticed a spot of brilliant gold on its gill cover.

Only later did I discover that this meant it wasn't a grey mullet but a golden one

sandbanks we found what I had been looking for. Along the far bank the surface was oddly riffled and chopped. Whenever a bird flew over, it exploded in spray.

Very slowly, keeping low, we edged across the channel until we were just ten yards from the bank. Then we shipped the paddles and I slid the anchor into the water. I paid out enough warp to bring us level with the shoal. Taking care not to bang the boat, I picked up the fishing rod and cast. The fish ploughed across the surface as the bait hit the water, but immediately regrouped. I tied on a lighter lure and cast again. I started to wind, and immediately the rod tip went down. To my intense disappointment it was a bass. I put it back and tried again.

This time the rod banged over more per-

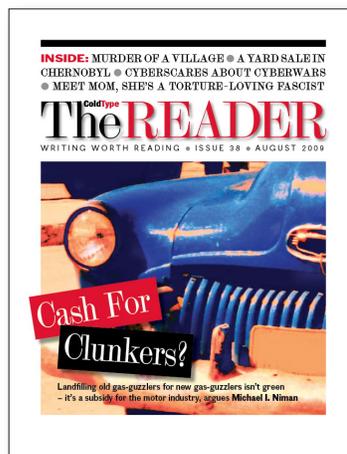
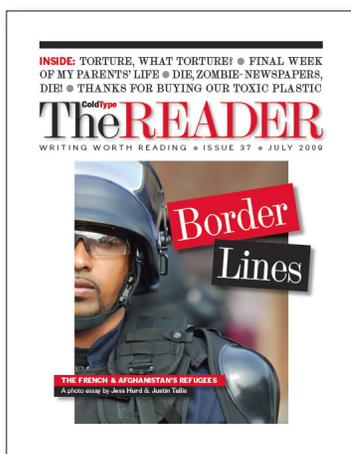
suasively. Even before I got the net under it, I knew what it was. I lifted out my first grey mullet – or so I thought. It was too small to keep. As I unhooked it, I noticed a spot of brilliant gold on its gill cover. Only later did I discover that this meant it wasn't a grey mullet but a golden one. I fished on but caught two more bass, so I packed up before I did any more harm.

So here's the score so far. Plenty of mackerel, though only sometimes. Too many greater weevers. The odd bass, pollock, whiting and gurnard; no grey mullet. Lots of energy expended; one or two near-death experiences. A tough way to feed myself. But very much alive.

CT

George Monbiot's latest book is "bring On The Apocalypse."

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Aiding and abetting war crimes

Frida Berrigan reveals how the Israeli military tested new weapons in Gaza with US support

You feel like a child playing around with a magnifying glass, burning up ants.” That is how one Israeli soldier described Operation Cast Lead, the Israeli Defense Force’s (IDF) invasion of the Gaza Strip, which began in December 2008.

His is one of 54 testimonies collected by the Israeli organization Breaking the Silence in a 110-page report that paints a disturbing picture of urban warfare in one of the world’s most densely populated areas, where more than 1.5 million people occupy a narrow strip of land between Israel and the sea.

Another soldier, after recounting an incident in which his unit used civilians as human shields, described Gaza as a “moral twilight zone.”

It is an apt term for Gaza’s wholesale destruction: homes demolished by Caterpillar D9 bulldozers (manufactured in the United States and armored by Israeli Military Industries) and set afire by white phosphorus canisters (made by Pine Bluff Arsenal, a US Army installation in Pine Bluff, Ark.). Save the Children, a U.K.-based NGO, estimated that more than 500,000 people were displaced during the war, and, a month after the ceasefire, 100,000 remained homeless. The Palestinian Economic Development Council puts a \$1.9-billion price tag on rebuilding from the 22-day war. It noted that

even under ideal circumstances the work could take five years.

The term also applies to the civilians killed: children cut down while playing, women and men killed as they tried to carry on their normal lives. Civilians were targeted by Cobra helicopters armed with high-explosive anti-tank (HEAT) missiles (both made by Lockheed Martin), blasted by Strike missiles shot from Hermes drones (designed and manufactured in Israel) and caught in the crossfire as groups of soldiers advanced on firing militants. Richard Falk, the UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories, says that of the 1,434 Palestinians killed in Gaza, 960 were civilians, including 121 women and 288 children.

Arms and dollars for the ‘moral twilight zone’

Israel – the largest recipient of US military aid – has one of the most sophisticated and extensive military arsenals in the region. US-origin weapons predominate and are an emblem of Washington’s close relationship with Tel Aviv. During George W. Bush’s presidency, Israel received more than \$22 billion in military assistance from the United States. The bulk of this was in Foreign Military Financing (FMF), which are US grants for weapons purchases. Now, FMF is on the rise. President Obama is fol-

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MORAL TWILIGHT ZONE

The phosphorus ignites and burns on contact with oxygen, and continues burning until nothing is left or the oxygen supply is cut. According to medical personnel, the wounds sometimes began to burn again as they cleaned them

lowing through on his predecessor's promise to increase security assistance to \$30 billion over the next 10 years.

In a review of the Gaza war published in February 2009, the nonpartisan Congressional Research Service listed US weapons platforms used in Operation Cast Lead, including "F-15 and F-16 aircraft [and] Apache helicopters." Human Rights Watch's (HRW) list of the US systems deployed by Israel is far more extensive, including Cobra helicopters and American-made High-Explosive, Dual-Purpose rockets and HEAT missiles.

In addition to these systems, human rights groups found evidence of Israel's use of a wide array of controversial, experimental weapons systems.

White phosphorus

"Why fire phosphorus?" "Because it's fun. Cool." – Israeli soldier, to Breaking the Silence.

White phosphorus is designed to obscure the battlefield, increasing freedom of movement for the user. It can also be used as a weapon. The US Army Center for Health Promotion and Preventative Medicine notes that white phosphorus is "spontaneously flammable" and an "extremely toxic inorganic substance." In Gaza, it was used to devastating effect used to burn down buildings. As one Israeli soldier told Breaking the Silence, "phosphorus was used as an igniter, simply to make it all go up in flames."

One woman interviewed by HRW described what happened after she was hit by burning white phosphorus: "It burnt a hole and melted everything," she said, pointing to her bandaged arm. The phosphorus ignites and burns on contact with oxygen, and continues burning until nothing is left or the oxygen supply is cut. According to medical personnel, the wounds sometimes began to burn again as they cleaned them.

In late January 2009, an Amnesty International investigation "found white phosphorus still smoldering in residential areas

throughout Gaza days after the ceasefire came into effect on 18 January." In the bombed courtyard of the Gaza headquarters of the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees, researchers found fragments of white phosphorus artillery shells and note that the "attack had caused a large fire, which destroyed tens of tons of humanitarian aid, including medicines, food and other non-food items."

Unlike much of Israeli military hardware, the Hermes and Heron drones are manufactured domestically, and both were used in Operation Cast Lead. In a joint assessment of Israeli drone attacks, B'Tselem, the Palestine Centre for Human Rights and Al Meza Centre for Human Rights found that Israel carried out 42 drone attacks in which 87 civilians were killed during the war.

Marc Garlasco, a senior military analyst with HRW, describes how precise and discriminate the drones can be: "Drone operators can clearly see their targets on the ground and also divert their missiles after launch." In a study of six specific IDF drone attacks during Operation Cast Lead, HRW found that 29 civilians were killed, including 8 children. According to their study, 5 of the 6 attacks were carried out in broad daylight, all of them in civilian areas far from the fighting and in "unlikely sites for launching rockets into Israel." Given the drones' high degree of precision, HRW asserts that "these attacks violated international humanitarian law."

New weapons testing

Human rights investigators, journalists and humanitarian workers were all barred from Gaza during the fighting, fueling confusion and speculation about what kinds of weapons systems were being used.

Mads Gilbert, a Norwegian doctor who worked in a Gaza hospital during the war, told "Democracy Now!" that "we have seen a substantial number of amputations where the amputees do not have shrapnel injuries. On the contrary, they have torn apart their legs, often one or two or even

three limbs.” These injuries – new, terrible and seemingly shrapnel-free – have led to the hypothesis that Israel has been using what are known as Dense Inert Metal Explosives (DIME), a type of weapon that is still in testing phase in the United States.

“It is highly likely that Israel has developed its own version of DIME,” writes journalist David Hambling on the national security blog Danger Room. The “Iron Fist” interceptor, unveiled by the Israeli military in 2006, works in a way that is consistent with DIME technology. As Hambling writes in the online magazine *Defense Update*, the Iron Fist “uses only the blast effect to defeat the threat, crushing the soft components of a shaped charge or deflecting and destabilizing the missile or kinetic rod in their flight.”

Amnesty International researcher Donatella Rovera surveyed the damage wrought by these weapons and concluded, “The kinds of weapons used and the manner in which they were used indicates prima facie evidence of war crimes.”

War crimes?

Months after Operation Cast Lead, countless questions about the conduct of the IDF and the weapons used in Gaza remain unanswered. Gathering incontrovertible

evidence and making solid conclusions is a critical part of post-conflict reconstruction. But given the kind of investigations that have been carried out thus far, that sort of closure seems out of reach for the people of Gaza.

The IDF carried out five of its own investigations, concluding that it “operated in accordance with international law” and that the small number of questionable incidents that did occur were “unavoidable and occur in all combat situations.”

HRW deems these investigations “not credible” and has called on the Israeli government to cooperate with a comprehensive UN investigation led by the former chief prosecutor of the international war crimes tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, Richard Goldstone. Thus far, Israel has opted not to participate.

And the United States – Israel’s closest ally and largest supporter – has refused to push Israel to cooperate. It seems the “moral twilight zone” extends beyond Gaza, all the way to Washington. **CT**

The kinds of weapons used and the manner in which they were used indicates prima facie evidence of war crimes”

Frida Berrigan is the Senior Program Associate at the New America Foundation’s Arms and Security Initiative. She is a contributing editor at In These Times and a columnist for Foreign Policy in Focus.

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A supertax for banks

They were ‘too big to fail’ so we bailed them out. Now they are doing well, it’s payback time, says British Labour Party MP **Michael Meacher**

The government has done nothing except lecture the banks on their promises – which must have had them laughing all the way to their bank

The row over bankers’ pay and bonuses rumbles on. After the MPs’ expenses scandal, which was bad enough, the real gluttony has now been revealed in the latest disclosures of City bonuses being set to reach £4bn this year. The government crashed down with an iron fist on MPs’ excesses by creating the statutory Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority, yet on the far greater greed of the City it has done next to nothing. Have the bankers taken over the state?

Unimaginably vast sums of UK taxpayers’ money (£904bn so far, according to the IMF) have been poured into protecting the banks from the consequences of their own crass recklessness, with little or no quid pro quo in the banks protecting taxpayers’ jobs and homes. Maintaining lending to businesses at the pre-crunch levels, which was the ostensible aim of the exercise in the first place, has been allowed to dissipate to such a degree that it actually contracted by nearly £15bn in the second quarter of this year. Yet the government has done nothing except lecture the banks on their promises – which must have had them laughing all the way to their bank. This must be the most blatant abandonment of financial responsibility by any government in modern times. So what really should be done?

Several steps need to be taken in the

short, medium and long term. Most immediately, banks should be made to increase their lending to businesses and homeowners substantially. M4 lending, which measures this, has fallen from a growth rate of 19.8% in February 2007 to just 0.3% in May this year, and it may well be negative by now. Top management in the part-nationalised RBS and Lloyds should be instructed to reverse this trend straight away, and if they fail or decline to do so, should be replaced by those who will. If HSBC and Barclays do not follow course, they should be required to do so by regulation.

REVIEW THE TERMS

Furthermore, now that most banks are beginning to return to profit, some hugely so, the terms of the exorbitantly generous asset protection scheme should be reviewed. It was born in the wake of the collapse of Lehman Brothers when there seemed to be a real danger of a global banking collapse. Now that has clearly passed, the £585bn of taxpayers’ money that was originally devoted to the scheme should now be drastically cut back. This would significantly reduce the level of public debt and thereby also substantially ease the pressure on the public accounts and the need for large public expenditure cuts.

More generally, the role of the banks within the economy should be greatly re-

duced relative to the real engines of growth in manufacturing and services. The chancellor regularly refers to the £25bn annual revenues from the finance sector, but not to the apocalyptic cost to the wider economy of the magnitude of banking incompetence or recklessness, which far outweighs it. Britain is put at great risk by carrying bank liabilities at a far higher multiple of GDP than any other country except Switzerland. The truth is that a bank that is too big to fail is too big. The banks should be significantly shrunk to avoid this risk in future.

Control pay and bonuses

In addition, procedural reform of the banks should be put in hand, not ignored or resisted as the government has done for two years now. The casino investment arms of the banks should be split off. Capital ratios should be raised to levels large enough to absorb any imaginable banking failures. Pay and bonuses should be strictly controlled at moderate levels by the FSA and Bank of England, preferably in accordance with wider guidelines drawn up by a high pay commission, which is urgently needed

across the whole economy.

Lastly, once normal conditions have returned post-recession and the costs of the meltdown to taxpayers can broadly be assessed, the banks should be expected to repay most, if not all, of the vast funding that saved them from extinction. The reasons for this are compelling. Whenever banks have themselves lent extensive funds to businesses or individuals, they require full reimbursement from their clients so long as they are able to pay.

In addition, if huge cutbacks are indeed made in public expenditure levels as a result of the crass incompetence of the banks, then those who have been forced to pay the price to save the banks should be compensated as quickly as it is feasible for the banks to do so.

For that purpose, a supertax should be imposed as a proportion of banking profits in future until restitution has been reasonably secured. **CT**

Michael Meacher, Labour MP for Oldham West and Royton, was Britain's environment minister 1997-2003.

The truth is that a bank that is too big to fail is too big. The banks should be significantly shrunk to avoid this risk in future.

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Bringing the banksters to heel

Danny Schechter on why Wall Street is pleased by the attention paid to the debate on health care

These summer soldiers and sunshine patriots and their tea baggers and the dispatch-a-mob they've incited to yell at members of Congress are strangely silent when it comes to questioning profiteering by health care insurers and the banks

The thermometer is in the red as the heat of August blends into the steam of the health care fight. These two hot subjects seem to be fogging up TV screens during these dog days as the righteous right take up the tactics of the militant left to create the impression that health care reform is a commie plot. For his part, President Obama insists a bill will pass and that “sensible proposals” will prevail.

What is sensible these days?

You can count on that gruesome Fox TV threesome – Bill O'Reilly, Glenn Beck and Sean Hannity – to go ballistic whenever it appears that our government is going to do anything beneficial for the people. There's always a million reasons why it won't work, or worse, sink the Republic. Rush Limbaugh alternates between arguing that President Obama is a racist, a communist or a Nazi.

George Orwell would be staggered about how prophetic he had been.

These summer soldiers and sunshine patriots and their tea baggers and the dispatch-a-mob they've incited to yell at members of Congress are strangely silent when it comes to questioning profiteering by health care insurers and the banks. It is as if the only enemies are in Washington, not on Wall Street. They are mostly silent about the bank bonuses and pervasive cor-

porate crime.

If health care reform is at risk, financial reform seems a non-starter. The empire is striking back, and suddenly what were once considered modest reforms are running into roadblocks as they are branded the work of Bolsheviks..

On the issue of bonuses – the one financial matter that seems to piss off the public the most – in 2007, banks gave out bonuses worth a staggering \$1.6 BILLION – there is now a debate about allowing bonus guarantees. These were once tied to performance but even that criteria is being watered down.

They tell us, “A guaranteed bonus might strike many people as a contradiction in terms. But on Wall Street, banks have become so eager to lure and keep top deal makers and traders that they are reviving the practice of offering ironclad, multimillion-dollar payouts – guaranteed, no matter how an employee performs.”

Not a bad job if you can get one – you get a bonus even if you do lousy. This debate led the newspaper of record to observe. “The resurgence of bonus guarantees underscores just how difficult it is to control Wall Street pay, despite the public outcry over how taxpayer money is being spent.”

But is worse than that, much worse. I had to go to Canada to find a more com-

prehensive press report on how the fraud factories are winning the battle against new regulation.

David Olive writes in the *Toronto Star*, “You would think after global financiers triggered the current, unprecedented worldwide recession and credit crisis, they might embrace inevitable reforms that their reckless conduct made necessary.

“You would be disappointed.”

And that’s an understatement, (or to quote Ellen Brown, “it’s an understatement to call it an understatement,”) Olive tells us that the banks, having bought up much of the Congress, now feel emboldened enough to tell the reformers to shove it:

“For the financiers, to their dishonor, have not so much as tendered an apology for their craven, mass departure from prudence, or what Barney Frank, the Democrat representative for Massachusetts, labels their “moral deficiency.”

“Instead, the financiers and their powerful lobby groups are resisting any new legislated constraints on the behavior by which they nearly brought themselves and the global economy to ruin. Adding insult to injury, banks have jacked up credit card rates to 27 per cent and more on the same Main Street taxpayers who rescued them.”

Arrogance and avarice

Everyday brings more news of their arrogance and avarice

The *Financial Times* reports: “US banks stand to collect a record \$38.5 BILLION in fees for customer overdrafts this year, with the bulk of the revenue coming from the most financially stretched consumers amid the deepest recession since the 1930s...The fees are nearly double those reported in 2000...”

“The Federal Reserve is working on rules on overdraft fees, and rules on customer charges could be a priority of the Obama administration’s proposed Consumer Protection Agency if approved by Congress.”

No wonder the banks want to kill the proposed agency.

Bear in mind, this crisis did not happen by accident or just by some mistakes. It was not an accident argues the *Bond Tangent Blog* (Via Baseline Scenario):

“Financial institutions did not amass trillions of dollars of toxic assets and tangle themselves up in a destructive web of credit derivatives by accident. Financial institutions did not produce and maintain technology allowing them to take advantage of traditional investors by accident. A thief was not able to operate a multi-billion-dollar Ponzi scheme for decades by accident. We are not talking about the occasional rogue trader here who has bribed his compliance officer. Even within the existing regulatory architecture, these activities required a considerable amount of complacency (to be polite) by financial regulators across agencies, over the course of many years, and through many cycles of political appointees from both parties.”

Was it complacency or more like complicity? Nothing is likely to change unless there is pressure from below. And that pressure is not going to come from the right.

So where should it come from?

As for the cost of inaction: Obama spoke of that on July 22: “If we don’t pass financial regulatory reform, the banks are going to go back to the same things they were doing before,” he said “In some ways it could be worse, because now they know that the federal government may think they’re too big to fail. And so if they’re unconstrained (by stricter regulations) they could take even more risks.”

Write that down. Put in a bottle or a time capsule, text it as a memo to yourself on your I-Phone and twitter your followers. If the banksters are not brought to heel, we will have survived this crisis only until the next one erupts. **CT**

Mediachannel’s NewsDissector Danny Schechter is finishing “*The Crime of Our Time*,” a film and book on Wall Street Fraud. (newsdissector.com/plunder.) Comments to dissector@mediachannel.org

“In some ways it could be worse, because now they know that the federal government may think they’re too big to fail. And so if they’re unconstrained (by stricter regulations) they could take even more risks”

Of flat tax and fat cats

Instead of taxing the rich to pay for health care reform, moderates want to tax the food that makes people fat. **Sam Pizzigati** disagrees

Instead of taxing the rich to pay for health care reform, via a progressive surtax on high incomes, these moderates want to tax the sugary foods and drinks that make people fat

Politicians and policy makers who adore the rich don't adore the progressive income tax. They're always looking for alternatives. Conservative fans of fortune, over recent years, have been gravitating to the "flat tax," the notion that everybody ought to pay income taxes at the same exact rate, an act of "fairness" that would mean an instant – and whopping – windfall for America's most financially favored.

The more moderate of fortune's friends have, of late, been talking up the idea of a "fat tax." Instead of taxing the rich to pay for health care reform, via a progressive surtax on high incomes, these moderates want to tax the sugary foods and drinks that make people fat.

This "fat tax," at the moment, hasn't yet gained much legislative momentum. But the working assumption behind the fat tax – that America's expenditures for health care wouldn't be so horribly out of control if people just worked harder at watching their weight – is rapidly hardening into our conventional political wisdom.

In the last few weeks alone, two major studies have linked overweight and obese people to rising health care costs. Treating overweight patients, the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported late in July, adds as much as \$147 billion annually to national health care spending.

Another new study, from the Urban Institute and the University of Virginia, puts the overall impact of obesity-related issues at closer to \$200 billion a year.

Obesity, note the CDC researchers, "continues to impose an economic burden on both public and private payers." The "connection between rising rates of obesity and rising medical spending," they add, has become "undeniable."

But why have obesity rates been rising?

"Something big must have changed in America to cause so many people to gain so much weight so quickly," the *New Yorker's* Elizabeth Kolbert noted last month. "But what, exactly, is unclear – a mystery battered in an enigma."

The mystery starts with the suddenness of America's upsurge in obesity. The first reliable national data on overweight Americans comes from the early 1960s. Over the next 20 years, the share of Americans who registered in as overweight barely budged up at all.

Expanding waistlines

But then, in the 1980s, American waistlines started expanding at a shockingly rapid pace. The nation's adult obesity rate, according to the National Center for Health Statistics, jumped from a modest 15 percent in 1980 to 23 percent in 1994 to 35 percent in 2006.

Analysts have advanced, for this skyrocketing, various explanations. Fattening fast food has become cheaper, relative to other foods. Restaurants are super-sizing. Corporate food giants have re-engineered food products to maximize their almost addictive fat, sugar, and salt.

All these factors no doubt contribute to the growing incidence of obesity. But all these factors also operate on a national, even global, scale. They don't explain why some states in the United States have more obesity than others or why many other developed nations show much less obesity than the United States.

So what's going on here? We have some clues. Those obesity differences between states and nations turn out to follow a consistent pattern: The more unequal the distribution of a society's income and wealth, researchers have shown, the more obesity. Inequality, in effect, seems to be making people fat.

Obesity follows what epidemiologists – the scientists who study the health of populations – call a social gradient. Levels of obesity, in developed societies, rise as income and social status fall. On each rung of the economic ladder, people tend to be more overweight than the people on the rungs above them.

Do “lower status” people simply “choose” to be unhealthy? That's a charge you can hear all the time on talk-radio. But researchers disagree. People typically practice unhealthy behaviors not because they want to be unhealthy, but because they need relief – from social stress.

Responding to stress

People typically respond to stress, investigators note, by increasing their intake of our society's readily available relaxants, disinhibitors, and stimulants. They smoke. They do drugs. Or they eat more “comfort foods,” digestibles usually packed with sugar and fat.

The more chronic the stress, the more likely a reliance on one or another of these comforting props. And that stress becomes more chronic as societies become more unequal.

The great irony in all this? Commentators today still regularly refer to the super rich as “fat cats.” Generations ago, that label made some sense. Back then, only the affluent could afford to be fat. A generous girth signified, in those circumstances, high social status.

In our contemporary developed societies, by contrast, calories abound, and high social status comes to those who can afford to stay fashionably slim. We have, essentially, no “fat cats” any more.

Would our modern societies be healthier places if more people became slimmer? They certainly would. The health professionals striving so hard to educate people about the risks that excess pounds create are performing a vital public service.

But this focus on individual obesity treatment and prevention, as epidemiologists Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett point out, overlooks the reasons why people engage in unhealthy behaviors in the first place.

In the United States, obesity and inequality both started soaring in the 1980s. If inequality continues to widen the gaps between us – and deepen the stress among us – all our extra pounds don't figure to be fading away anytime soon.

And that brings us back to the progressive health care surtax on the rich that flat-taxers and fat-taxers would rather us avoid. Let's not. If we really do want to be more healthy, we need to become more equal. Taxing the rich – to help bankroll health care reform – would move us ever so neatly in that direction. **CT**

Sam Pizzigati edits Too Much, the online weekly on excess and inequality at www.toomuchonline.org

Levels of obesity, in developed societies, rise as income and social status fall. On each rung of the economic ladder, people tend to be more overweight than the people on the rungs above them

Hurting the people you're trying to help

Jeff Nygaard wonders why the media has a problem over the raising of the minimum wage

Whenever one hears the phrase “some economists” it’s good to be suspicious. There are a lot of economists, after all, and “some” of them are completely clueless

When the US federal minimum wage increased to \$7.25 per hour in June, it meant that the annual income of a full-time minimum-wage worker would be about \$15,000. Monthly, that’s about \$1,200. The increase was covered fairly widely in the corporate media. Unfortunately, the coverage focused on what a bad idea it is to pay workers so much.

National Public Radio reporter David Greene summed up the “problem” like this: “some economists say that what happens when you raise the minimum wage is you can lose jobs in the economy. Jobs can be cut, and so fewer people are actually getting a paycheck.”

Whenever one hears the phrase “some economists” it’s good to be suspicious. There are a lot of economists, after all, and “some” of them are completely clueless. Greene does not cite anyone specifically, although later in the story he says that “there’s an entirely different view from some other economists.” Which ones? The clueless ones, or some other ones? He never says.

Many, many media outlets echoed this idea that raising the minimum wage is a bad idea. Here are a few sample headlines about the increase: “A Pay Increase At What Cost?” (*Winston-Salem Journal*) “Minimum Wage Hike Comes at ‘Bad Time’

for Some Businesses” (*Wyoming Tribune-Eagle*) “Minimum Wage Hike May Prolong Hard Times” (*Newark Star-Ledger*) “Minimum Wage Boost Sounds Good, but It’s Not, It Could Lead to Layoffs and Less Opportunity for Those Seeking Jobs” (*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*).

No extra money!

The NPR reporter went so far as to tell us that “businesses . . . just have no extra money hanging around right now and so if they’re forced to pay out more in wages, they’ll just cut hours or maybe even cut some of those low wage jobs.” Host Robert Siegel underlined the point, reminding listeners that opponents of the increase say “you actually end up hurting the people whom you’re trying to help” by increasing their wages.

The *Washington Post* headlined their article “Some Attack Timing of Minimum Wage Hike,” which is true. “Some” do attack it. But the article itself included a statement from one economist that the increase “could not have come at a better time,” from the point of view of stimulating the economy by putting a few more dollars into the hands of people who will spend it. Quite a headline, that one!

The normally reliable *St. Petersburg Times* headlined their story “Minimum Wage Hike Reignites Labor Debate,” and

reported that “Both camps are out in full force,” with one “camp” saying that an increase is a good thing and the other “camp” saying what NPR says. The St. Pete paper concluded with a list of four sources, three of which thought it was a good thing. The fourth source, the “Employment Policies Institute,” disagreed.

Neither the *Times* nor any other news organization that cited the Employment Policies Institute bothered to note that the EPI is “one of several front groups created by Berman & Co., a Washington, DC public affairs firm owned by Rick Berman, who lobbies for the restaurant, hotel, alcoholic beverage and tobacco industries.” That bit of info is from the invaluable propaganda research group SourceWatch (www.sourcewatch.org/)

Outside of industry propaganda from places like EPI, it’s hard to find any support for the idea that increases in the minimum wage have ever harmed the recipients of those wages.

The other EPI, the Economic Policy Institute, put out a “Minimum Wage Issue Guide” on July 20th that emphasized this point: “There is no evidence of job loss from previous minimum wage increases.”

Researcher Bruce Nissen teamed up with H. Luke Shaefer of the University of Chicago in 2007 “to examine the actual impact of the new Florida minimum wage one year after it took effect.” The result? “We were unable to find any negative impacts whatsoever.” That is, no job loss, no companies leaving the state, no damage to the retail sector, no harm to minimum-wage workers. Nothing.

The *Indiana Business Review* of Fall 2008

published a study called “Minimum Wage Impacts on Employment: A Look at Indiana, Illinois, and Surrounding Midwestern States.” They, too, found that “Empirical analysis strongly challenges the conventional wisdom that increasing the minimum wage hampers employment.” The question of why such wrongheaded ideas are considered “wisdom,” let alone conventional wisdom, is the question that should pop into our minds here.

The excellent scholar Holly Sklar offered some real wisdom when she reminded readers in a recent opinion piece that “It would take \$9.92 today to match the buying power of the minimum wage at its peak in 1968.” Sklar added, in a highly relevant point that I couldn’t find in any news story on the wage increase, that “The long-term fall in worker buying power is one reason we are in the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression.”

Is a minimum wage increase a good thing, or does it “hurt the people whom you’re trying to help?” How one answers that question has a lot to do with class. To those who pay wages – that is, owners and corporate CEOs – higher wages are a negative. To those who are paid wages – that is, the overwhelming majority of the population – higher wages are a cause for celebration. There was no celebration in the newspapers, however (or on Public Radio) on July 24th, offering more evidence of the class bias of the corporate media. **CT**

Jeff Nygaard is a writer and activist in Minneapolis, Minnesota who publishes a free email newsletter called Nygaard Notes, found at www.nygaardnotes.org

The question of why such wrongheaded ideas are considered “wisdom,” let alone conventional wisdom, is the question that should pop into our minds here

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Megrahi didn't do it . . .

How many times do we have to be told that the Libyans weren't responsible for the blowing up of Pan Am 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, in 1988, asks **William Blum**

Iran financed the PFLP-GC, a Palestinian group, to carry out the bombing with the cooperation of Syria, in retaliation for the American naval ship, the Vincennes, shooting down an Iranian passenger plane in July of the same year, which took the lives of more people than did the 103 bombing

"And on the most exalted throne in the world sits nothing but a man's arse." – Montaigne

If there's anyone out there who is not already thoroughly cynical about those on the board of directors of the planet, the latest chapter in the saga of the bombing of PanAm 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland might just be enough to push them over the edge.

Abdel Basset Ali al-Megrahi, the only person ever convicted for the December 21, 1988 bombing, was released from his Scottish imprisonment August 21 supposedly because of his terminal cancer and sent home to Libya, where he received a hero's welcome. President Obama said that the jubilant welcome Megrahi received was "highly objectionable". His White House spokesman Robert Gibbs added that the welcoming scenes in Libya were "outrageous and disgusting". British Prime Minister Gordon Brown said he was "angry and repulsed", while his foreign secretary, David Miliband, termed the celebratory images "deeply upsetting." Miliband warned: "How the Libyan government handles itself in the next few days will be very significant in the way the world views Libya's reentry into the civilized community of nations."

Ah yes, "the civilized community of nations", that place we so often hear about but so seldom get to actually see. American

officials, British officials, and Scottish officials know that Megrahi is innocent. They know that Iran financed the PFLP-GC, a Palestinian group, to carry out the bombing with the cooperation of Syria, in retaliation for the American naval ship, the Vincennes, shooting down an Iranian passenger plane in July of the same year, which took the lives of more people than did the 103 bombing. And it should be pointed out that the Vincennes captain, plus the officer in command of air warfare, and the crew were all awarded medals or ribbons afterward. No one in the US government or media found this objectionable or outrageous, or disgusting or repulsive. The United States has always insisted that the shooting down of the Iranian plane was an "accident". Why then give awards to those responsible?

Today's oh-so-civilized officials have known of Megrahi's innocence since 1989. The Scottish judges who found Megrahi guilty know he's innocent. They admit as much in their written final opinion. The Scottish Criminal Cases Review Commission, which investigated Megrahi's trial, knows it. They stated in 2007 that they had uncovered six separate grounds for believing the conviction may have been a miscarriage of justice, clearing the way for him to file a new appeal of his case. The evidence for all this is considerable. And most importantly, there is no evidence that Megrahi was in-

volved in the act of terror.

The first step of the alleged crime, *sine qua non* – loading the bomb into a suitcase at the Malta airport – for this there was no witness, no video, no document, no fingerprints, nothing to tie Megrahi to the particular brown Samsonite suitcase, no past history of terrorism, no forensic evidence of any kind linking him to such an act.

And the court admitted it: “The absence of any explanation of the method by which the primary suitcase might have been placed on board KM180 [Air Malta to Frankfurt] is a major difficulty for the Crown case.”

The scenario implicating Iran, Syria, and the PFLP-GC was the Original Official Version, endorsed by the US, UK, Scotland, even West Germany – guaranteed, sworn to, scout’s honor, case closed – until the build-up to the Gulf War came along in 1990 and the support of Iran and Syria was needed for the broad Middle East coalition the United States was readying for the ouster of Iraq’s troops from Kuwait. Washington was also anxious to achieve the release of American hostages held in Lebanon by groups close to Iran. Thus it was that the scurrying sound of backtracking could be heard in the corridors of the White House. Suddenly, in October 1990, there was a New Official Version: it was Libya – the Arab state least supportive of the US build-up to the Gulf War and the sanctions imposed against Iraq – that was behind the bombing after all, declared Washington.

The two Libyans were formally indicted in the US and Scotland on Nov. 14, 1991. Within the next 20 days, the remaining four American hostages were released in Lebanon along with the most prominent British hostage, Terry Waite.

In order to be returned to Libya, Megrahi had to cancel his appeal. It was the appeal, not his health, that concerned the Brits and the Americans. Dr. Jim Swire of Britain, whose daughter died over Lockerbie, is a member of UK Families Flight 103, which wants a public inquiry into the crash. “If he goes back to Libya,” Swire says, “it will be

a bitter pill to swallow, as an appeal would reveal the fallacies in the prosecution case. ... I’ve lost faith in the Scottish criminal justice system, but if the appeal is heard, there is not a snowball’s chance in hell that the prosecution case will survive.”

And a reversal of the verdict would mean that the civilized and venerable governments of the United States and the United Kingdom would stand exposed as having lived a monumental lie for almost 20 years and imprisoned a man they knew to be innocent for eight years.

The *Sunday Times* (London) recently reported: “American intelligence documents [of 1989, from the Pentagon’s Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA)] blaming Iran for the Lockerbie bombing would have been produced in court if the Libyan convicted of Britain’s worst terrorist attack had not dropped his appeal.” Added the Times: “The DIA briefing discounted Libya’s involvement in the bombing on the basis that there was ‘no current credible intelligence’ implicating her.”

If the three governments involved really believed that Megrahi was guilty of murdering 270 of their people, it’s highly unlikely that they would have released their grip on him. Or is even that too much civilized behavior to expect.

One final note: Many people are under the impression that Libyan Leader Moammar Qaddafi has admitted on more than one occasion to Libya’s guilt in the PanAm 103 bombing. This is not so. Instead, he has stated that Libya would take “responsibility” for the crime. He has said this purely to get the heavy international sanctions against his country lifted. At various times, both he and his son have explicitly denied any Libyan role in the bombing.

Humankind shall never fly

All those angry people. Yelling at the president and members of Congress about how the proposed government health plan, and Obama himself, are “socialist”. (See the poster of Obama as the Joker character

A reversal of the verdict would mean that the civilized and venerable governments of the United States and the United Kingdom would stand exposed as having lived a monumental lie for almost 20 years and imprisoned a man they knew to be innocent for eight years

ANTI-EMPIRE REPORT

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Boys of Capital have been chortling in their martinis about the death of socialism. The word has been banned from polite conversation

from Batman with “Socialism” in large letters, as the only word.) These good folks wanna get their health care through good ol’ capitalism; better no health care at all than godless-atheist commie health care; better to see your child die than have her saved by a Marxist-Stalinist-collective doctor who works for the government. But these screaming, heckling Americans – like most of their countrymen – might be rather surprised to discover that they don’t really believe what they think they believe. I wrote an essay several years ago, which is still perfectly applicable today, entitled “The United States invades, bombs, and kills for it, but do Americans really believe in free enterprise?”

A common refrain, explicit or implicit, amongst the recent health-care hecklers is that the government can’t do anything better or cheaper than private corporations. Studies, however, have clearly indicated otherwise. In 2003, US federal agencies examined 17,595 federal jobs and found civil servants to be superior to contractors 89 percent of the time. The following year, a study to determine whether 12,573 federal jobs could be done more efficiently by private contractors found in-house workers winning 91 percent of the time, according to an Office of Management and Budget report. And in 2005, a study of tens of thousands of government positions concluded that federal workers had won the job competitions more than 80 percent of the time. All these studies, it should be kept in mind, took place under the administration of George W. Bush, who, upon taking office in 2001, declared it his top management priority that federal workers should compete with contractors for as many as 850,000 government jobs. Thus, any pressure to influence the outcome of these studies would have been in the opposite direction – putting the outside contractors in the best light.

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Boys of Capital have been chortling in their martinis about the death of socialism. The word has been banned from

polite conversation. And they hope that no one will notice that every socialist experiment of any significance in the twentieth century – without exception – was either overthrown, invaded, corrupted, perverted, subverted, destabilized, or otherwise had life made impossible for it, by the United States and its allies. Not one socialist government or movement – from the Russian Revolution to the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, from Communist China to the FMLN in El Salvador – not one was permitted to rise or fall solely on its own merits; not one was left secure enough to drop its guard against the all-powerful enemy abroad and freely and fully relax control at home.

It’s as if the Wright brothers’ first experiments with flying machines all failed because the automobile interests sabotaged each test flight. And then the good and god-fearing folk of the world looked upon these catastrophes, nodded their heads wisely, and intoned solemnly: Humankind shall never fly.

The continual selling of the Afghan war

“But we must never forget,” said President Obama recently, “this is not a war of choice. This is a war of necessity. Those who attacked America on 9/11 are plotting to do so again. If left unchecked, the Taliban insurgency will mean an even larger safe haven from which al Qaeda would plot to kill more Americans. So this is not only a war worth fighting. This is fundamental to the defense of our people.”

Obama was speaking to the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the ultra-nationalist group whose members would not question such sentiments. Neither would most Americans, including many of those who express opposition to the war when polled. It’s simple – We’re fighting terrorism in Afghanistan. We’re fighting the same people who attacked New York and Washington. Never mind that out of the tens of thousands the United States and its NATO front have killed in Afghanistan not one has been identified as having had anything to do with the events

of September 11, 2001. Never mind that the “plot to kill Americans” in 2001 was hatched in Germany and the United States at least as much as in Afghanistan. What is needed to plot to buy airline tickets and take flying lessons in the United States? A room with some chairs? What does “an even larger safe haven” mean? A larger room with more chairs? Perhaps a blackboard? Terrorists intent upon attacking the United States can meet almost anywhere, with Afghanistan probably being one of the worst places for them, given the American occupation.

As to “plotting to do so again” ... there’s no reason to assume that the United States has any concrete information of this, any more than did Bush or Cheney who tried to scare us in the same way for more than seven years to enable them to carry out their agenda.

There are many people in Afghanistan who deeply resent the US presence there and the drones that fly overhead and drop bombs on houses, wedding parties, and funerals. One doesn’t have to be a member of al Qaeda to feel this way. There doesn’t even have to be such a thing as a “member of al Qaeda”. It tells us nothing that some of them can be called “al Qaeda”. Almost every individual or group in that part of the world not in love with US foreign policy, which Washington wishes to stigmatize, is charged with being associated with, or being a member of, al Qaeda, as if there’s a precise and meaningful distinction between people retaliating against American aggression while being a member of al Qaeda and people retaliating against American aggression while NOT being a member of al Qaeda; as if al Qaeda gives out membership cards to fit in your wallet, as if there are chapters of al Qaeda that put out a weekly newsletter and hold a potluck on the first Monday of each month.

In any event, as in Iraq, the American “war on terrorism” in Afghanistan regularly and routinely creates new anti-American terrorists. This is scarcely in dispute even at the Pentagon.

The only “necessity” that draws the

United States to Afghanistan is the need for oil and gas pipelines from the Caspian Sea area, the establishment of military bases in this country that is surrounded by the oil-rich Caspian Sea and Persian Gulf regions, and making it easier to watch and pressure next-door Iran. What more could any respectable imperialist nation desire?

But the war against the Taliban can’t be won. Except by killing everyone in Afghanistan. The United States should negotiate the pipelines with the Taliban, as the Clinton administration unsuccessfully tried to do, and then get out.

Yugoslavia

During 1998-1999, the United States used the Kosovo conflict to reaffirm its hegemonic role in Europe. US officials deliberately undercut a potential diplomatic solution to the Kosovo war; instead of using diplomacy to resolve the conflict, the United States sought a military solution in which NATO power could once again be demonstrated. The resulting air war, in 1999, succeeded in fully establishing the continued relevance of NATO, thus affirming US hegemony in Europe and undercutting European proclivities for foreign policy independence. – *David Gibbs, “First Do No Harm: Humanitarian Intervention and the Destruction of Yugoslavia”*

There’s no issue of the recent past that has caused more friction internationally amongst those on the left than the question of what really took place in the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s. Gibbs’ new book explores many of the myths surrounding this very complicated and controversial slice of history, particularly those dealing with the supposed humanitarian motivation behind the Western powers intervention and the many alleged Serbian atrocities. **CT**

William Blum is the author of:

Killing Hope: US Military and CIA

Interventions Since World War 2;

Rogue State: A Guide to the World’s Only

Superpower; West-Bloc Dissident: A Cold

War Memoir; Freeing the World to Death:

The war against the Taliban can’t be won. Except by killing everyone in Afghanistan

A prisoner once more

Ahmed Masoud had trouble getting into Gaza, but how will he return home to England?

Next morning, we are briefed on the possible outcomes of the trip: the best is being stopped by Israeli gunboats; the others are being arrested or attacked by missiles

The Journey

At last I have made it back to Gaza to see my family, armed with supplies for my ailing mother. Now that I am here, there is no way out. It's seven years since I left my home and family in Gaza; I wonder if they know what I look like now. Do they miss me at mealtimes? Or are there no mealtimes now my mum has had a cancer operation that nearly killed her? Will I be able to see her before it is too late?

The Rafah border between Egypt and Gaza has been sealed for the past three years, but I am desperate to see my family, whatever the cost. I plan to take a solidarity boat from Cyprus, organised by the Free Gaza Movement. It is part of the Hope Fleet sailing from Larnaca to Gaza in an attempt to break Israel's siege.

When I arrive at Larnaca airport, everything looks the same as when I was first here, seven years ago, after being trapped in Cairo airport for five days. (I had left Gaza with five days to spare, to be sure not to miss my flight, and like all Palestinians was not allowed to leave the airport. I found myself leaving one prison and entering another.)

Next day, I set off to find some colos-

tomy bags for my mother; because of the siege, she is not able to find enough. The Cypriot hospital gives me just one bag. With their little English, the nurses try to tell me that all hospitals across the world have such things. I want to say that Gaza is not part of the world - well, not the world we live in, anyway.

Next morning, we are briefed on the possible outcomes of the trip: the best is being stopped by Israeli gunboats; the others are being arrested or attacked by missile. We are asked to sign a paper saying that we understand the risks involved. It also asks what we would want to happen in case of death. "Please make sure I am buried in Gaza . . ." Signed: Ahmed Masoud.

The next day, we are still waiting for the boat to leave. Someone mentions that the Rafah border might open for a short period of three days. I spend about two hours deciding whether to wait for the boat to leave or to fly to Cairo. If I don't leave for the border today, I will lose precious time with my family.

The moment I reach Cairo airport, my passport is taken away and I am asked to wait in a separate room. I am then sent to a different small room, where I wait with lots of other people for six hours. A four-year-old girl travelling with her dad can't stop crying; she hasn't had any water for ten hours, and is not allowed to get any. A

bus comes to take us away, with a policeman who holds our passports. After nine hours, we get to the border. The little girl is still crying.

On the Egyptian side, the border is filthy and full of people. It takes us all day to reach the Palestinian side, where we are finally given bottles of water. I spot the father of the little girl telling her not to drink too quickly. Finally, we are on the bus to Rafah in southern Gaza.

I look everywhere for my brothers, who have been waiting for me on the other side. I keep staring out of the window to see how much Gaza has changed. There are lots of destroyed buildings as a result of the Israeli attack in January, but I feel I still know everything.

I hurry off the bus, but am stopped by a tall guy with a beard, who asks me where I am going and grabs my bags. I start shouting at him that I don't need a taxi, but he is no taxi driver. He is my own little brother - though not so little any more.

When we get home, my dad is the first to open the door. I walk through afraid, as if saying sorry for my long absence, like a naughty teenager who has stayed out late, but he rushes to me and hugs me. I feel his tears on my shirt, making it wet. My mum is at the top of the stairs. I am so happy to see her on her feet. I feared I would find her lying in bed, unable to speak, but she is wailing and the kids are jumping around dancing dabke. I realise how long I have been away.

After a week of enjoying the food, weather and company, the question of how to leave hits me. I am anxious about not being able to return to my pregnant wife in London, and to rehearsals of my play, which we are taking to Edinburgh. I was supposed to leave with the Free Gaza boat, but it never reached its destination. The Israeli navy intercepted it two days after I arrived in Gaza. So I am stuck here. Will I wait for the border to open, God knows when? Or will I find an escape route?

I hurry off the bus, but am stopped by a tall guy with a beard, who asks me where I am going and grabs my bags. I start shouting at him that I don't need a taxi, but he is no taxi driver

The Return

Five weeks pass and I enjoy every second with my family in Gaza, but a vine of fear grows inside me whenever I think about leaving. Every time I'm on the phone to Heather, my pregnant wife in London, I speak confidently, telling her I'll be able to leave soon., but as soon as I put the phone down I feel so far away from her. She goes for a scan at hospital and rings me straight away to tell me we are expecting a boy. I start to laugh, I'm so happy, then I realise I'm so far away that he could be born without me.

The border opens on Monday, August 3 for three days, but there are about 8,000 people who want to leave on those days, all in similar circumstances to me: Old people will lose their chance of getting medication, the injured will lose their only chance to

have their war wounds treated, students will lose their scholarships and many families will lose their residence wherever they are staying.

I check the internet, looking for my bus number, to see if my name is among those being allowed to leave. In order for the government to organize the movement of those leaving, they now make people register in advance so they can allocate buses for them. It would be a worthy system if everything in Gaza was running properly, as priority is given to those who register first. However, because I came during the last opening of the border, my name is no. 5,000, so I'll have to wait for at least four months for my name to get to the top of the list.

Undeterred, I kiss my mum and the rest of my family goodbye, call a cab and leave with my brothers, Khalid and Tareq. I don't expect that I'll get out of Gaza today, given that my name is not on any of the buses,

GOING HOME

An old man faints because of the heat, and an ambulance rushes through to take him away. But his son refuses to let his dad get into it as it's a Palestinian ambulance, which will take him back to Gaza.

but I decide to try anyway, hoping that something will come up when I am there. But we spend the whole day in the heat of the sun after being refused access to the border by police at the first checkpoint.

My brothers are making phone calls to all their friends in the hope that someone might be able to help, while I keep scanning my phone as my wife is phoning the British Consulate in Egypt in the hope that they can intervene.

The day passes; I'm thirsty, tired and angry. I climb back into the cab of the taxi and we go back home, where my mother and family greet me like a hero, trying to make me feel better. I look at my mum, pretending I'm not concerned. I don't want her to feel sad – it was to see her happy that I made this journey in the first place.

The second and third day pass in a similar manner. I'm stuck here. I know it will be a few months before I see my wife again. How am I going to tell her?

Then, as my hope begins to fade, just before the car pulls over outside my mother's front door, the breaking news on the radio makes me jump right off the seat. The Egyptians have decided to extend the opening of the border for two more days, one for foreign nationals and the last for everyone. I leap out of the car, not even caring about my brother, who is cursing me for not helping him carry my suitcases. I go online to check my name, but there is nothing, so I start phoning people to see if they can help. It's my last chance to leave and I'm willing to do anything not to waste it.

My aunt tells me of an Egyptian officer, who will be able to help for a \$500 bribe. I speak to him and close the deal.

I get to the border on the last, fifth, day and find out that a lot of people have

paid similar bribes or even more. They can charge as much as they want, people will pay. I don't say goodbye this time. I look back and see dad raising his hand, mum smiling and my sister gazing. I smile at all of them and close the door behind me as I pass through the Palestinian side. Then the bus waits for six hours without moving an inch. An old man faints because of the heat, and an ambulance rushes through to take him away. But his son refuses to let his dad get into it as it's a Palestinian ambulance, which will take him back to Gaza. Two hours later, an Egyptian ambulance picks him up from the Egyptian gate.

A small girl, Rania, sits next to me on the Egyptian side, smiling and offering me a sweet. I am touched, longing for some human tenderness.

By about 9 pm my name is announced to be deported to Cairo airport, then the girl and her father are called. By 4:00 am, August 8, I'm on the bus to Cairo, telling Rania the story of Harry Potter. She sleeps most of the way, wakes up and asks me to continue. The thought of getting back to my wife and soon-to-be-born child thrills me. I think of the bus journey as a parental rehearsal.

We get to Cairo at 2:00 pm, where I have to beg, pay bribes and call a friend to get money for the ticket home after my credit card doesn't work. But at last I'm on the 5:00 pm BMI flight to London. I close my eyes and think of Heather waiting for me on the other side. I'm almost home. **CT**

Ahmed Masoud's play "Go to Gaza: Drink the Sea," was performed at the Assembly Hall, Edinburgh, last month. The first part of this essay was originally published in New Statesman.

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Of sex and athletes

Dave Zirin on the media madness over the gender of South African sprinter Caster Semenya

If you aspire to be a star woman athlete but have no aspirations to appear in *Playboy's* Women of the Olympics issue, you are far better off being from South Africa than the United States.

The Western media's handling of the story of Caster Semenya, the gold-medal-winning 18-year-old South African runner, has been at best simplistic and at worst repellent. In a salacious, drooling tone, "Is she really a he?" is the extent of their curiosity.

On various radio shows, I've been asked, "Why does she talk like a man?" No one defines what "a man" is supposed to talk like. Or, "Do you think she's really a dude? Is this a Crying Game thing?" I've heard it all this week, and most of the questions say far more about the insecurities of the questioners than about Semenya's situation.

It's not just in the confederate confines of sports radio. I appeared on Campbell Brown's CNN show, where my co-panelist, Dr. Jennifer Berman, said that suspicion of Semenya's gender was justified because she is "8 feet tall" (she's 5-foot-7). How an 18-year-old runner became Yao Ming in Dr. Berman's mind was never addressed. This is hysteria, pure and simple, and it is born out of people's own discomfort with women athletes who don't conform to gender stereotypes.

In South Africa, however, the response

could not be more different. Semenya was greeted by thousands of people in a celebration that included signs and songs from the antiapartheid struggle.

She was even embraced by former South African first lady Winnie Mandela. "We are here to tell the whole world how proud we are of our little girl," Mandela told cheering fans. "They can write what they like—we are proud of her."

As Patrick Bond, a leading South African global justice activist, said to me, "To order Semenya tested for gender seems about as reasonable as ordering IAAF officials like Philip Weiss tested for brain cells — which actually isn't a bad idea given his recent off-field performance. And if Weiss doesn't have a sufficient number of brain cells to know how to treat women athletes, it would only be fair to relieve him of his functions for the good of world athletics."

It's not just national political figures with global profiles who are embracing Semenya.

The people have rallied around her fiercely, particularly in the very rural, impoverished, subsistence-farming community where Semenya was raised. Her home village, Masehlong, has an unemployment rate near 80 percent. They only recently acquired electricity.

As the *Guardian* recently wrote: "The loyalty of Semenya's friends and neighbours

"To order Semenya tested for gender seems about as reasonable as ordering IAAF officials like Philip Weiss tested for brain cells — which actually isn't a bad idea given his recent off-field performance"

RUNNING WILD

Unfortunately for women athletes, you can't be too masculine for fear you'll be called a lesbian. You can't be too aggressive for fear that you will be called mannish

is striking. South Africa's rural communities are typically regarded as bastions of social conservatism divided into traditional gender roles and expectations of femininity. But there is no evidence that Semenya, an androgynous tomboy who played football and wore trousers, was ostracised by her peers. Instead, they are shocked at what they perceive as the intolerance and prurience of western commentators."

'They are jealous,' said Dorcus Semenya, the athlete's mother, who led villagers in jubilant singing and dancing on Friday. "I say to them, go to hell, you don't know what you're saying. They're jealous because they don't want black people improving their status.'

It perhaps shouldn't be so surprising that they recognize the West's "intolerance and prurience." Unlike the United States, South Africa has same-sex marriage.

The African National Congress Home Affairs Minister Nosiviwe Mapisa-Nqakula, while arguing in favor of legalizing same-sex marriage, said, "In breaking with our past . . . we need to fight and resist all forms of discrimination and prejudice, including homophobia."

Unlike the United States, South Africa's Constitution formally prohibits discrimination based on sexuality. The Constitution reads: "The state may not unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds, including race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language and birth."

This does not mean South Africa is some sort of Shangri-La for LGBT people. But it does suggest the United States can stand to learn at thing or two about dis-

crimination and human sexuality.

There is currently no definitive information regarding Semenya's sexual orientation or gender choice. We know she identifies herself as an 18-year-old woman and she can run like the wind while not looking like a conventional pinup.

Unfortunately for women athletes, you can't be too masculine for fear you'll be called a lesbian. You can't be too aggressive for fear that you will be called mannish. You must be an outdated stereotype of a woman before you are an athlete. You must market yourself as nonthreatening and blazingly heterosexual.

The most famous female athlete of the first half of the twentieth century was Mildred Ella "Babe" Didrikson. She won three medals in track and field in the 1932 Olympics and also became the standard for all women golfers. Yet despite her towering athletic accomplishments, Didrikson was denounced as "mannish," "not-quite female" and a "Muscle Moll" who could not "compete with other girls in the very ancient and time honored sport of mantrapping."

Hearing that in addition to track and field she also played basketball, football and numerous other sports, an astonished journalist asked Didrikson, "Is there anything you don't play?" Without missing a beat, she reportedly answered, "Yeah, dolls."

From Babe Didrikson to Caster Semenya, to paraphrase the ad for Virginia Slims: you've come a long way... maybe. **CT**

Dave Zirin is the author of "A People's History of Sports in the United States" (The New Press) Contact him at edgeofsports@gmail.com.

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A letter to Jimmy Carter

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21 July 2009

Office of Jimmy Carter
 The Carter Center, 453 Freedom Parkway
 Atlanta, Georgia 30307

Dear Mr. Carter,

I am writing you because you are the one person alive today who could do the most to change contemporary history, altering its utterly destructive course, and increasing the possibility for humanity to survive globally in a humane world.

At almost 84, my focus is on trying to assure a livable world for future generations. If you are willing to speak the blunt truth as you understand it, your impact on world history could, I'm quite certain, be unprecedented.

We humans are at a cusp in historical development, one that divides unavoidable tragic destructiveness on one side - the one we're on now - from - on the other side - a radical, fundamentally different course that would permit true human fulfillment for all peoples.

You are the one living person who held the most powerful position in the world and who I see as a decent human being. My hope is that you will write a book revealing in detail why, during the course of your presidency, you were compelled by the established power system to authorize many terrible actions. It is a blight on humanity that the power structure forces every head of state to act against the well-being of the majority of people, or face possible assassination.

Please President Carter, consider the possibility of writing an account of your experiences prior to and as incumbent in the White House, a full account that will reach the hearts of the American people, and help develop a widespread understanding that the system of values that has been in place ever since the nation was founded is deeply unworkable for achieving a world of justice and dignity. Greed, acquisitiveness, materialism, individualism and hate must be replaced by generosity, sharing, the natural joys of being alive, communality and love.

I know this sounds wildly utopian, and it is, but I believe the changes are urgent.

Respectfully yours,

George Salzman

Prof Emeritus of (Theoretical) Physics
 Univ of Massachusetts, Boston

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