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Under the Taliban, Afghanistan's Madrassas Increase and Harbor Terrorists

Mohammad Shoaib Haidary
October 09, 2022

The number of madrassas has surged in Afghanistan. The Taliban is making them a safe haven for terrorists and threatening the security of the region and the world.

On August 12, Salman Rushdie was stabbed and injured severely by a Muslim man at an event in the US. The attack on him reveals that hatred against freedom of speech has reached boiling point and terrorist threats are on the rise. Fanatical ideologies that spread through social media in the West and madrassas in countries like Afghanistan and Pakistan are key reasons for this increase in terrorism.

Since the takeover of the Taliban in August 2021, the number of madrassas in Afghanistan has increased dramatically. These institutions have long been breeding grounds of terror. Their illustrious alumni include the Taliban who emerged from Pakistani madrassas in the 1990s. Madrassas help the Taliban to spread their ideology, achieve cultural hegemony and dominate Afghan society. This phenomenon is a threat to global security.

Why are madrassas a threat?

Madrassas can be referred to as Islamic religious schools or seminaries. Some of them go back almost 1,000 years in South Asia. The Taliban's top focus since taking over Afghanistan has been building madrassas. According to the BBC, there

are nearly 13,000 unregistered religious schools and 1,275 religious government-registered schools in Afghanistan.

Recently, some madrassas have relocated from Pakistan to Afghanistan because of the patronage provided by the Taliban after their takeover. In the two decades in the period 2001-2021, not as many new madrassas opened up under the non-Taliban governments who focused on a more modern education. This has changed under the Taliban who have allocated significant resources to seminaries. Sheikh Rahimullah Haqqani, an influential Taliban leader recently killed in a suicide attack, was among many who moved their madrassas from Pakistan to Afghanistan.

Even as madrassas open up in or move to Afghanistan, the Taliban are converting modern schools into madrassas. A well equipped modern school in the province of Khost was transformed into a madrassa, where 6,000 students and 130 teachers have been forced to depart. The Taliban have turned Metra, a local television station, into a seminary education center. A Taliban leader has reportedly issued a decree to create a big jihadi school in each of the 34 provinces of Afghanistan. The salary of jihadi school teachers is three times that of regular school teachers.

To further promote jihadi schools, the Taliban are converting high schools, institutes, teacher training institutes, women's affairs departments, and human rights commission offices into madrassas. The Taliban have also modified the university curriculum, increasing the total teaching requirements for Islamic studies from 8 to 24 credits.

Prior to the Afghan war with the Soviets in the 1980s, the madrassas in Pakistan were training future religious scholars. Thereafter, curricula began to teach jihad and militancy to Afghan learners in order to prepare them for war. Most of

the Taliban were trained in Saudi-financed madrassas in Pakistan. The curriculum was a combination of puritanical Saudi Wahhabism and anti-western Indian Deobandism. Deobandis hold westernization to be the source of corruption in contemporary Islamic states and deem the laws of such states illegitimate. Educators in Afghanistan's madrassas are mostly graduates of their Pakistani counterparts. Unsurprisingly, they are influenced by fundamentalist interpretations of Islam.

The difference in teachings between the religious schools and the modern schools has deepened division and fueled extremism. Madrassa scholars loathe secular learners and consider them followers of the western "infidels." This hatred explains why the Taliban bombed or burned many secular schools after 2001. In some of the madrassas like the famed Darul Uloom Haqqania in the town of Akora Khattak in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan, Osama bin Laden and Mullah Omar are hailed as heroes. The top leadership of the Taliban graduated from this madrassa, which has been called Pakistan's 'university of jihad.'

When the Taliban took over Afghanistan in August 2021, they prohibited girls in most provinces from attending secondary school. They dismissed all women from leadership posts in the civil service, forced women to cover their faces in public, and banned them from traveling unaccompanied by a male relative. Afghanistan's madrassas teach their students to hate democracy, freedom of speech and women's rights. These seminaries also inculcate intolerance against other Muslims who do not follow the straight and narrow interpretation of Islam followed by the Taliban. Shias are singled out for particular scorn and madrassas have been known to cause sectarian violence.

The Taliban is allocating more funds for madrassas and plans three to ten madrassas per

district. With 350 districts, Afghanistan could soon see an additional 1,000 madrassas. Money from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries are flowing into madrassas. Rural communities donate land, labor, food, clothes and services to madrassas. The combination of foreign money and local support makes madrassas formidable.

It is clear that the Taliban is systematically brainwashing the next generation through madrassas. This will strengthen their social base and churn out footsoldiers who would be willing to kill themselves for jihad. This bodes ill for Afghanistan, Pakistan, India and, indeed, the rest of the world.

What do the 1980s foretell?

This is not the first boom in madrassas in the region. Under General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq in the 1980s, these religious schools proliferated. Many catered to refugees fleeing Soviet rule in Afghanistan. As mentioned above, the Taliban are alumni of these Pakistani madrassas.

As is well known, the Taliban oppose education for girls and women's rights. Their puritanical version of Islam involves public flogging, stoning to death and decapitation in public. It is an open secret that the Taliban offered sanctuary to al-Qaeda. This dreaded terrorist outfit first burst into public attention on August 7, 1998 when it bombed two US embassies in East Africa. Nairobi, Kenya and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania were the targets. As per the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), 224 people died, including 12 Americans, and more than 4,500 people were wounded.

Given the Taliban's extremist Islamist ideology, it is inevitable that they will harbor terrorists again. Numerous reports indicate that "al-Qaeda and the self-proclaimed Islamic State in Khorasan [have been] growing in strength since the U.S. withdrawal." Jihadi groups around the

world have been inspired by the victory of the Taliban. Afghanistan's madrassas will provide these groups with foot soldiers, a social network and a base for their operations.

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The US Dollar's Global Dominance Is Facing a Big Threat

Syed Zain Abbas Rizvi
October 13, 2022

The US dollar has dominated the global economy since World War II. With the emergence of new challengers, American power is waning, the dollar is weakening and its hegemony is fading away.

The tale began in 1944. World War II was at its peak in Europe. Amidst such insecurities, 44 allied nations convened in New Hampshire to establish the Bretton Woods System. Under the stipulations of the system, all countries adjusted their currencies to the US dollar while fixing the dollar to gold. They assumed that fixing a gold standard would reduce volatility in the global economy. Conveniently, that agreement also established US hegemony over global trade. However, by the early 1970s, that system collapsed as the US encountered a gold crunch.

The US faced a balance of payments crisis. The Federal Reserve did not have enough gold reserves to back the dollar. The infamous Nixon Shock ended the US dollar's convertibility to gold.

The waxing and waning of the petrodollar

Henceforth, the US dollar plummeted as countries rapidly lost confidence in the greenback. This is the point that pivots the reality of today. In the mid-1970s, President Richard Nixon struck a deal with the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) to trade oil exclusively in dollars in exchange for US military assistance. Consequently, the petrodollar emerged, oil prices quadrupled, and the rest is history.

Ever since, the US dollar has been the undisputed exchange-reserve currency across the world. Agreements with Saudi Arabia and the rest of the Middle East reinforced the global oil trade in the greenback currency. Trading oil and gas futures, denominated in the dollar, entrenched the position of the US as the global superpower. While the euro surfaced as a strong contender in the 1990s, dollar-based finance continued to flourish. Developing economies like China and Russia had no choice but to hold US Treasuries and accrue massive dollar reserves to hedge currency risk. And, while fractious elements, like Iraq's Saddam Hussein, and Muammar Gaddafi relentlessly attempted to derail the petrodollar, those efforts led to invasion, assassination, and decimation.

Today, multiple geopolitical and economic factors are again turning the tide against the supremacy of the US dollar. Rapid globalization was already a ticking time bomb situation for the greenback. Now, China's rise as the next potential economic powerhouse, Russia's exclusion from the dollar-driven SWIFT system and a global economic slowdown are challenging the dominance of the US dollar.

The trend towards de-dollarization is not exactly a novel phenomenon. Latin America attempted to move away from the dollar in the 1990s. In response to US sanctions, Venezuela sought to pay for oil payments in Chinese yuan instead. Chile de-dollarized in the 1980s and generally avoided dollarization. In the early 2000s, Iraq attempted to sell oil in euros while Libya actively lobbied for years to forge a pan-African gold standard.

However, the global financial crisis of 2007-08 reversed this trend to de-dollarization. Over the last decade, no significant development emerged to diminish the dominance of the US dollar. With a rift emerging between the US and Saudi Arabia, the dollar faces a new challenge.

The US and Saudi Arabia drift apart

With 17.2% of global exports, Saudi Arabia is the world's largest crude oil exporter. In the past, it was the biggest supplier to the US. It is because of oil that Saudi Arabia emerged as a core US ally in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia leads OPEC. In the past, this gave the US an indirect sway over global oil prices, which are denominated in dollars. This allowed successive American governments to run massive trade deficits and take cheap debt. Since 1979, the Saudi Kingdom has been a US proxy against Iran.

In the past few years, the US has boosted shale oil production and built up its Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR). In the 1990s, the US imported an estimated 2 million barrels per day. By 2021, this figure fell to mere 500,000 barrels per day, a fall of 75%.

Recently, the Saudi royalty has been particularly dissatisfied with US President Joe Biden's policies in the Middle East. Biden's decision to withdraw support for Saudi Arabia's military intervention in Yemen annoyed Riyadh.

Houthi attacks on Saudi oil facilities and Biden's attempt to revive the nuclear deal with Iran has increased Saudi insecurities. Riyadh believes that the US is backtracking on the historic security guarantees to the House of Saud.

Biden's recent Middle East tour was an abject failure. He failed to achieve his principal objective: get Saudi Arabia to increase oil production. Most recently, the White House has accused OPEC+ of aligning with Russia after this grouping of oil producers agreed to deep oil production cuts. In turn, OPEC+ has accused the West of "wealth arrogance" and hypocrisy.

China and others emerge as an alternative to the US

Over the years, China has emerged as the top importer of Saudi oil. In 2020, Saudi Arabia exported \$95.7 billion worth of oil. China accounted for \$24.7 billion of that figure while the US imports were a mere \$6.59 billion. China's Belt and Road Initiative has invested in Saudi Arabia and Chinese investments reportedly reached \$43.47 billion in 2021.

Saudi Arabia is planning to invest in Chinese companies. Aramco has signed a \$10 billion deal with Chinese petroleum companies. Talk of the petroyuan oil trade has hit the headlines. As of now, the \$13.4 trillion euro dollar market and the \$25 trillion US Treasury market offer depth and liquidity that no one else can match. Yet this could change in the future. Rising interest rates have strengthened the dollar, causing import bills of poorer economies to shoot up and triggering a global debt crisis. This might shake the global faith in the US dollar and at least China's trading partner might become more amenable to trading in yuan.

Russian President Vladimir Putin recently addressed the BRICS Summit, a grouping of

Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. He spoke of an alternate mechanism for international payments and an alternative to the International Monetary Fund's Special Drawing Rights (SDRs). Instead of denominating against the dollar, countries could use a basket of their respective currencies instead.

Talk of Iran and even Saudi Arabia joining BRICS has emerged. Were this to happen, such a grouping would make up more than a third of the global GDP, over 25% of the global oil output, roughly 40% of the global iron production, and about half of the world's agricultural production. Even a weakened Russia has caused havoc in global oil and commodity markets. An expanded BRICS with its own reserve currency could seriously challenge the dollar.

Russia and China are already engaging in ruble-yuan trade. Russian energy giant Gazprom recently announced that Beijing would start "making payments for Russian gas supplies in the national currencies of the countries -- the ruble and yuan." Frozen out by the West from SWIFT, Russia is now using China's Cross-Border Interbank Payment System (CIPS). In due course, CIPS could emerge as a big winner of the Russia-Ukraine War. India is openly defying American pressure by increasing its oil purchases from Russia. Now, Russian oil makes for 21% of Indian oil imports, up from less than 1% before the war. India is buying discounted Russian oil to curb inflation and this trade is no longer denominated in dollars. Along with closer Russia-China ties, India's imports of Russian oil dent the dominance of the dollar. So are moves by NATO member Turkey to buy discounted Russian oil. If such trends continue, the days of the US dollar may be numbered.

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High Time for Africans to Reclaim Their Agency

Claire Price, Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò
October 16, 2022

In this edition of The Interview, Professor Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò argues that Africans are authors of their own script. To plot Africa's entire current realities on the sole axis of colonialism is just plain wrong.

In this edition of The Interview, Nigerian academic Professor Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò explains why Africa's decolonization movement has got it wrong – and why Africans urgently need to reclaim their agency. Táíwò works at Cornell University in the US, where he is Professor of African Political Thought and Chair at the Africana Studies and Research Center.

Táíwò is a noted scholar and a provocative thinker. His views can be controversial. He says: "A lot of the decolonization movement is complete nonsense, it's totally irrelevant. And I use very

strong language because these people are causing a lot of damage in the continent.”

It is for this reason Táíwò fights back against the movement that spurred “Rhodes Must Fall” and called for colonial reparations. Before this interview, he had just returned from Nigeria where his mother passed away but Táíwò says he’s keen to take his mind off his loss. And while he starts off gently, his appeals become more impassioned as he warms to his theme.

Táíwò’s book, *Against Decolonisation: Taking African Agency Seriously*, prompted a FO° Live discussion on June 28 earlier this year: *In 2022, Can and Does Africa Determine Its Own Destiny?*

Táíwò’s book has now been recommended by *The Financial Times*. As per this venerable British newspaper, the book “makes a powerful case for how Africans can get out of their malaise: not by being trapped in a psychological state of victimhood, but by reclaiming their agency.”

The transcript has been edited for clarity.

Claire Price: Agency is a big theme of your book – how do you define it?

Olúfẹ̀mi Táíwò: One of the central tenants of modernity is the idea of the self. That’s the agency that I’m talking about - that the individual is the author of her or his life script. Many of us are messed up and write very terrible scripts for ourselves but however we write it, what is important is that we own it. The colonialists substituted themselves for the agency of the colonized. While that lasted, the colonized didn’t give up their agency – they kept on contesting the power and authority of the colonizers. But much of the decolonising literature does not take seriously this agency of the African. And by making it seem as if colonialism is the axis on which to plot Africa’s entire phenomenon is just wrong.

Price: Do you feel that many African writers deny their own agency by blaming colonialism for their problems?

Táíwò: Much of the decolonising literature, not African writers but decolonising literature, is vested in that. But the fact that we can’t blame colonialism for everything does not mean we can’t blame colonialism for anything.

Price: Have you faced criticism that you underplay the impact of colonialism?

Táíwò: Unfortunately no, I haven’t faced criticism.

Price: Is that fortunately or unfortunately?

Táíwò: Unfortunately! Who knows, in this book, I might get some people’s goat and they might challenge it. But previously, it was thought that colonialism brought modernity to Africa. I argued in my first book that modernity was introduced to Africa by the missionaries and that those ideas were stifled by colonialism. And 12 years since its publication, no-one has challenged this thesis. That’s not a boast, it’s just the honest truth.

Price: I’m going to go through a few things that people blame colonialism for. First, borders. Isn’t the decolonisation movement right to blame Europeans for drawing up arbitrary borders and causing all sorts of trouble?

Táíwò: I have argued in the book that it’s been 60 years now that most of Africa has been independent. If Africans don’t like their borders, they could do something about them. Those borders are not sacrosanct – look at Eritrea, Sudan and the secessionist movements in Cameroon. There is no country in the world that is natural, all borders are artificial. In fact, most of the world’s countries are multinational states. Just look at the United Kingdom and Russia.

Price: The second charge is tribal conflict, which people claim was exacerbated by the colonizers' divide and rule policy. We can see how that played out in the recent Kenyan elections.

Táíwò: First, you need to get rid of that terminology. There are no tribes. That's straight out of racist colonial anthropology. You don't look to the national group that I belong to and call it a tribe. It's global, it's multi-ethnic, there are a lot of different dialects with regional variations. It has a civilization that dates back at least one thousand years.

When Europe was making the transition to modernity and the feudal structure was being broken up, they migrated to cities under their tribal affiliations. As capitalism grew, they started organizing themselves according to guilds and that was the start of the trade union movement. Africans wanted to do the same under the colonial movement - but the colonial authorities pre-empted them and insisted that Africans organized themselves by tribal unions.

Price: So they can be blamed?

Táíwò: Yes, they could be blamed for exacerbating tensions but some Africans have tried to craft different identities since independence – and some of their experiments have succeeded. For example, you don't have those tensions in Tanzania, which is made up of various ethnic and national groups. That's not the way they organize their elections. Even when you talk about Zanzibar, those tensions are religious rather than ethnic. And in Senegal, everybody now speaks Wolof – we're seeing the Wolofisation of Senegal.

Claire: You've talked about languages there. Can African thinkers be truly “decolonized” if they write in English or French?

Táíwò: Why do people assume that you cannot domesticate a language? We live in a world of several Englishes. I work in the US and I went to school in Canada and they don't speak the same English. And they are not the same as UK English. Why are Indians celebrated for calibrating English in their own way and Africans are treated as if they are still minions. It doesn't make sense.

That's the reason why a lot of the decolonisation movement is complete nonsense, it's totally irrelevant. And I use very strong language because these people are causing a lot of damage in the continent.

English did not just come with colonialism. Africans have been writing in English since 1769. Formal colonialism did not come to West Africa until 1865. Do you want to throw away 100 years of history?

And who insisted that Africans should speak their own indigenous languages and only speak enough English to service the colonial machine? The colonizers!

Price: Ethiopian American academic Adom Getachew has said that: “Acknowledging that colonial history shapes the current inequalities and hierarchies that structure the world sets the stage for the next one: reparations and restitution.” What are your thoughts on that?

Táíwò: Honestly, I don't touch that. And the reason why is a very simple one. There's a reparations movement for those who were forcibly brought to the Americas, which was later expanded to include reparations for colonial rule. People need to separate the two.

As an African immigrant to the United States, I cannot be part of the reparation movement for black people in this country because there's no basis for it. If I come from West Africa; a country

like Nigeria, Ghana or Sierra Leone, from which many people were shipped off as slaves, I need to do some very serious genealogy. Because if I'm from one of those families that profited from it, I should be paying reparations! We need to take history very seriously.

The idea that people went in and kidnapped people – yes that's how it started but eventually a market was created. Willing buyer, willing seller. Unfortunately, we're still making the same deals. If we say we were coerced then and we're still being coerced now, then we're permanent children.

In 50 years, maybe our grandchildren will be asking the Chinese for reparations for what they're doing in Africa right now. And that's the fault of the Chinese? No, I'm sorry. We need to have internal debates about this. We should not pretend that Africans are victims all along.

Price: Why do these ideas matter?

Táíwò: As I did my research for this book, I said wait a minute, is this what people are peddling about pre-colonial history? Are you suggesting that how life was led in Africa in 15th century was the same as in the 19th century?

The kind of granular engagement with the complexity of life and thought in different parts of Africa is being effaced on a daily basis. That cannot be good for the future of scholarship about the African continent. That for me is not just a disservice, it's really bordering on the criminal.

I'm sorry that I have to speak in very strong terms. This is not a divergence, it's not academic. It's about how Africa is going to deliver for its citizens. These are ideas that go to the heart of human dignity.

I don't see the decolonisation movement getting into all that. It's all about chasing slights. Not slights for ordinary people but for academics.

***Claire Price** is the chair of Fair Observer. She is a video journalist and media trainer, with nearly two decades of experience at the BBC and Agence France-Presse (AFP).

***Olúfẹmi Táíwò** is a professor at Cornell University who has expanded the African contribution in philosophy and has, simultaneously, worked to indigenize the discipline. Over the years, Táíwò has made philosophy more relevant to Africa and African students.

Islam + Fascism = Islamofascism, but What Does It Really Mean?

Amir Darwish
October 20, 2022

The term Islamofascism is often bandied about, but the history of this term is complicated, its meaning messy and its usage unclear.

During the recent French elections, politicians like Marine Le Pen, but also members of President Macron's circle, were not shy to use the term 'Islamofascism' to attract voters. They had often used it to stir emotions. For instance, on October 29, 2020 when three people were killed by a knife attack in Nice, Christian Estrosi, the town's mayor said that 'Islamofascism' has to be eradicated from French

territory. The meaning of such the term remains vague. It is used to politically demonise a segment of the population and influence the ethnic majority of voters. Although there has been some scholarly work around ‘Islamofascism’, this has not in any clear or detailed way involved a full consideration of the meaning of the term fascism.

While the term was coined in the 1930s, its use and abuse have come to the forefront since 9/11. Those who agree with its use are mainly commentators from a journalistic or political background and rarely actual scholars. The closest such comparison is the research conducted by Tamir Bar-On, whose article on the topic proposed seeking to analyse the term according to a typology that distinguishes four competing forms of discourse: ‘Thou shall not compare’, ‘Islamofascism’, ‘Islamofascism as epithet’, and ‘Dare to compare’. It is however noteworthy that linking fascism, whose historical roots are clearly European, to non-European movements is not new. There have been works on several fascist movements in America, Africa, and Asia, such as Young Egypt, Japanese fascism, and the Lebanese Phalange movement.

The history of the term

The invention of the term has been abusively attributed to several commentators,, including politicians and scholars. However, none of the proposed thinkers, writers or political actors are known to have seriously engaged with studies of fascism. Those who have engaged did so in a very selective manner.

‘Islamic fascism’, or what became known since the 1990s as ‘Islamofascism’, is a term that draws a comparison between the ideological characteristics of specific Islamist movements and a broad range of European fascist movements before and during the World War II era Europe.

The earliest use of ‘Islamofascism’ goes back to 1933 when Akhtar Ḥusayn Rā’ēpūrī attacked the poet Muḥammad Iqbāl, who had tried to secure the independence of Pakistan as a Muslim nation. Rā’ēpūrī referred to this campaign as an act of “Islamic fascism”. Such a use of the term fascism remains vague, and fails to reflect any broader scholarly work on the subject. That may appear understandable, as Rā’ēpūrī was writing in the 1930s, when fascism was still in its infancy.

Fast forward to the post-World War II era. The Arab press occasionally used terms such as the Arabic *al-fāshiyya al-islāmiyya* (‘Islamic Fascism’) in the 1960s. They did so without any clear understanding of the term’s background and mainly used it to demonie their political opponents. The most prominent Arab intellectual to use a related term as a warning and critique may be the well-known Syrian poet, Adonis, who was born in 1933. He used the term *al-islāmiyya al-fāshiyya* (“fascistic Islam”). The Pakistani Muslim philosopher Fazlur Rahman (1919-88), who taught for years at the University of Chicago (not to be confused with the Pakistani radical Fazal-ur-Rehman), referred to ‘Islamic fascists’ in his works.

Meanwhile, the founder of the Republican Brother movement in Sudan, Mahmoud Mohammed Taha, called the Sudanese Islamist Al Turabi, in 1968, ‘fascist’ claiming he was a ‘student of Mussolini’. Such usage of the term served simply to tarnish a political opponent and took no account of any serious studies of fascism. Although there were some appearances of the term prior to 9/11, the phrase rapidly gained currency in Western discourse after the September 11th attacks. Just like the basic term “fascism,” used to describe anyone or any party with authoritarian tendencies, it became prevalent in Western journalistic and intellectual circles and was used and widely abused.

Proponents and Opponents

The origins of the term ‘Islamofascism’ remain obscure, with no agreement about the person or persons who may have invented the term. The neoconservative writer, Norman Podhoretz, played a central role defending the term and arguing for its validity. Podhoretz stands out, as the editor of the magazine *Commentary*, a home for US neoconservatism. He has used the term in numerous of his works. This includes a book-length argument entitled *World War IV: The Long Struggle Against Islamofascism*. He started his campaign in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, and by 2007 was asserting that the US was already facing ‘World War IV’ against Islamofascism.

Podhoretz describes Islamofascism as an enemy with two heads, one of a religious character and the other secular. He believes that Islamofascism is bringing about World War IV, that the fight must be taken to the enemy (the Islamofascists) on several fronts, and that it will take a long time for the war to end. He asserts that our ‘Islamofascist’ enemy is “even more dangerous and will be more difficult to defeat” than Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union.

Podhoretz nevertheless fails to provide any serious reasons why we should believe that the enemy can be considered to be in some sense fascist. He fails to cite any exact similarities between fascism and Islamofascism. Eschewing analysis, he contents himself with demonizing a movement whose contours remain undefined.

Some leftist thinkers have opposed the term and its use, citing several reasons. The American poet and essayist Katha Pollitt offered the following scholarly argument as to why she disagreed with it: “What’s wrong with ‘Islamofascism’? For starters, it’s a terrible historical analogy. Italian Fascism, German Nazism and other European fascist movements of the 1920s and ’30s were

nationalist and secular, closely allied with international capital and aimed at creating powerful, up-to-date, all-encompassing states... You wouldn’t find a fascist leader consulting the Bible [referring to Islamist who consult the Koran] to figure out how to organise the banking system or the penal code or the women’s fashion industry.”

It’s interesting here to note how in this case the author makes an assumption concerning her readership and audience. She argues that the term should not be used because of the specific political features of fascism, rather than because of its inadequacy attributable to the failure to back it up with proper scholarly engagement. No more than the others does Pollitt engage with fascism studies.

Overall, politicians tend to use the term to attract voters, increasingly as elections get closer. The voices of such politicians provoke a strong echo precisely to the extent that they refrain from analyzing or even explaining the term. In a truly rational world, scholars should seek clarity when likening fascism to Islamism or Islamism to fascism. A full examination of both phenomena is required.

In reality, the term fascism has no place in Islamic thought, which is why serious scholars dismiss the term as inadequate or inappropriate. The term ‘Islamofascism’ correlates very closely with a tendency in Western to ostracise Muslims. Ideally the two questions – concerning the meaning of the term and the reasons Westerners vilify Islam –, should be the objects a separate discussion. Now that the term is gaining currency and, perhaps for the first time being taken up by serious scholars, the opportunity has emerged to reflect more carefully on its use.

[Fair Observer is a media partner of the Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right (CARR). This article has been published in collaboration with CARR.]

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An Open Conversation on Buddhism

Srinivas Reddy, Peter Isackson, Steven Elleman
October 23, 2022

Three people from three different backgrounds, age groups and parts of the world discuss Hinduism, Buddhism and the role of religion in society.

In the summer of 2022, Reddy and Hofmann conversed for over an hour on the global significance of Buddhism. Their conversation led to the discussion below, which exemplifies Fair Observer's belief in the criticality of discourse.

You can find below how three authors from three different generations in three different locations wrestle with issues pertaining to

Buddhism, religion and society that are still relevant today.

Steven Elleman: Did the deification of Buddha represent an ancient process of co-opting?

Srinivas Reddy: I think the rise of worshipping Buddha like a god reflects the move from a strictly monastic tradition to a more popular religion for the general public. Older well-established practices of ritual and praise were hard to eliminate and so they were gradually incorporated into Buddhist practice. Also the idea is that we do not worship the Buddha as a human god but rather an outward manifestation of the internally realized Buddhist truths.

Elleman: In this context, did Buddhism represent a process of opting out of Hinduism, i.e. when Buddhism was starting out did it actively oppose Hinduism or did it just go its own way, avoiding and circumventing Hinduism altogether?

Reddy: There are indeed some aspects of Buddhism that critique Hinduism, or rather elements of brahmanical culture, particularly caste and the Vedas, but the important thing to keep in mind historically is that there were multiple diverse traditions within what we commonly call Hinduism, and also several other "non-Hindu" traditions circulating at that time alongside early Buddhism. It was a rich and diverse religious landscape. Later on one could argue that Hinduism co-opted Buddhism, which is one reason why Buddhism died out in India. In the modern context, Ambedkar did indeed opt out of Hinduism in favor of Buddhism because it did not enshrine a doctrine of caste.

Elleman: Did Buddhism have a typical pattern of social organization, and how did it contrast with Hinduism? Forgive me for the comparison, but Protestantism and Catholicism really come

to mind, where Protestantism was a reaction against entrenchment, centralization, and ossification in Catholicism. It feels like one of the ways it "fought back" was to be flat and decentralized compared to Catholicism.

Reddy: As in the previous question, Buddhism did critique the prevailing social structure of Hinduism, particularly in regard to caste divisions, so in that sense it was a movement reacting against the rigidity of brahmanical social norms. But again, this was not Buddhism's *raison d'être*. Buddhism opened up previously inaccessible forms of knowledge to various communities, particularly merchants. Like many reform movements however, Buddhism evolved to include many of the hierarchies and structures that it once critiqued.

As you said, I do think we're in a similar situation these days vis-à-vis capitalist systems, and I think the lesson from Buddhism is two-fold: first, the need to focus on developing your individual self and reforming your daily practices; and second, to be wary of becoming the thing you want to change.

Steven Elleman's reflections on Srinivas Reddy's answers

Professor Reddy,

Wow, thank you for such a thorough, thoughtful response.

This definitely helps. To provide a bit more context, I believe we're in an era framed by a secular religion that we might call "State-Sponsored Objectivity." Just like religions before it, Objectivity makes universal claims about the world, but unlike Christianity, its sins are of omission instead of commission. It abstains, and in abstaining it pretends to remain neutral, but at its root it establishes a false dichotomy with damning

implications. Objective, distanced, neutral, become the new good. Subjective, close, biased, the new bad. And just like in times past, we've been gaslit into believing that insight comes externally, rather than internally.

In each of these historical periods (Buddhism, Reformation, and the secularized, objectivized present) a broad realization emerges of our collective gaslighting. I suspect one major catalyst of this is the new avenues of diffusion. Perhaps it was trade and merchants with the rise of Buddhism. The printing press during the Reformation. And today's internet.

Forgive me for my idealism (delusions of grandeur?), but by looking at history and applying its lessons to the present, perhaps we may detect an opportunity to figure out what's next, what may be an alternative to State-Sponsored Objectivity? What are philosophies needed for a Post-Truth world, where "Truth is dead" joins "God is dead"? This is a theme I've thought a lot about and would love to develop it in a dialogue. No pressure to join if this feels a bit too idealistic, but I think it would be invaluable to have your particular vantage point. History never repeats itself, but it rhymes, and perhaps Buddhism follows the same rhyme scheme?

I'm including Atul and Peter in this conversation because I believe Fair Observer is seeking to offer us this kaleidoscopic sense of the world where subjectivity and different vantage points are valued. But we still tend to express these things in the language of Objectivity and the trappings of BBC's supposedly neutral eye. Could we need to develop a different vocabulary? Then again, a different vocabulary requires a different guiding philosophy.

All the best,
Steven

Peter Isackson's Reply to Steven Elleman's Response

Steven,

Many thanks for initiating this back and forth with Srinivas after his unambiguously "enlightening" and supremely enjoyable talk. This supplementary dialogue perhaps highlights the limits of Zoom-style educational endeavors, where questions and even answers are emptied of their human content (i.e. subjective, sensory meaning, or deeper social sense).

I expect you may not be aware of the fact that my very first article in Fair Observer – which Fair Observer's founder and CEO, Atul Singh, pushed me to write – was the result of a spontaneous exchange on the Oxford Alumni LinkedIn discussion group. I contested Atul's representation of religion. Atul pressed me to cogently pen an article in which I might express why I thought he was wrong for publication.

Thinking back on it today, in the light of what you have just expressed, I was contesting an example of what you call the religion of Objectivity. It was something Atul had gleaned from Neil de Grasse Tyson's pontifications on his updated version of Carl Sagan's Cosmos. It sounded like science, so it must be objective (i.e. true)!

One thing to take away from this dialogue, thanks to Srinivas's explanations, is something that has always been known across many civilizations, but which is too complex for the religion of Objectivity (which is also the religion of corporate media) to handle. Any and every religious tradition encompasses a spectrum of human activities from the purely mental to the most formally executed and often meticulously controlled physical rituals. At the purely sociological level, all religions incarnate the idea of "religio" (literally tying

people together in Latin), but with variations from loose and voluntary to legally constraining. Call it community building. They all include a serious approach to ethics that spans the Buddhist idea of individual mindfulness (that correlates in some ways with Christian or Augustinian conscience... which only in recent centuries became focused on the emotions of guilt and shame) to the acknowledgement of formal laws. Buddhism's major distinction may be that it refuses to formulate any of its recommendations or even strictures as laws (though perhaps Srinivas will inform us that some Buddhist traditions do precisely that).

The Judaic and Islamic traditions insist on the primacy of the law enshrined in scripture. St Paul's formulation of Christianity announced the abolition of "the (Hebrew) Law," preparing the terrain for Augustinian conscience. But the social vocation of pre-Reformation Christianity, partially compelled by the feudal system that had something of a caste element to it, progressively built up a parallel set of ritualistic imperatives that effectively took on the force of "law" in the Hebraic sense. That is what Luther protested against, spawning a movement that ended up proclaiming there is no collective law ("the priesthood of all believers").

This subsequently evolved from a principle to become a doctrine. In that sense, it followed the pattern Srinivas mentioned: "becoming the thing you want to change." The uncomfortable cohabitation of competing doctrines inevitably led to some seriously violent conflict (130 years of religious wars), decimating the population of entire regions. It was all based on the opposition between competing doctrines, all of which, by the way, had the pretension of being someone's "law of the land" according to the apparently rational but ultimately explosive compromise of *cuius regio, eius religio* that left the question of an established

religion to the discretion of the local monarch or lord.

The reaction to that fundamentally unstable status quo was the emergence in 1648 of the nation state as the unique framework for collective identity. The state replaced religion as the ultimate binding force in society. Logically enough, to fill the gap after the marginalization of theology, it produced the Enlightenment, which supposed the possibility of purely rational laws governing not only the functioning of the state but also public morals. These rational laws could only be based on empirical principles uncontaminated by subjectivity. Thus was the ideology out of which today's religion of Objectivity was born. It's worth noting that though it relied on grand principles – such as Jefferson's famous “all men are created equal” – it didn't exclude largely shared personal feelings about the inferiority of other admittedly "useful" races.

Interestingly, all societies recognize but apply diversely a wide range of co-existing laws: natural laws (or what are deemed the laws of nature), formal (constitutional) laws, some variations on common law (e.g. case law), religious laws (depending on the religion) and the laws of decorum. PC or the implicit code of “politically correct,” for example, is a new set of prescriptions that some people feel has or must have the "force of law." The real problem at the core of Objectivity is that the notion of law, which can be organic, has been reduced to the idea of constraint and prohibition. This has always been an implicit but not always dominant factor in the behavioral laws of specific religions (e.g. Judaism, Islam, Mormonism, Jainism...). In any case, the borderline between moral laws and imposed rituals in every society will always be ambiguous.

I may be wrong, but one of the lessons I drew from Srinivas' talk was the desperate need we have of understanding what religions (including

Objectivity!) share and what those common traits tell us about human society itself. Not with the aim of establishing some kind of syncretic truth, but of helping to build what Steven calls “this kaleidoscopic sense of the world.” Beyond that is the other big issue: the individual and the cosmos. Society will always stand somewhere between the two.

Since my very first article in Fair Observer was about religion, I still hope that at Fair Observer we can find a way of building a kind of open think tank (but a tank with no walls) that deals with religion and society, metaphysics, ethics and philosophy in their interaction with geopolitical events and purely social and economic phenomena. Publications like Aeon feature articles on these topics, but they tend to be academic, i.e. knowledgeable and informative, but cold & distant, according to the norms of Objectivity.

Perhaps we could use your reflections on the religion of Objectivity as a starting point. In any case, this discussion is already a model of how dialogue can be productive. Which makes me think of David Bohm, who promoted true dialogue. Though an incontestably "Objective" scientist (an influential theoretical physicist) he was also inspired by Krishnamurti's version of Buddhism.

Many thanks, Steven, for pushing this forward.

Warm regards,
Peter

Srinivas Reddy's Conclusion

Thank you all...lots to mull over indeed! As the Buddha urged, we must keep questioning and refining our thoughts, just as a goldsmith assays gold by melting, forging and polishing.

***Srinivas Reddy** is a scholar, translator and musician. He studied classical South Asian languages and literatures (Sanskrit, Tamil and Telugu) at UC Berkeley, and learned music from his guru and mentor Sri Partha Chatterjee, a direct disciple of the late sitar maestro Pandit Nikhil Banerjee. Srinivas is Guest Professor of South and Southeast Asian Studies at IIT Gandhinagar in Gujarat, India and Visiting Assistant Professor of Religious Studies and Contemplative Studies at Brown University.

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When The Right Goes Wrong

Mauktik Kulkarni
October 24, 2022

Coming from Jaithirth Rao, a doyen of the Hindu right in India, the argument that leftists are always wrong is astonishing in its lack of nuance.

As a fiscally conservative, socially liberal centrist, I have found Jaithirth Rao's commentary thought-provoking, occasionally even witty and entertaining. His civilizational pride in centuries-old Indian and Hindu traditions is the flavor of the political season in India, making him an important public voice. Given his stature, it was strange and disappointing to notice the lack of nuance in his latest piece about leftists in the US and India being wrong about using terms like minoritarian and majoritarian in their respective countries.

The US was and remains an imperfect union

One can begin with the fact that, as one of the shortest constitutions in the world, the American founding document is extremely conservative. So much so, that voting rights were restricted to white, land-owning men at the dawn of the republic. Distrust of the occupying British government ran so deep that constitutional articles were framed in terms of public and personal affairs the federal government is allowed to get involved in.

On the other hand, as the longest constitutions in the world, with universal adult franchise embedded from the get-go, the Indian founding document is arguably one of the most liberal in the world. The belief that the government is a force for socio-economic good underlies the framing of the Indian constitution. The Indian federal government was entrusted with bringing about socio-economic change in an impoverished country weakened by centuries of colonization. Keeping in mind that the founding fathers of these countries had different visions for their respective countries' governing structures, let us scrutinize some of the issues animating Rao's argument: American electoral representation system that includes two senators per state and the Electoral College, legislative and judicial quirks like the filibuster and the number of judges in the Supreme Court, and Islam in India.

Rao would have the readers believe that two senators per state, regardless of population, is sacrosanct because it's a centuries-old constitutional safeguard. It is well known that the original choice itself was a compromise between two schools of thought: The Virginia Plan, advocating proportional representation, and the New Jersey Plan, proposing one senator per state. The so-called Connecticut Compromise adopted by the constitutional convention was not driven by philosophical or ideological purity, but the spirit of democratic compromise. After 125 years of letting state legislatures elect federal senators, Americans realized their folly. Some senate seats were going vacant for years due to perennial state-level political gridlocks while others had become 'millionaire's clubs,' out of the reach of and out of touch with the people they were intended to represent. The 17th amendment, supported by both conservatives and liberals, corrected it in 1913 and made senators accountable to all the voters of the state.

While it corrected some of the distortions, others have crept in. Rapid industrialization of farming and mushrooming of high-tech industries near the coasts have led to mass migration, resulting in more than half of the population living in just nine of the 50 states, thereby allowing less than half of Americans to control 82% of the senate. On the other hand, regions like Puerto Rico and Washington, DC, with tax-paying populations rivaling those of states like the Dakotas or Alaska, do not have federal legislative representation. Despite years of campaigning for statehood, conservatives have blocked their efforts because they are reliably liberal votaries. While I am philosophically supportive of the constitutional safeguard, the distortions beg the question: Are senators supposed to represent landmass? Or citizens? Rao seems to paint anyone asking such thorny questions as simply wrong.

The case of the Electoral College, which the author describes as 'consciously established some 200 years ago,' is even more egregious. When it was enshrined in the constitution, slaves were concentrated more in the Southern cotton and tobacco growing states with no voting rights. And yet, the infamous 'three-fifths compromise' counted each slave as 3/5th of a person when deciding proportional representation in the House of Representatives and presidential elections, skewing the political power disproportionately in favor of Southern slave-owners.

Furthermore, since federal congressional districting is somewhat counter-intuitively governed by the states and the Supreme Court has refused to interfere in the process, gerrymandering has rendered an overwhelming majority of House of Representatives seats out-of-bounds of opposition parties. Assuming that Rao is not opposed to abolishing slavery and the Civil Rights Act granting African Americans voting rights, the argument that the Electoral College is somehow above the fray is bizarre. Two American states have recently changed the way they assign their presidential electoral votes from winner-takes-all to be in line with the percentage of votes each presidential candidate received in their states. And several states are experimenting with ranked choice voting systems to improve electoral outcomes. It has been evolving since its inception, as it should be in democracies.

Similar nuances regarding the filibuster and the composition of the Supreme Court are well documented. Without even getting into the details of the filibuster, the author himself mentions that the Electoral College is 200 years old and the filibuster is a mere 100, acknowledging that it is not enshrined in the constitution. If the democratic spirit of give-and-take led to the adoption of the filibuster – and at least 161 instances between 1969 and 2014 of bypassing it – dismissing arguments for its reform as wrong seems petulant.

As far as the Supreme Court is concerned, the constitution established it with six justices and gave the Congress the power to determine its composition, putting it in the realm of bare-knuckle politics. Its composition has been changed six times and it has seen ten justices under Abraham Lincoln's presidency. As this author has argued recently, if conservatives can employ realpolitik and constitutional immorality to tilt the court conservative, calling liberals insufferably wrong for advocating similar tactics to tilt it in their favor seems hypocritical.

In addition to providing fodder for academic debates, these quirks have had serious real-world consequences. Several American conservatives, most notably David Frum, have argued of late that it has destabilized the American system and brought it on the brink of a debt default. It was not the passion of the majority, as the founding fathers had feared, but that of the minority, whipped up by the lies of Donald Trump, that led to the insurrection of January 6th. Assuming that Rao is a supporter of Narendra Modi's climate change policies, the intransigence and climate change denialism of American conservatives that has had disastrous effects on the whole world should be dead wrong in his books.

India is imperfect too

Turning to India, one does not have to be a minority-baiter or appeaser to call out growing majoritarianism in India. A pan-national Islamic identity has had a long history and still enjoys support in some Muslim quarters. But the effects of religious orthodoxy and inward-looking conservatism among some sections of Muslims are evident globally. Barring a few exceptions, Muslim-majority countries have not contributed to scientific thought or technological breakthroughs in the post-industrial-revolution era. Middle Eastern countries that were at the forefront of science, arts and culture in Islam's heydays are

now in the headlines primarily for their repressive rulers, lack of human development and freedom of expression.

That should not stop a discerning mind like Rao's from calling out the razing of Muslim rioters' houses without due process after some riots and not meting out the same punishment to Hindu rioters after other riots as majoritarianism. Or invoking sedition and Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) laws against Muslim dissenters and hatemongers to lock them up without bail while booking Hindu hatemongers under the most lenient penal provisions and letting them off on bail as religious discrimination. The same applies to the premature release and felicitation of 11 Hindu convicts of the gruesome gangrape of Bilkis Bano while the 31 convicts of the Godhra train burning are serving their life sentences. Again, as this author has in the past, it should be easy to call out Islamic terrorism in Kashmir, support peaceful resettlement of Kashmiri Pandit refugees, and criticize Modi's government for tirelessly counting Covid-19 cases resulting from the Tablighi Jamaat event while not showing the same diligence and urgency after the exponential rise in cases in the aftermath of the Kumbh Mela and Modi's crowded political rallies for the West Bengal elections.

Assuming that leftists are all wrong might be a simple, elegant, and utterly lucid argument. Coming from Rao, it does disservice to the culture of public debate, reasonable fact-based dialogue, and political give-and-take, which are essential to any democratic system.

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has played a key role in a few health care and tech start-ups.

UK's NHS is Broken: Is Private Medicine the Answer?

John Broadway, Alan Waring
October 26, 2022

With increasing health care demands and capacity constraints, does private health care offer a better alternative to universal social insurance schemes? Or, does private health care simply put profits before patients? The authors dive deep to make sense of it all.

Universal Health Care (UHC) developed shortly after World War II, especially in the United Kingdom, mainland Europe, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. It has two main principles. The first is cradle-to-grave health care funded by or on behalf of the state for all citizens regardless of age, status, income or means, and either subsidized or free on demand at the point of care. The second is that the source of state funding derives from the population and employers. This may be sourced through general taxation or, more usually, a combination of general taxation to fund capital and payroll demands, complemented by compulsory national social insurance or a nominated health insurer for all those of working age. The required funds are typically deducted from wages at the source. Thus, in principle, UHC is an attempt to defray total health care costs evenly and fairly across the population.

Hand-in-glove with UHC is the establishment of a National Health Service (NHS) charged with delivering it. There is no set template for an NHS and different countries have developed different schemes, all with greater or lesser involvement of state or state-backed insurance schemes and patient contributions. In general, NHS systems have proven effective in their provision and very popular with patients. There is little evidence of patients being unable to obtain care owing to inability to pay or denial of insurance, since coverage is a statutory requirement. However, most countries continue to face NHS challenges arising from aging populations, increased demand, pandemic crises, staff shortages, and new and often expensive treatments. In some countries, especially the UK, such challenges have translated into chronic delays in treatment and long waiting lists, often running into years.

Universal Health Care versus Private Provision

Some countries have eschewed UHC, the most prominent being the US, which by far spends the most per capita on health care, some US\$3.6 trillion in total in 2018 or US\$11,172 per person. This represents at least 1.5 times that spent per capita by European countries. Despite such expenditure, timely treatments, full staffing, and the latest technology, the US ranked only 22nd in the global list of effective health care outcomes. There are many reasons for this discrepancy (e.g. OECD 2015; Dorn's classic 2008 study), including a highly fragmented non-national system and differential standards, insurer disavowal of cover for certain conditions, and patient inability to pay premiums owing to poverty or unemployment. US Census data for 2016 showed that some 28.1 million citizens had no health care insurance. Over the next three years, the figure remained relatively static and by 2020 it was still 27.96m or 8.6% of the population.

Thus, it may appear that, ideologically speaking, there exist two directly opposed approaches to health care – UHC and private provision. While in UHC countries there has always been a degree of private health care, the standard expectation and culture is that “UHC rules.” However, the pressures to accept greater private provision have grown inexorably, and especially in countries such as the UK that have elected radical-right governments continuously since 2010. Privatization of the NHS has always been an ultimate objective of the Conservative (Tory) Party since 2010. At the same time, Tory governments have deliberately masked and downplayed their intentions, owing to the population’s jealous ownership of “their” NHS and the risk of political suicide for any party openly advocating dismantling the NHS. Ironically, while the UK radical-right government has been keen to introduce a US-style private health care provision, in the US there have been growing calls for UHC as a means to counter the worst characteristics of a US system that many perceive as broken.

Rather than seek to answer the question ‘which approach is best?’, this article presents a case study of one example of the tensions between the two competing ideologies.

70+ Years of the UK’s National Health Service

The National Health Service Act 1946, which came into effect in July 1948, had as its underlying principle the provision of health care universally available to all and free at the point of use. While 74 years later that principle remains the public mantra of all mainstream political parties in the UK, nevertheless Conservative governments since 2010 have initiated an accelerating drive to change its fundamental structure, funding and delivery of health care. These changes are encapsulated in the new Health and Care Act 2022. Services ‘free at the point of use’, while still

guaranteed, are now open to much greater private competition.

Will this result in private fee-based provision, currently a lesser part of the existing two-tier health service provision, potentially overtaking free NHS delivery? This has already emerged in dentistry, for example, where so many dentists have quit NHS provision to go private that some localities no longer have a single NHS dentist. Will general practitioner (GP) practices follow the same pattern, or will they cater for both NHS and private patients but with an access and delivery bias towards private patients? Other high demand, low provision services, such as podiatry, physiotherapy and mental health, are under similar threat of a private practice bias.

Continuously increasing pressure on NHS finances and resources have provoked these changes that correlate with a variety of convergent causes. First is demographic changes, such as population increase and an increasing proportion of the elderly. The emergence of many more effective but often expensive treatments has seen the rise of more demanding patient expectations in a society of ‘consumerist entitlement,’ fed on internet and social media information. Then there is a long-term trend that has produced a shortfall in medical staff and state funding. And, of course, the Covid crisis has added to the woes of an NHS creaking at the seams. Long-term underfunding of the NHS has led to long waiting times, and created pressures for private care as a solution. NHS commissioners are now compelled to increase contracted provision and, under political direction, to choose private contractors.

Governments face the dilemma of maintaining and improving health care provision in line with medical advances and public demands, while finding ways to pay for it all. UK political parties and the health care professions concur that the ‘old model’ NHS is no longer fit for purpose. However,

will the model of the new 2022 Act produce the promised ‘salvation’ the present government asserts? Or, will it degenerate into a “dog’s dinner:” a dysfunctional, systemic mess from which the only beneficiaries will be private doctors and surgeons, insurers, private corporations, their investors, and financially secure patients, while the mass of patients without adequate finances will be taken back to a primitive pre-NHS reality on a par with third-world health care?

A Climate of Amoral Calculation

Right-wing politicians in the UK reflexively insist on pushing for greater private funding and provision of services, arguing that a wholly publicly funded and run health service is bound to be cost-inefficient, top-heavy with administrators, unwieldy, and unresponsive to changing contexts and needs. Private health care providers, they argue, are much faster and more cost-efficient. Such providers, they assert, are entitled to be profitably paid for their services and, as respectable and ethical enterprises, they would never extract excessive profits or engage in any underhand or lazy practices to the detriment of patients. Unfortunately, in practice the evidence shows that all are not such paragons of virtue.

Examples are legion. The private sector – including many of the contractors to the NHS – has come in for considerable criticism. Especially egregious practices include the failure to address adequately and resolutely growing evidence over several years of mass clinical fraud, negligence and cover-up. The notorious case of Ian Paterson – a surgeon jailed for 20 years, who for over 14 years falsely diagnosed healthy patients as having cancers requiring mastectomies – resulted in “well over 1,000” unnecessary breast removals at two Spire private clinics and three NHS Hospitals. The Paterson Inquiry Report in 2020 found that the managements of these hospitals had a “culture of avoidance and denial” and exercised willful

blindness to mounting evidence and ‘whistleblower’ reports. It concluded that the private clinics had not demonstrated that they were yet capable of meeting the high standards required. It recommended a new more stringent regime for all such facilities.

Of course, this does not mean that all private health care provision is incompetent, poor value for money, fraudulent, or worse, damaging or dangerous for patients. Nor does it mean that the long-standing public/private partnership arrangement that characterizes the NHS cannot and should not continue both in principle and in practice, so long as there are stringent monitoring, control and independent auditing systems in place, reinforced by both NHS and government determination to stamp out unethical, harmful and, especially, criminal conduct.

Therein lies the rub. It has become abundantly clear that throughout the life-cycle of private contracting to the NHS, from bidder approval, tendering, terms and conditions, pricing, award decision and onwards to delivery and termination, “light touch” laissez-faire oversight predominates. Moreover, one is left with a feeling that a cozy “turning a blind eye” collusion exists whereby a culture driven by the strategy of “what can we get away with?” has been allowed to develop. A pursuit of profit above all other considerations encourages, if not ensures, a heavy reliance on amoral calculation by some of those engaged in private health care.

Who Are the Private Companies?

In the public’s perception, the most visible and longstanding private healthcare companies are those established by medical expenses insurers, such as BUPA, AXA, and PHP. The major ‘medex’ insurers have also acquired hospitals and GP group practices. Many citizens receive free private health care from such companies as a result

of employee benefit schemes, although, increasingly, others are prepared to pay from their own pockets. A disincentive for self-funders is that annual premiums increase markedly with the insured's age and tend to become prohibitive by late middle-age, especially if claims experience is poor. Premium renewals are heavily affected by "claims made" e.g. operations, treatment for serious illness, or frequent consultations. Thus, typically cover for self-funding individuals is for 'major medical only' while excluding routine GP-type provision. Nevertheless, via the 2022 Act the government clearly intends to encourage, if not persuade, the mass of patients to acquire private medical insurance, and this would include cover for GP services.

Other major corporations operating in the UK health care sector include Spire (now owned by the Australian company Ramsay Health Care), Circle, and HCA, which run extensive networks of private hospitals and clinics. They are high-profile bidders for NHS clinical provision contracts, although following Circle's business failure in 2015 of its management franchise running of the NHS Hinchingbrooke Hospital, such major 'whole facility' contracts are less likely.

However, many other companies, often foreign-based, operate in the UK private health care sector that contract services to the NHS unobtrusively. Ownership of GP services, typically group practices, by private corporations (often US-based) rather than the GPs themselves, has become increasingly commonplace. These include Centene, Babylon, Operose, Livi, SRCL, and First Practice Management. Continuing corporatization for profit, if not strictly controlled, would totally undermine the 'not-for-profit' foundation of the NHS and enable excessive extraction of profits by foreign beneficiaries.

GP Services in Privatization's Crosshairs

According to the King's Fund research body, the amount spent by the NHS on private sector delivery overall in 2019-20 totaled £14.4bn, much higher than the £9.7bn shown in the Department of Health and Social Care's accounts, since the latter excluded a number of categories including GPs and other primary care services.

For several reasons, GP services have become the new target for private corporations. One is the fact that, whereas the public may imagine that GPs are employees of the NHS, in fact GPs have always been private outsourced contractors to the NHS, working on "contracts for services" and not "contracts of service." Another is that GP patient lists – the basis of NHS payments to GP practices – are growing. In addition, new GP numbers continue to fall while many experienced GPs are quitting early, long before normal retirement, or going part-time, owing to feeling overworked, under-paid and under-valued. One in six GP posts remains typically vacant for long periods. Both the Nuffield Trust and the BMA report that in some cities there are now fewer than 50 GPs per 100,000 patients, or 25% more patient load per GP than the accepted NHS 'safe' ratio. According to NHS data, GPs typically now have 2,500 patients each instead of 1,600, and in some cases over 6,000.

Increased demand and decreased provision establishes an attractive context for private corporate acquisition of group GP practices running perhaps half-a-dozen or more surgeries, typically in urban locales. Their business model is to move away from traditional face-to-face consultations with an attentive, caring "usual" GP, and replace them with remote online and phone consultations randomly from a bank of GPs. The Covid crisis and avoidance of face-to-face appointments presented an unexpected opportunity to introduce and test the new model in practice as an operational and regulatory necessity. As a

result, some patients (including the authors) have not seen their usual, or any, GP since 2019. This loss of face-to-face access risks damaging accurate and timely diagnosis. The cross-party Health and Social Care Committee of the House of Commons has examined the future of GP services. Its latest parliamentary report is highly critical of the degenerating GP experience for many patients, which has resulted from this new business model.

Profits Before Patients

With corporate-owned GP practices, emphasis on extraction of profits increases at the expense of reinvestment into, for example, additional GPs, nurses, ancillary staff, and improved phone call handling systems. These are needed to cope with increased patient demand by enforced remote access in an ‘online and phone only’ health care environment. For example, Operose Health UK, the UK’s largest group of GP practices and owned by the US Centene corporation, has some 600,000 NHS patients. In June 2022, BBC Panorama ran a damning undercover investigation report, alleging that patient referral documents remained unread for months and that Operose routinely used poorly supervised ‘physician associates’ as less qualified but cheaper substitutes for fully qualified GPs.

In a group of six GP practices owned by another hierarchy of corporate owners in a South Coast city, patients (including the authors) typically experience up to a 1 hour or more wait in phone queues for routine access, only to be cut off by a time limit. Their online e-consult facility also has a daily quota and time cut-off, thereby similarly forcing patients into an unwelcome and stressful ‘first come, first served’ competition with each other. Often, the e-consult facility is unavailable for days at a time. In response to a formal complaint about its dysfunctional call handling system, the practice’s management stated in writing that a decision had been taken to “reduce the number of phone lines into the center”

so as to save patients’ money caused by long waits. It added, “we are not currently looking to change this decision.” Investing in an improved phone and call handling system appears trumped by the focus on profit extraction.

Moreover, the ultimate ownership of such practices is usually impossible to establish, owing to intricate layers and networks of corporate shareholdings that block transparency. Similarly, determining just how much profits are being taken is almost impossible, as many avoid filing full UK accounts by using subsidiary account rules. Intentional opacity is a salient characteristic of such companies.

The next logical step by corporately-owned GP practices is likely to be to an expansion of a “private patients only” regime, whereby consultations, treatments, blood tests, vaccinations etc will all be fee-based and no longer fall within the free NHS provision. This move will follow in the footsteps of UK dentists, many of whom have withdrawn from NHS provision. Thus far, the withdrawal of GPs as NHS contracted providers is a minority, but the trend is likely to accelerate as more GP practices are acquired by profit-driven companies. The prospect of having to pay for GP services will hit the poorest, and, for many, it may deny them the “provision of health care universally available to all and free at the point of use” warranted by law for over 70 years.

Private health care take-up has been increasing, especially via employment benefit schemes and particularly by those in the 20-40 age group who are more willing to self-fund insurance premiums or fees. They tend to perceive private health care as an essential commodity, comparable to other lifestyle purchases, such as online multimedia packages, Netflix, and expensive gym subscriptions. However, the big risk is that in times of economic downturn or cost-of-living crises,

such necessities will be dispensed with as unaffordable luxuries.

Is the NHS Safe in Tory Hands?

Despite the Conservative government's Health and Care Act 2022, which is reassuringly intended to 'reform' the NHS and its provision, including a much greater emphasis on private sector outsourcing, concerns abound. One is that its main impact will be to sanctify in law private profit at the expense of patient health care, while exempting delivery from standards of public responsibility and proper accountability. A detailed study by Goodair and Reeves published in *The Lancet* in July 2022 showed that over the period 2013-2020 "private sector outsourcing corresponded with significantly increased rates of treatable mortality, potentially as a result of a decline in the quality of health-care services."

Thus far, the public seems unaware of this new stealth assault – literally "hidden in plain sight" – on what they still imagine will continue to be a guaranteed free-at-the-point-of-use NHS. Not that they don't care. Few have heard about the changes. Fewer still know about the scope, scale, content and impact the 2022 Act will have on them as patients. As the truth dawns – that perhaps the NHS is not safe in this particular government's hands and that patients may increasingly find that they will have to pay for GP services among others – it is likely to become a major general election issue. The government and NHS will have a tough job 'selling' this new regime to the public, and any hint of 'economy with the truth', deception, outright lies, or brazen confidence trickery will prove unwise.

Increasing corporate ownership of GP services could be made to work satisfactorily for patient care, but that would require new stringent criteria and robust monitoring, control and transparency arrangements that are currently missing. These

would include: (a) complete transparency of GP ownership and accounts; (b) independently audited publicly available accounts of GP practices; (c) regular independent audits of management and clinical provision by GPs.

Rigorous assurance of contract compliance will be crucial. The Care and Quality Commission will not be robust enough for these audit tasks. If it is to provide any benefit let alone maintain its credibility, the level of independent auditing (and corrective action) cannot be 'tick the box' or appear as superficial 'window dressing.'

Failure Is Not an Option

The 2022 Act is one heck of a gamble. The larger and more complex any system is, the higher the likelihood of dysfunctionality or even total failure. In particular, if the new ICBs (Integrated Care Boards) fail, that alone could result in an end of the NHS. The headline preventive elements that may be required – but thus far are not evident – include:

Compulsory liability/surety bonds amounting to, say, 10% of pre-tax turnover imposed on all corporate entities and their individual board members that seek to provide services to the NHS. This is to focus their attention on their duty-of-care obligations and the penalties for failure. Compulsory fit-for-purpose registration and competence certification of all insurance entities and their professional and sales staff engaged in offering Private Medical Expenses Insurance. This is to deter fly-by-night opportunists and scammers. Regular compulsory independent validation and verification audits (to national criteria, standards and certified auditors) of all corporate policies, strategies, operations, and management systems, in relation to contracted provision of services to the NHS, including GP services. This is to provide

systems assurance that requirements are appropriate and are in fact being implemented, and to counter the “what can we get away with?” tactic. Regular review of speed of implementation and effectiveness of remedial recommendations in compulsory audit reports. This is to ensure that remedies for system defects are in fact implemented promptly and effectively, and to counter the ‘what can we get away with?’ attitude. Legal penalties for corporate wrong-doers (both organizations and individuals), including, say, 10% of pre-tax profits and where appropriate (according to the nature and scale of the offense as well as repetition), jail sentences, and/or fines, asset confiscation, compensation orders, directorship bans, and compulsory “name-and-shame” orders. This is to ensure that duty-holders are made accountable for serious offenses.

While some legal difficulties in imposing such controls exist, these must be overcome so as to prevent abuses that favor private contractors while harming patient health care, personal finances, taxpayers, and public trust and confidence in government. Analogues for such tough controls exist. For example, following years of uncontrolled public harm by cavalier online and social media platform owners, the Online Safety Bill will likely impose a number of broadly similar controls on such companies and senior executives. In health care, the government must place the emphasis on prevention and fairness now, rather than on future corrective reaction to malpractice or malfeasance. Failure to do risks fomenting widespread social discontent and even public disorder. The UK experience should also provide a salutary warning to other countries.

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many countries, including government and public sector organizations in the UK. He has had substantial managerial experience in the UK health and social services sector, including evaluation of the impact of National Health Service reforms on patient care.

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Chorus for Peace in Ukraine Sings Louder

Medea Benjamin, Nicolas J.S. Davies
October 29, 2022

Is Ukraine another forever war or will someone give peace a chance? The world has been divided on the issue for months, with the US and the UK taking the lead in insisting the war will last “as long as it takes,” despite no clarity about what “it” is. Now the debate has emerged even in the US.

Ukkraine has been wracked by shocking destruction and deadly violence since Russia invaded the country in February. Estimates of the death toll range from a confirmed

minimum of 27,577 people, including 6,374 civilians, to over 150,000. The slaughter can only get more horrific as long as all sides, including the United States and its NATO allies, remain committed to war.

In the first weeks of the war, the United States and NATO countries sent weapons to Ukraine to try to prevent Russia from quickly defeating Ukraine's armed forces and conducting a US-style "regime change" in Kyiv. But since that goal was achieved, the only goals that President Zelenskyy and his Western allies have publicly proclaimed are to recover all of pre-2014 Ukraine and decisively defeat and weaken Russia.

These are aspirational goals at best, which require sacrificing hundreds of thousands, maybe millions, of Ukrainian lives, regardless of the outcome. Even worse, if they should come close to succeeding, they are likely to trigger a nuclear war, making this the all-time epitome of a "no-win predicament."

At the end of May, President Biden responded to probing questions about the contradictions in his Ukraine policy from The New York Times Editorial Board, replying that the United States was sending weapons so that Ukraine "can fight on the battlefield and be in the strongest possible position at the negotiating table."

But when Biden wrote that, Ukraine had no position at any negotiating table, thanks mainly to the conditions that Biden and NATO leaders attached to their support. In April, after Ukraine negotiated a 15-point peace plan for a ceasefire, a Russian withdrawal and a peaceful future as a neutral country, the United States and United Kingdom refused to provide Ukraine with the security guarantees that were a critical part of the agreement.

As now disgraced British prime minister Boris Johnson told President Zelenskyy in Kyiv on April 9th, the "collective West" was "in it for the long run," meaning a long war against Russia, but wanted no part in any agreement between Ukraine and Russia.

Undeclared goals for perennial war?

In May, Russian forces advanced through Donbas, forcing Zelenskyy to admit, by June 2nd, that Russia now controlled 20% of Ukraine's pre-2014 territory, leaving Ukraine in a weaker, not a stronger position.

Six months after Secretary Austin declared in April that the new goal of the war was to decisively defeat and "weaken" Russia, President Biden is rejecting calls for a new peace initiative. So the US and the UK had no reservations about intervening to kill peace talks in April. Now that they've sold President Zelenskyy on fighting an endless war, Biden insists that he has no say in the matter if Zelenskyy rejects peace negotiations.

But it is axiomatic that wars end at the negotiating table, as Biden acknowledged to The New York Times. The perennial thorny question for war leaders is "When to negotiate?" The problem is that, when your side seems to be winning, you have little incentive to stop fighting. But when you appear to be losing, there is no incentive to negotiate from a weak position either, as long as you believe that the tide of war will sooner or later shift in your favor and improve your position. That was the hope on which Johnson and Biden convinced Zelenskyy to stake his country's future in April.

Now Ukraine has launched localized counter-offensives and recovered parts of its territory. Russia has responded by throwing hundreds of thousands of fresh troops into the war and starting

to systematically demolish Ukraine's electricity grid.

The escalating crisis exposes the weakness of Biden's position. He is gambling with hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian lives – which he has no moral claim over – that Ukraine will somehow be in a stronger military position after a winter of war and power outages, with hundreds of thousands more Russian troops in the areas Russia controls. This is a bet on a much longer war, in which US taxpayers will shell out for thousands of tons of weapons and millions of Ukrainians will die, with no clear endgame short of nuclear war.

Thanks to the moral and intellectual bankruptcy of the US mass media, most Americans have no inkling of the deceptive way that Biden and his bubble-headed British allies cornered Zelenskyy into a suicidal decision to abandon promising peace negotiations in favor of a long war that will destroy his country.

The horrors of the war, the contradictions in Western policy, the blowback on European energy supplies, the specter of famine stalking the Global South and the rising danger of nuclear war are provoking a worldwide chorus of voices urgently calling for peace in Ukraine.

The media's complicit silence

If you're on a media diet of the thin gruel that passes for news in America these days, you may not have heard the calls for peace from UN Secretary General Guterres, Pope Francis or the leaders of 66 countries speaking at the UN General Assembly in September, representing the majority of the world's population.

But there are also Americans calling for peace. From across the political spectrum, from retired military officers and diplomats to journalists and academics, there are "adults in the room" who

recognize the dangerous contradictions of US policy on Ukraine. They are joining leaders from around the world in calling for diplomacy and peace.

Jack Matlock served as the last US Ambassador to the Soviet Union, from 1987 to 1991, after a 35-year career as a Soviet specialist in the US Foreign Service. Matlock was at the embassy in Moscow during the Cuban missile crisis, where he translated critical messages between US President John Kennedy and Russian Premier Nikita Khrushchev.

On October 17, 2022, in an article in *Responsible Statecraft* titled "Why the US must press for a ceasefire in Ukraine," Ambassador Matlock wrote that as principal arms supplier to Ukraine and the sponsor of the most punitive sanctions on Russia, the United States "is obligated to help find a way out" of this crisis. The article concluded, "Until... the fighting stops, and serious negotiations get underway, the world is headed for an outcome where we all are losers."

Another veteran US diplomat who has spoken out for diplomacy over Ukraine is Rose Gottemoeller, the Deputy Secretary General of NATO from 2016 to 2019 after she served as President Obama's senior adviser on arms control, disarmament and nonproliferation. Gottemoeller recently wrote in the *Financial Times* that she sees no military solution to the crisis in Ukraine, but that "discreet talks" could lead to the kind of "quiet bargain" that resolved the Cuban missile crisis 60 years ago.

On the military side, Admiral Mike Mullen was the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff from 2007 to 2011. After President Biden chatted at a fundraising party about the war in Ukraine leading to nuclear "Armageddon," ABC interviewed Mullen about the danger of nuclear war. "I think we need to back off that a little bit and do

everything we possibly can to get to the table to resolve this thing,” Mullen replied. “It’s got to end, and usually there are negotiations associated with that. The sooner the better as far as I’m concerned.”

Economist Jeffrey Sachs was the director of the Earth Institute and now the Center for Sustainable Development at Columbia University. He has been a consistent voice for peace in Ukraine ever since the invasion. In a recent article on September 26, titled “The Great Game in Ukraine is Spinning out of Control,” Sachs quoted President Kennedy in June 1963, uttering what Sachs called “the essential truth that can keep us alive today:”

“Above all, while defending our own vital interests, nuclear powers must avert those confrontations which bring an adversary to a choice of either a humiliating retreat or a nuclear war,” said JFK. “To adopt that kind of course in the nuclear age would be evidence only of the bankruptcy of our policy—or of a collective death-wish for the world.”

Sachs concluded, “It is urgent to return to the draft peace agreement between Russia and Ukraine of late March, based on the non-enlargement of NATO... The world’s very survival depends on prudence, diplomacy, and compromise by all sides.”

Even Henry Kissinger, whose own war crimes are well documented, has spoken out on the senselessness of current US policy. Kissinger told the Wall Street Journal in August, “We are at the edge of war with Russia and China on issues which we partly created, without any concept of how this is going to end or what it’s supposed to lead to.”

The fiasco of the progressives’ withdrawn letter

In the US Congress, after every single Democrat voted for a virtual blank check for arming Ukraine in May, with no provision for peacemaking, Progressive Caucus leader Pramila Jayapal and 29 other progressive Democratic Representatives recently signed a letter to President Biden, urging him to “make vigorous diplomatic efforts in support of a negotiated settlement and ceasefire, engage in direct talks with Russia, explore prospects for a new European security arrangement acceptable to all parties that will allow for a sovereign and independent Ukraine, and, in coordination with our Ukrainian partners, seek a rapid end to the conflict and reiterate this goal as America's chief priority.”

Unfortunately, the backlash within their own party was so blistering that within 24 hours they withdrew the letter. Siding with calls for peace and diplomacy from all over the world is still not an idea whose time has come in the halls of power in Washington DC.

This is an extremely dangerous moment in history. Americans are waking up to the reality that this war threatens us with the existential danger of nuclear war, a danger most Americans thought we had survived once and for all at the end of the First Cold War. Even if we manage to avoid nuclear war, the impact of a long, bloody war will destroy Ukraine and kill millions of Ukrainians, cause humanitarian catastrophes across the Global South, and trigger a long-lasting global economic crisis.

That will relegate all humanity’s urgent priorities – from tackling the climate crisis to hunger, poverty and disease – to the back-burner for the foreseeable future.

There is an alternative. We can and must resolve this conflict through peaceful diplomacy

and negotiation, to end the killing and destruction and let the people of Ukraine live in peace.

***Medea Benjamin** is the co-founder of both CODEPINK and the international human rights organization Global Exchange. She is the author of eight books, including *Drone Warfare: Killing by Remote Control* and *Inside Iran: The Real History and Politics of the Islamic Republic of Iran*. Benjamin has been at the forefront of the anti-drone movement.

***Nicolas J.S. Davies** is an independent journalist and a researcher for CODEPINK. He is also the author of *Blood On Our Hands: The American Invasion and Destruction of Iraq*. Davies and Medea Benjamin have co-authored *War in Ukraine: Making Sense of a Senseless Conflict*, available from OR Books in November 2022.

You are Free (Except to Speak Truth to Power) in America

Vikram Zutshi, Lee Camp
October 30, 2022

This wide-ranging conversation with Lee Camp aka “America’s Most Censored Comedian” provides an overview of the dysfunction of America’s stumbling hegemon.

The topic of censorship has featured prominently in ongoing conversations about big tech and its deep links with the U.S. establishment, particularly the security state. Activists and journalists known for speaking out against the depredations of the American empire and challenging the official narrative are promptly banned from the major platforms. The journalist and comedian Lee Camp used to host a satirical comedy show called *Redacted Tonight on Russia Today (RT)* where he exposed the machinations of corporate media, the security state and global elites, in his own inimitable style.

Following the Russia-Ukraine conflict, RT was taken off air in the US and so was Lee Camp’s show. So explosive were Camp’s revelations that, soon after RT was pulled, YouTube banned his videos globally and Spotify deleted his podcast. Note that Facebook has shadow-banned Camp since 2016. RT gave him unfettered freedom to express his views candidly. Now, American platforms have pushed Camp into the shadows.

Camp has been a biting critic of NATO expansion and American hegemony. So successful was Camp in upending prevailing tropes about the inherent goodness of America that both *The New York Times (NYT)* and *National Public Radio (NPR)* published hit pieces on him in rapid succession.

Ironically, the US, which likes to admonish other countries for muzzling dissent, is notorious for punishing those who dare to challenge its political and cultural hegemony. Julian Assange and Edward Snowden were both branded as enemies of the state for spilling the beans on the largest illegal mass surveillance program in history. While Assange, the founder of Wikileaks, is currently locked up in a dingy cell in Britain’s infamous Belmarsh prison, awaiting extradition to America, Snowden was forced to seek asylum in

Russia, where he was recently granted citizenship by President Vladimir Putin.

In a candid and wide-ranging conversation with Camp, we spoke about his relentless activism to unmask the hidden face of the American empire, the origins of the US proxy war in Ukraine, the lies and distortions published in corporate media outlets, the way the CIA has infiltrated major media organizations and American military assistance to 73% of the world's dictators. Camp responds to accusations of being a "conspiracy theorist," shares his thoughts on the FBI raid on Donald Trump's residence, opines on the rise and fall of the petrodollar and claims that asset management firm Black Rock is "the one entity that really owns the world."

The transcript has been edited for clarity.

Vikram Zutshi: A common accusation leveled against journalists like yourself, who regularly speak out against the crimes of the American empire, is that you are assets of the Chinese or Russian deep state. In fact, your show, *Redacted Tonight*, was hosted on the Russian state channel, *Russia Today*, later shut down by the US government in the wake of the Ukraine crisis. How do you respond to these charges?

Lee Camp: US media and television is kept carefully within a small Overton window, a small area of acceptable thought. There are no true anti-war voices regularly on US media, no anti-capitalist voices, and no anti-imperialist voices. Therefore, for an anti-war, anti-imperialist comedian/commentator such as myself, there was essentially nowhere one could host a comedy TV show like *Redacted Tonight*. In 2014, just about the only channel that would allow such a thing was RT America.

I chose to house my show there because a) I could be unabashedly anti-war and anti-imperialist

and b) I was completely uncensored and unrestricted. For the eight years *Redacted Tonight* lasted, I wrote every word I ever said. I was never told what to say or what not to say. I was not instructed on where to stand or what to believe. Such freedom is completely unheard of on American television.

Not only are news broadcasters and reporters heavily censored — just look at people like Phil Donahue or Chris Hedges being forced out for being anti-war — but even comedians are kept in a small cage. Even back to the days of *The Smothers Brothers*, comedians were "canceled" for being anti-war. Nowadays, there are essentially no anti-capitalist or anti-imperialist comedians on television. Well, for eight years there was at least one until the US government shut down RT and my show this past March.

So to sum up, if you're asking why I would air my show on RT America, then you're really asking why I would want to be free and uncensored. Hopefully the answer to that is pretty obvious.

Zutshi: On August 26, you tweeted, "New documents show the US & EU plans to plunder Ukraine have been in the works for years. They plan to sell off public infrastructure, destroy worker rights, and secure massive giveaways to billionaires. Much of this has already begun." What is the invasion of Ukraine really about in your view and what are these "new documents" you refer to?

Camp: Here are the documents I refer to. And while this sort of plundering is the standard operating procedure when a country has been "acquired" by the West, that is not the root reason for the proxy war. I have said since day one that I'm opposed to the Russian invasion, but because I'm a thinking adult, I can say that and also realize the US and NATO have been creating this scenario

for years. Anyway, the root cause for this proxy war is that the US is a late-stage empire, and the ruling elite believe they own the world. They are not willing to allow the rise of any other large countries.

Economically Russia is not much of a competitor to the US, but if Russia were allowed to align with China, France, Germany, India etc. then US hegemony would very much be at risk. The US ruling class deals with this threat by attempting to chip away pieces of Russia and China and create a wedge between them and the rest of the world. Of course in many ways, this plan is backfiring.

Rather than turning Russia into some sort of failed state, US/NATO actions seem to be speeding up the splitting of the world economies with many states moving beyond the petrodollar. Meanwhile the US has begun to collapse internally as we can see by the fact that the UN's Office of Sustainable Development now ranks us with Cuba and Bulgaria as a "developing country."

Furthermore, the moment the petrodollar is no longer king, the US empire will be over, because without it the US can't print as much money as we want and still have a powerful currency. The ruling elite realize this and that's the true reason they have destroyed Iraq, Libya, and Syria and tried to crush Iran and Venezuela. All of those nations were/are outside the petro-dollar and outside the grasp of our central bankers. (Not to mention if humanity is to ever do anything about the climate crisis, step one is to end the petrodollar).

As it stands now, the most powerful country in the world will do everything it can to make sure oil is still the main energy source of the world – because the power of our currency depends on it.

Zutshi: You have spoken about the CIA's tentacles spreading far and wide, infiltrating all aspects of public life including Google and social media. It's

been well documented that the US intelligence community is firmly embedded in corporate mainstream media. In this context, how do legacy organizations like The New York Times and The Washington Post succeed in projecting themselves as stridently anti-establishment and champions of the underdog?

Camp: Well, it's all just propaganda, marketing, and branding. The CIA has a long history of being heavily involved in mainstream media. Operation Mockingbird in the 1960s and 1970s involved placing CIA personnel in most mainstream outlets to help control the reporting and slant the coverage. The CIA and the US government pretend all of those shenanigans are long over. However, nowadays they don't need to do anything secretly. CIA agents and Pentagon officials are regularly interviewed and "consulted" on mainstream media. They are viewed as the final word in truth, when in fact it is their job to lie to the American people (and the world).

The Washington Post and NYT act as if anything said by the CIA, the FBI, the Pentagon or the State Department is the absolute truth. They are not reporters but rather stenographers for the corporate state. Of course this results in wild inaccuracies in their reporting.

Fairly recent fake stories like Russia paying the Taliban bounties to kill Americans or Cuba using advanced sonic weapons to give US diplomats mild headaches made the "legacy media" look like clowns. Then there are past epic failures like WMD in Iraq or the Gulf of Tonkin incident.

The New York Times famously essentially refused to cover the Holocaust throughout World War II. Even when they covered the liberation of Auschwitz and the horrible acts that took place there, they still failed to mention the victims were Jews. They basically ignored the genocide of the Jewish people. NYT also talked very positively of

Hitler all the way up to the US entrance into World War II.

Anyway, why are these legacy media outlets still held up as the highest form of journalism? Because that's what helps the US empire – repeating the lies of the corporate state and attacking those who reveal the truth, such as the attack piece NYT did on me which was filled with lies and misinformation.

Zutshi: Was there a singular incident or series of events that turned you stridently against the American empire and its relentless efforts to preserve and maintain economic and political hegemony at all costs? How do you respond to those who dub you a conspiracy theorist?

Camp: To answer the last part first, those who call me a conspiracy theorist are either willfully ignorant or trying to defend the status quo at all costs. They clearly don't want to discuss these subjects in an adult, rational sense.

You ask when I turned against the American empire, but in fact, I believe I act in support of the truth and in support of freedom for all peoples. If someone is intellectually honest and they support freedom and truth, then they will find that they are opposed to the viewpoint being pushed by the American empire on most events that take place these days.

Empires in general are never built in order to spread equality, justice, and sustainability. They are built out of greed, ego, and hunger for power. For example, a report by the Congressional Research Service found that the US has perpetrated over 250 military interventions over the past 30 years. I think any honest person would be hard-pressed to find one of these interventions that is motivated purely by a need to help others or defend human rights. Sure, those types of things

sound nice when printed in The New York Times, but they're never the truth.

With every US military intervention (and even with all of our economic sanctions), the true motivation is always power, wealth, and resources. One can see proof that the US does not care even remotely about human rights in the fact that our country gives military assistance to 73% of the world's dictators.

Zutshi: You recently stated that the asset management firm Blackrock is the one entity that "really owns the world." It's a sensational claim but one that begs further enquiry. Tell us more about your investigations into Blackrock.

Camp: I'm certainly not the first to cover this, but BlackRock has over \$9 trillion in assets, which is more than the GDP of every country except the US and China. To put \$9 trillion in perspective, if you make \$40,000 a year after taxes, in order to make \$9 trillion, it would take you 225 million years. That's not a typo.

And you won't be surprised to hear that BlackRock does not generally use their insane wealth for good. They are one of the largest investors in weapons contractors, fossil fuels, and deforestation. They also are the one of the top stakeholders in every major media company in the US, so they can control the message. This is one of the reasons you hear so little about BlackRock. They don't really want people talking about them, and they exert massive control over American media. They are also one of the top stakeholders in most big banks, including many outside the US.

Anyway, long story short, it's tough to overstate the amount of control BlackRock has. No person or company should have anywhere near that amount of wealth and power.

Zutshi: What is the truth behind the unprecedented FBI raid on Donald Trump's Mar-a-Lago residence? Does Trump have the goods on Biden, Obama, Hillary and the intel community as some are saying?

Camp: No. I don't think he has anything on them. Keep in mind I don't support either of the main parties, which are really just one party representing only corporate America. The raid on Trump's residence – and all other legal attacks against him right now, whether legitimate or not – are all meant to stop him from running (and winning) in 2024.

Trump represents a rift in the elite ruling class, who don't actually care about the terms "Democrat" or "Republican." The ruling class wants to continue American hegemony and continue the bonanza of wealth they've enjoyed. A certain percentage of them support Trump because he oversaw one of the largest transfers of wealth to the top percentile ever, along with a massive tax break for the wealthiest Americans. But a larger percentage of the ruling class don't support Trump because he's not a good CEO for America. He says things out loud that are meant to be government secrets. He alienates allies and befriends "enemies."

Zutshi: Finally, do you see the American empire unravel as the dollar ceases to be the global currency standard and more and more nations begin transacting in their national currencies? Is there likely to be a new "rules-based order", one that is not dependent on the NATO agenda?

Camp: Yes, the writing is on the wall for the American empire. It is in its last years, which could mean decades, and there are two or three ways America can deal with that decline. Accept it and transfer into a sustainable, mostly happy country that does not control the world but also does not have as much Ponzi scheme wealth for

corporate America. Or use all military might to maintain control, thereby precipitating some sort of horrific nuclear war, which the proxy war in Ukraine has put us on the cusp of.

Waning empires can shrink and not collapse, the way Britain has done, though not without hundreds of years of trouble. But waning empires can also collapse into a horrific kind of fascism. Right now the US seems to be racing towards the later choice.

But another aspect that people should take into account is climate change. Climate catastrophe is putting all of this on steroids. And the end of the American empire and the climate crisis are inexorably linked in a way that most people are not talking about. I mentioned this in an earlier question.

When the US left the gold standard, we created the petrodollar to make sure our currency would still be incredibly powerful. We made a deal with Saudi Arabia that all oil sales would be in dollars and then all the other OPEC countries joined on. So in order for the US to maintain hegemony, the world must keep selling/buying oil in US dollars.

The moment oil is no longer king and green energy takes over or the moment oil sales switch to other currencies, the US piggy bank will collapse. So unfortunately this means the most powerful country in the world has a very strong vested interest in making sure oil is the world's main energy source. Therefore, the most powerful country in the world demands that climate change because of fossil fuel use continues unabated. It's horrifying. And it honestly amazes me so few are talking about it.

***Vikram Zutshi** is a cultural critic, author and filmmaker who divides his time between the US,

Latin America and Asia. For a decade, Vikram worked in indie film and network television, as a consultant to tech start-ups, as a real estate developer, and in media sales and acquisitions. Then, he produced feature films before transitioning into directing.

***Lee Camp** is the former host and head writer of the hit comedy news show Redacted Tonight with Lee Camp on RT America. He is now the host and writer of The Most Censored News with MintPress News.

The Dirty Secrets About How Reza Shah Destroyed Iran

Mehdi Alavi, Atul Singh
October 31, 2022

Outside Iran, many Iranians believe Reza Shah was great. During his and his son's regime, all Iranians were told he was great. The reality is that Reza Shah was an egomaniac lackey of the British who oppressed his people, stole from the exchequer and betrayed his country.

Today, Iran is ruled by a theocratic regime. It is easy to blame the mullahs for all of Iran's ills. However, it is an inconvenient truth that their path to power was paved by the British and the Americans.

In the recent protests, unknown assailants have attacked banks, police, ambulances, other government officials, mosques, clerics and

religious people. During their attacks, protesters often yell, "Reza Shah ruhat shad," a phrase that literally translates to "Reza Shah, may your soul be happy." These protesters are totally ignorant about the fact that, if Reza Shah was in power, he would have all of them killed. History tells us that Reza Shah dealt brutally with his opponents and crushed any sign of dissent.

British Domination and Exploitation

The British began interfering in Iran as early as the late 18th century. At that time, Persia, as Iran was then called, was under pressure from the Ottomans and the Russians. To Persians, the British seemed a countervailing power. To Britain, Persia was like Egypt, a buffer state to protect the jewel in the crown: India. The British did not rule Iran directly but dominated the country through bribery and intimidation. A cadre of collaborators helped the British Empire to run Persia as an informal colony. The British drained the Persian bullion to support their Indian ventures. Unlike Egypt though, Persia never became a protectorate thanks to the resistance of Shia religious leaders.

Persia became increasingly important to British interests in the early 20th century. While Egypt had the Suez Canal, Persia had oil. In 1914, before World War I broke out, the House of Commons backed Winston Churchill's proposal for the British government to acquire 51% of the shares of Anglo-Persian. Churchill was determined to keep Anglo-Persian an absolutely "all British Company" and spent a then princely sum of £2.2 million to do so. The goal was to ensure energy security for Great Britain where the Royal Navy switched from coal to oil to compete against the fast-rising German navy.

After World War I broke out, Persia remained neutral but supplied oil to Britain. In fact, Persian oil arguably led to Allied victory. The "conversion of the British fleet to oil... [gave them] advantages

over the German fleet powered by coal--greater range and speed and faster refueling.” In keeping with their imperial tradition, Britain paid a pittance to Persia for oil.

Britain not only exploited Persia for oil but also grain. This led to the 1917-18 famine. About nine million Persians died, an estimated 40% of the population. Scholars have called this a genocide and, arguably, it was the biggest tragedy of World War I, exceeding the loss of life in Somme and Verdun. The British skilfully blamed the Russians and the Turks, and the genocide remained unknown for nearly a century.

The British Enthroned Ruthless Reza Mirpanj

After the Russian Revolution of 1917, Persia became a frontline state for the British Empire to counter the Bolshevik menace. As in other countries, the Soviets tried to foment trouble in Persia. Britain countered by propping up Reza Mirpanj, an officer in the Persian Cossack Brigade. He went on to depose the Qajar dynasty in 1925 and declare himself shah. The rubber stamp parliament approved Reza Mirpanj’s power grab.

Once he became shah, this opportunistic officer changed his name to Reza Shah Pahlavi. Importantly, the Persian language was called Pahlavi during the Sasanian Empire. The Sasanian dynasty centralized Persia and made it a great power. Choosing Pahlavi was a very clever public relations stunt. Not everyone bought into Reza Shah’s sham. Four courageous legislators opposed the new shah. One of them was Mohammad Mosaddegh who would go on to become prime minister years later. The British managed Reza Shah’s coronation using the coronation of George V as their guide.

Reza Shah presided over the greatest loot of Iranian historical and cultural relics. In 1931, he allowed foreign archaeologists to explore Iran and

excavate Persepolis, the capital of the ancient Persian Achaemenid empire founded by Darius the Great in the 6th century BCE. His regime looked the other way as they loaded invaluable ancient artifacts onto big trucks. Then these trucks made their way from Persepolis to the Persian Gulf. Eventually, these artifacts ended up in the US and other prosperous countries of the West. Many relics ended up at the University of Chicago where they are housed in the appositely colonial sounding Oriental Institute.

The new shah turned out to be a classic British lackey. He stamped out Soviet influence and built the Trans-Iranian Railway connecting the Caspian Sea to the Persian Gulf. Built at ruinous cost to the Iranian taxpayer, this allowed British troops to deploy faster to counter the Soviets. Most importantly, the shah increased oil concessions to the British. The British increased their oil production in Persia from around 5 million tons (37 million barrels, equivalent) in 1932 to 10 million tons (over 74 million barrels, equivalent) in 1938. Note that very little of this old money trickled down to the Persian treasury and oil revenue comprised merely 10% of the budget.

In 1936, protests against Reza Shah’s policies erupted in Mashhad. The security forces cracked down the protesters. The protesters sought sanctuary in the holiest place in Iran: Imam Reza’s mausoleum. On the shah’s order, security forces entered the mausoleum and viciously massacred people. After that slaughter, Reza Shah became damned to eternity to most Iranians. After that incident, many people feared to even say his name, but referred to him as sag, which means dog—considered the most derogative of abuses in the Farsi language.

For increasing military might and expensive projects, Reza Shah had to increase the tax burden on the people. He also pursued a policy of centralization and Persianization. This meant

ethnic minorities had no place in Persia, which he named Iran — the name used by natives of the land. Reza Shah's detribalization and Persianization led to ethnic cleansing and genocide. William Douglas, a noted American judge, had the following to note about one community that fell foul of Reza Shah:

“Lur after Lur was beheaded. Again and again, the plate was heated red hot and slapped on the stub of a neck....The colonel started betting on how far these headless men could run.... Every man, woman, and child had been killed. Not a living soul was left.”

Overall, Reza Shah was a disaster for Iran. He banned all newspapers, organizations, and any opposition. Intellectual and political expression was censored. This undid the remnant of reformist efforts kicked off by Amir Kabir, the remarkable modernizer of the mid-19th century. who preceded him about 80 years earlier. This reformer had started *Vaqaye Etefaqieh*, Iran's first newspaper whose name literally translates as “The Happened Events.”

Inspired by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk of Turkey, Reza Shah banned Iranian traditional dress. Both men and women now had to wear Western clothing. If they did not do so, they were beaten and even taken into custody. This policy caused a massive rupture with tradition. In small towns and villages, people ignored the shah's edict. In cities, people suffered, especially the women. Many women stopped going to public places to avoid harassment and became involuntary prisoners within their own homes. Like many other policies, the shah's policy on clothing was an unmitigated disaster. It led to resentment across the country and had unintended consequences. Today, the mullahs enforce rigid rules of dress on women in much the same way as the shah. Then too, women protested as they are protesting today.

Bloodthirsty at Home, Weak Abroad

Reza Shah might have been ruthless to ethnic minorities and deserters but he was always subservient to the great powers. He gave away many parts of Iran to buy peace. Scared of the Soviets, he gifted them the Firoze region, which lies today in Turkmenistan and is home to its capital Ashgabat, in 1933. Later, Reza Shah succumbed to British pressure and parted with more land. In 1937, the wily Brits convened a meeting to unite Muslims against the Bolsheviks. The Saadabad Treaty was signed. As per this treaty, Reza Shah gave the Helmand wetland to Afghanistan, full rights of Shatt al-Arab to Iraq and the strategic Ararat Mountain to Turkey. This Iranian that Reza Shah gave to Turkey allows Turkish troops access to the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic of Azerbaijan, which is an enclave of Azerbaijan within Armenia. Consequently, Turkey has replaced Iran as the natural ally of Azerbaijan even though the country is 85% Shia and Azeri culture has been deeply influenced by its Iranian counterpart.

In World War II, Reza Shah overplayed his hand. The rise of Nazi Germany swayed his head. By engaging with the Nazis, he began playing a dangerous game. Once the Germans invaded Russia in 1941, the British and the Soviets invaded Iran to secure oil supplies and continued access to warm waters. Reza Shah's troops capitulated. The reason was simple. Reza Shah had started as a cavalry gendarme. These gendarmes were backed by landlords and their main job was to keep the peasants in check. They were bullies who lived off the fat of the land and not patriots who were serving to fight for their country. When the British and the Soviets invaded, most of Reza Shah's top officers simply fled. Reza Shah himself proved to be a coward who did not resist the invading powers in the slightest. The military historian Robert Lyman observed that the British victory was, “one of the fastest capitulations in history.”

Part of the reason Reza Shah lost was because he was a corrupt, cruel and incompetent autocrat. He was a lowly cavalry officer who was part of a coup and then conducted a coronation. Once on the throne, this autocrat engaged in a massive land grab across the country. By the time the British packed him off to exile in 1941, Reza Shah had become Iran's largest landowner. He also deposited a fair bit of cash at British Barclays Bank. The money that should have been used to build roads, schools and hospitals became the private property of a bloodthirsty upstart.

Fundamentally, Reza Shah was a narcissist, not a patriot. When the British took over Iran, he was more worried about preserving his private wealth instead of fighting for his country. By this time, this king had lost the trust of his people. The canny British had been keeping an eye on him. About 15 years ago, the imperial diplomat Harold Nicholson observed, "He [Reza] is secretive, suspicious, and ignorant; he appears wholly unable to grasp the realities of the situation or to realize the force of the hostility he has aroused." Nicholson proved prophetic.

The Modern Reza Shah Myth is a Lie

When Reza Shah and his son Mohammad Reza Shah ruled, writers and teachers lied to survive. Flattery was the order of the day. Reza Shah was glorified as a "social, economic, and political" reformer who laid the foundation for modern Iran. He was even given credit for reforms instituted by Amir Kabir. The regime kept Iranians in the dark about Reza Shah's paranoid, violent and oppressive rule. Iranians did not realize how this corrupt king betrayed Iran to the British and stole from the exchequer.

Apologists for the Pahlavis claim that Reza Shah brought modern medicine to Iran. The truth is that the Pasteur Institute of Iran had begun in 1919, many years before he seized power. It was

the first public health institution in the Middle East, producing vaccines for the region. Hospitals existed even in ancient Iran. Reza Shah was not the first to build hospitals in the country. To be fair, he did build a few but so did almost every colony from Nigeria to Vietnam.

The most incongruous myth pervasive in the Iranian diaspora is that Reza Shah ended capitulation and expelled foreign forces from Iran. History tells us that Iranians had always opposed foreign troops. Amir Kabir had called for their expulsion 80 years ago. The British saw the writing on the wall, withdrew their troops but exercised power behind the scenes. British troops did not march down streets in Tehran in contrast to New Delhi. Instead the British used Reza Shah to do their dirty work in Iran.

Some give credit for railways, roads, industries and instituting a civil registry in Iran. The railways were for British strategic interest and cost the Iranian taxpayer a fortune. The roads were few and terrible. Industries came because Iranians have traded for centuries. Entrepreneurs learnt from Europeans and set up factories. Besides, Iranians had been producing sugar and textiles, two industries showcased by his supporters, for centuries. The registry was demanded by the parliament five years before Reza became shah.

Reza Shah's regime failed to serve Iran. At the moment of reckoning, he and his troops just ran away. He was a thug in uniform who looted the country and killed innocents. He served imperial powers, not his people. Ayatollah Khomeini was not wrong when he said, "The Pahlavi monarchy was against the law from the day it was established. They formed a fake Constituent Assembly and forcefully made him [Reza Khan] the ruler over Iran. "Today, protesters in Iran chanting "Reza Shah ruhat shad" need to study their history. Iran needs freedom, democracy and

equality, not the glamorization of a paranoiac, cowardly, murderous, and traitorous shah.

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