

FAIR OBSERVER DEVIL'S DICTIONARY 2022

**Rediscover the events of
2022 in an original way**

PETER ISACKSON

Fair Observer Devil’s Dictionary
2022

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Fair Observer°

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Foreword

A Fair Observer Feature: The Daily Devil's Dictionary

Between October 2017 and December 2021, Fair Observer ran a regular feature, The Daily Devil's Dictionary. Written by Fair Observer's Chief Strategy Officer, Peter Isackson, the column appeared five days a week, from Monday to Friday, for over four years. Since January 1, 2022, the tradition continues at the much more relaxed pace of once a week under a new rubric: Fair Observer Devil's Dictionary.

All the Devil's Dictionary articles examine items in the news in an original way. They analyze the language used not only by public personalities but also by journalists. The articles examine the words used by public personas to open up our readers' perspectives on current events. The deeper meaning of political and social discourse, and especially of journalism itself, is often hidden or disguised. The Devil's Dictionary makes sense of it all in an informative and ironic manner.

2022: a year of global drama

The year 2022 earned its place in modern history as a year of impending geopolitical change. The news cycle was dominated by the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, leading to what by the end of the year had clearly become a prolonged proxy war. Its implications went far beyond the question of how Ukraine in its totality or its parts should be governed and by whom. The war's effect on the supply of energy, food and fertilizer to the countries of the developing world turned it into the a global drama. The effect on Europe was even more dramatic, with consequences that are likely to be long term concerning what former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld once referred to as "Old Europe" and "New Europe." In short, Europe became not only the movie set on which the war played out but the stakes in a high level poker game managed from Washington DC.

Introduction

Fair Observer is committed to an original concept of journalism that insists on the value of multiple perspectives. Therefore, we trust thousands of contributors to make sense of the world through their respective prisms. The Daily Devil’s Dictionary serves to remind our readers that it is always worth digging deeper into the discourse of the professionals — from politicians to journalists, from economists and scientists to entertainers and celebrities — whose voices we hear or are exposed to every day in the media.

The topics we treat in the Devil’s Dictionary can come from any source. The language public figures use reflects not only their individual personalities but, far more often, features of the ambient culture or ideology. This may include scientific facts but also assumptions about the world and society. Every human culture — whether national, ethnic or professional — spawns its own assumptions and beliefs. Some are natural effects of the environment we live in, whereas others may be the result of conscious strategies created by individuals or groups who have the power to influence.

The work of Devil’s Dictionary consists of noticing and then exploring the cultural and historical sources that accompany and are often layered under the literal dictionary definition of words. Each article seeks to clarify the hidden intentions that exist below the surface of any person’s or institution’s discourse. The examination of context to make explicit what may be called alternative and complementary definitions lies at the core of every Devil’s Dictionary article.

As citizens of a complex world, we should acknowledge the simple fact that everyone empowered to deliver a message in the public space is seeking to convince or persuade us of some truth (or fiction) that they believe we should accept. That is equally true of news or opinion pieces published by the New York Times

and of articles published by Fair Observer. No one can write without a point of view. In the age of artificial intelligence, even machines have an implicit point of view because they are increasingly producing human-sounding discourse. Those machines may not have a literal view, but the point of view they project are derived from the way they are programmed.

Although our governments and educational systems do not always encourage it, citizens of a democratic society should recognize the crucial need to delve critically into the context of the meaning of every message they receive. More often than not, there are multiple contexts to consider: cultural, ideological and historical. Looking into those contexts is the starting point of that virtuous skill we call critical thinking. In its modest and often intentionally humorous way, the Devil’s Dictionary strives to demonstrate how to think critically. It inevitably involves the author’s own strategies of persuasion, but that too is fair game for anyone interested in teasing out the relationship between context and the meaning of discourse.

Each entry in a Devil’s Dictionary focuses on how the ideas associated with words and phrases are linked to their context. In the format we have developed, there are three levels of context but the field of references varies from item to item. The first level, developed in the introductory paragraphs, presents the background of events that have provoked the citation of the chosen item of vocabulary. The second, “Contextual Note” immediately follows the definition. It situates that event among other contemporary events and explains its cultural influences. The third, “Historical Note,” seeks to remind readers of the continuum of history. This may involve many areas of knowledge and practice, such as economics, science, ideology and artistic traditions.

Fair Observer's Devil's Dictionary and the importance of critical thinking

All rational arguments depend, for their persuasive impact, on the ability to mobilize recognizable ideas expressed in shared language. The words we use take their meaning, not from our dictionaries, but from the cultural spaces in which they are produced. Our official dictionaries serve to stabilize and, in some sense, normalize the core concepts associated with individual words. They do not develop the full range of associations built into the culture of linguistic usage. Words always contain more meaning than we intend to use at any given time. They are slippery items that constantly challenge our grasp of meaning.

Many of the words and phrases used by public figures and deemed quotable by the media are catchphrases or "buzzwords." They carry associations that speakers and writers do not feel the need to define. Words that indicate abstract concepts such as "freedom," "democracy," "justice," "order" and "beauty" tend to evoke feelings and sentiments about something referred to in the context. They resonate with our emotions more than they signify something objective, stable and precise. Public speakers and writers often choose to use words less to clarify their ideas than to stir largely unconscious feelings that exploit culturally implanted associations with positive, noble values or beliefs. Anything associated with them will be understood by most people as good. Anything suggesting a lack of connection with them can become suspect. The same speakers or writers may also do the opposite, using words that evoke ideas and behaviors that have become culturally coded objects of disapproval and disgust.

Words such as "growth," "opportunity," "creativity" and "inequality" derive their meaning from the political and social ideas different groups of people associate with them, especially in the context of current debates focused on economic reality. This is where the kind of alternative definitions we propose in our Devil's

Dictionary become worth considering. These new definitions – ironic and often provocative, if not impertinent – focus on meaning that can be derived from the context. This work of the creative imagination as we think outside of the box known as a traditional dictionary, enables us to develop and refine our capacity to reflect not only on the meaning of these words but also the ideas they represent or convey.

Such an exercise becomes even more critical when we reason at the level of the phrase or expression, rather than the individual word alone. "Opportunity" is one thing, but evocation of the "land of opportunity" is another. It is a cultural meme that leads to a wide range of thoughts and reflections rooted in contemporary culture in ways that no traditional dictionary can do justice to.

The example of another cultural meme familiar to those who study economics can even more demonstrably prove this point. Most people have a positive reaction to word and the idea of "creativity." But should they always feel the same way about Joseph Schumpeter's celebrated idea of "creative destruction." Schumpeter proposed the term as an objective idea that describes a process observable in the history of capitalism. In classic rhetorical terms it is an oxymoron, a coupling of opposed ideas. It is only an apparent contradiction. It makes sense, even in the natural world, insofar as it describes a process at the core of the cycle of the birth, life and death of organisms in an ecosystem.

But Schumpeter's idea can be used in the political sphere to justify serious social damage. Creation can, in some circumstances, be associated with murderous aggression. It is only when we explore how this plays out in real contexts that we can begin to appreciate what creativity in this sense means. Who isn't for creativity? But when it means assaulting the livelihoods of thousands or millions of people, does it still mean the same thing?

The Devil's Dictionary's concept in its historical context

We owe the title of the column to Ambrose Bierce, the American author, humorist and journalist, whose career spanned the late 19th and early 20th century. In 1912, he gave the title The Devil's Dictionary to a book containing the collection of satirical definitions he had been composing and publishing in newspapers for several decades. The book has had a lasting reputation as a minor monument of American literature.

Fair Observer's Devil's Dictionary – formerly daily but now produced on a weekly basis – stands as an entertaining and instructive complement to the wider range of crowdsourced articles published by Fair Observer. It can be seen as an amusing exercise in critical reading and critical thinking, reminding us that awareness of context has the power to transform our perception of meaning. It also reminds us that meaning is never quite as simple as one isolated voice may make it out to be.

The Daily Devil's Dictionary is also consistent with the launch of Fair Observer's didactic arm, that includes Fair Observer Education, focused on schools and higher education, and Fair Observer Leadership Academy that targets the professional world.

As we continue to develop the essential notion of democratic, multi-perspective journalism, Fair Observer's team is also engaging directly with the emerging trends in the world of education and training. Those trends have become increasingly disruptive. During the COVID-19 pandemic, technology has materially shaken up many of our habits of communication and exchange, but nowhere more so than in the

world of education and training. Many argue that lower attention spans and trends towards standardization are diminishing our capacity not only for critical thinking but also for human creativity. Most reasonable people realize that the role of education in all societies now requires some serious rethinking and restructuring.

Fair Observer Education is navigating this new world delicately. While we use and even create exciting technology to meet the needs of learners, at the core, we believe in old-fashioned fundamentals. All learning is in some sense a social activity. We learn from other people, but even more effectively with other people. We even become who we are through learning. And the who we become is fundamentally a social being even if we are all called upon to find a role not just in the economy, but in the economic and social ecosystem.

The Fair Observer team has designed and delivered courses on themes such as writing skills, journalism, geopolitics, history, non-traditional security and cultural evolution. Fair Observer Devil's Dictionary has become one of the educational tools that we use to develop the essential communication skills required for effective speaking and writing. These skills include research, experimentation, critical thinking, creativity and a sense of dramatic structure and style. Educators interested in the Fair Observer Devil's Dictionary teaching approach will find a full description in the annex at the end of this e-book: The Devil's Dictionary Method, a Pedagogical Tool for Critical Thinking and Percussive Writing.

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PART I

Corruption

CHAPTER 1

Corruption is in the Eye of the Beholder

It may be time to recognize that all modern states cultivate native forms of corruption that can lead to authoritarian behavior in clear contradiction with their professed ideals.

July 20, 2022

A Reuters [article](#) this week quoted this public statement by a prominent political leader: “Sufficient evidence has been collected to report this person on suspicion of treason. All his criminal activities are documented.”

Now let’s imagine this quote presented in the form of a multiple-choice question on an examination for a high school history class. It might look like this:

Identify the person in modern history who made this statement to the press: “Sufficient evidence has been collected to report this person on suspicion of treason. All his criminal activities are documented.”

- a) Barack Obama
- b) Joseph Stalin
- c) Vladimir Putin
- d) Volodymyr Zelenskyy
- e) Boris Johnson

Clearly no American high school student would be tempted to answer Barack Obama, despite the fact that, more than all other presidents combined, Obama used the 1917 Espionage Act to [arrest](#) and prosecute whistleblowers and journalists. So, let’s move on to the other choices.

Given what everyone knows about history, the obvious choice would be Joseph Stalin. And, indeed, this sentiment correlates with the justification for his notorious show trials. But Stalin, who had no need to explain things to the press, never spoke these words.

With Stalin eliminated, the default answer for most people today would be the third choice, Vladimir Putin. It certainly fits with his image. We have seen [headlines](#) in the recent past about Putin’s habit of firing generals and other officials underperforming in the war in Ukraine. But in none of these cases was anyone accused of treason. They were simply “dismissed from their posts.”

The next choice, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, is patently absurd. No self-respecting student of current events would choose Volodymyr Zelenskyy. How could they? He’s a war hero, a knight in shining armor, the valiant defender of democracy, freedom and the moral values of the enlightened West. He is our only contemporary politician whom we can compare to Winston Churchill, a [comparison](#) Zelenskyy himself, in all modesty, made recently.

So can it be Boris Johnson? Johnson has never made a statement of great political consequence other than “Get Brexit done.” And he isn’t likely to make any others as his career definitively falters, allowing him to presumably spend quality time looking after at least some of the ten or twelve children he has left scattered along his career path (with [more](#) to come?).

And so, the surprising truth is that none other than Superhero Volodymyr was the author of that statement. On Sunday, as reported by Reuters, Zelenskyy “announced the firing of the head of Ukraine’s domestic security agency, the SBU, and the state prosecutor general.”

Our diabolical definition:



Sufficient evidence

Sufficient evidence

Any suspicion felt by an authoritarian leader.

Contextual Note

Reuters conveys the facts in a neutral, objective tone. But some of the facts it reports may sound astonishing to anyone who takes the time to think about their meaning.

Here is how Reuters defines the context: “Zelenskiy said he had fired the top officials because it had come to light that many members of their agencies had collaborated with Russia, a problem he said had touched other agencies as well.”

There's a wonderful vagueness about the idea that something “had come to light.” Readers will obviously and uncritically sympathize with Zelenskyy's condemnation of any lost soul who “collaborated with Russia.” The problem here may lie in the definition of “collaborated.” Its meaning ranges from “talked to” to “colluded with.” Zelenskyy has deemed this collaboration to be “treason.” That means that he believes that what “came to light” was clearly collusion.

According to *The New York Times*, [reporting](#) on the same story, “Mr. Zelensky said he was responding to a large number of treason investigations opened into employees of law enforcement agencies.” Later in the article we learn that a “total of 651 cases of high treason had been opened against law enforcement personnel.” Reuters also mentions that “SBU chief Ivan Bakanov” was “a childhood friend of Zelenskiy.” This is beginning to sound like a purge more worthy of comparison with Stalin than Churchill.

The US reaction was somewhat predictable. It reflected the American belief in rational management policies. The *NYT* reveals that

“American officials said the moves reflect Mr. Zelensky's efforts to put more experienced leaders in key security positions.” Surely a natural, intelligent thing to do. They even give a hint about the process. “U.S. intelligence agencies have been providing huge amounts of information to Ukrainian partners.”

This would appear to indicate that US intelligence provided the evidence for these accusations. A reasoning person might even be tempted to think that the US may have written the entire script for Zelenskyy to play out before the cameras. But anyone aware of how the news has been reported in the past few months by our legacy media should now understand and firmly believe that Zelenskyy is a visionary political leader, not an actor skilled at delivering other people's texts. The proper reading of events is that the visionary leader is judiciously using the resources provided by his docile partner and supporter, the US, to carry out his strategic vision.

The *NYT* stresses this point when it explains that even though “U.S. intelligence agencies have worked with the S.B.U. [Ukraine's intelligence agency], their main relationship during the war has been with Ukraine's military intelligence service.” In other words, the US is assisting with equipment, and that's it. It is definitely not getting involved in Ukrainian politics. This should be obvious. After all, there have been no intercepted telephone calls with Victoria Nuland in the past eight years, not since the famous [one](#) in February 2014. That should be “sufficient evidence” that the US has given up any attempt to influence the internal politics of the sovereign nation of Ukraine.

Historical Note

The *NYT* article apparently hopes its readers will miss the irony around the fact that in 2020 Oleksiy Symonenko, the acting prosecutor general appointed to replace his treasonous predecessor, “was accused by the National Anti-Corruption Bureau of Ukraine of ‘illegally’ interfering in a corruption investigation.”

This highlights one of those well-known and obvious though somewhat embarrassing facts about post-Soviet Ukraine: systemic and endemic [corruption](#), no matter who is in power or who has been “democratically elected.” In

June, Al Jazeera aptly [reminded](#) its readers that “on May 20, 2019, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, with a hint of irony, said in his inauguration speech that his election victory proved that Ukrainians were tired of experienced politicians who over the past 28 years had created a country of opportunities – ‘opportunities to steal, bribe and loot.’”

Like Russia itself, after the collapse of the Soviet Union and a US-supported restructuring of the economy under Boris Yeltsin, Ukraine's future oligarchs discovered the wonderful “opportunities” provided to anyone capable of

learning the ropes in a new version of what may aptly be called the three *liberal arts* mentioned by Zelenskyy: stealing, bribing and looting.

Russia and Ukraine had become two independent nations ready to benefit from the wisdom of American bankers, capitalists and consultants itching to teach them that a successful economy depends on the motivation of a class of hyper-wealthy people controlling the extraction and transformation of resources as well as being in charge of the distribution of wealth (mainly to themselves). Zelenskyy's own net worth today is [estimated](#) at \$596 million, comparable to Jeffrey Epstein's at the time of his death. It is also three times the estimated net [worth](#) of Robert Redford, who most will acknowledge has had a much richer and more productive career in entertainment than Zelenskyy.

Since the Russian invasion in February, and even before, Al Jazeera has demonstrated an uncharacteristic alignment with Western media's one-sided reporting on the conflict. This despite the pertinent remarks of their senior political analyst, Marwan Bishara, who has condemned the conformist attitude of the media. He was particularly "shocked by the venomous attacks on critics of US foreign policies by their fellow journalists and citizens, accusing them of acting as a 'fifth column' on 'Putin's payroll.'"

Al Jazeera's news services, in contrast, have largely followed the dictates of US propaganda,

though far less stridently than their American or British counterparts. In the article on Ukraine's corruption, Al Jazeera uses a classic but rather abject dodge to shield Ukraine from criticism. Citing rankings published in 2021, it notes that as the second-most corrupt country in Europe, Ukraine is nevertheless better than Russia, who holds first place. That is an odd case of whataboutism that should hardly reassure anyone about the capacity of Ukraine to represent a bastion of the ideals of Western democracy.

Critiquing the trend of the media, Bishara sees "a repeat of the disastrous Gulf War coverage of two decades ago, where much of the influential Anglo Saxon mainstream media sided rather blindly and foolishly with the official line." He then adds this impertinent question: "But why do these 'opinion makers' continue to peddle information or rather disinformation from military and intelligence services?"

The answer may simply be that they too are corrupt. It's just a different kind of corruption, the kind that Chomsky and Herman [analyzed](#) in *Manufacturing Consent* or that the contemporary [columns](#) of seasoned journalist Patrick Lawrence expose. In other words, concerning the existence of corruption—whether in Russia, Ukraine or the US and Western media —there is clearly "sufficient evidence."

CHAPTER 2

FO° Devil’s Dictionary: An Example of Executive Problem Solving in Florida

In an economy increasingly dominated by rentier monopolists, democracy has become just another management tool.

August 03, 2022

The Guardian last week featured an [article](#) that enigmatically began with this sentence: “The CEO of the biggest power company in the US had a problem.” It went on to describe in some detail the nature of the problem, initially revealed in a document leaked to the Orlando Sentinel. It concerned the CEO’s strategic reaction to a proposal in the Florida State Senate of a “law that could cut into Florida Power & Light’s (FPL) profits” by allowing landlords “to sell cheap rooftop solar power directly to their tenants – bypassing FPL and its monopoly on electricity.” A CEO’s job is obviously to solve this kind of “problem.”

Fortunately for Eric Silagy, the CEO of Florida Power & Light’s (FPL), US corporate culture encourages bold initiatives designed to solve problems, even the problems of a power company that fears it might lose its monopoly and lose a share of its captive profits. The source of the problem was a state legislator who dared

to propose a law intended both to benefit consumers and help transform an economy whose dependence on fossil fuels has created a climate crisis already visibly spreading havoc across swathes of the globe. Florida, in particular, is looking towards a future in which rising sea levels threaten much of the real estate along its extensive and overdeveloped coastline.

Silagy mustered his most refined strategic skills and executive grit to apply the kind of solution that only well-schooled executives understand. A believer in the virtue of delegation, Silagy ordered two of his vice-presidents to focus their attention on the legislator in question, a State senator by the name of Jose Javier Rodriguez. “I want you to make his life a living hell ... seriously,” Silagy instructed his underlings. Adding “seriously” at the end indicated that his order belonged to the realm of high strategy rather than ordinary, everyday business tactics.



Our diabolical definition:

Power company

Power company

1. An enterprise that produces and distributes power in the form of electricity

2. Any company with excessive profit margins and massive amounts of cash to spend on undermining the power of democracy.

Contextual Note

Many people will classify this drama as an outlier, relegating it to just another story of a “bad apple,” an individual lacking any normal ethical standards who poisons the lives of others. But given the fact

that it involves both politics and business at the highest level, it illuminates issues that are at the core of both the social order and of democracy itself.

Despite the first impression it creates, *The Guardian's* article eventually makes it clear that Silagy may not be the principal villain of the story. Silagy hypocritically deemed his crime to be nothing more than a "poor choice of words." What he means is that, however immoral, asocial and subversive of the political order his attitude and actions were, he runs no risk of being formally charged with anything other than aggressive business practices in a culture that believes aggressive practices to be a virtue rather than a vice.

Silagy has done nothing criminal. But as an article in the *Miami New Times* [informs](#) us: "criminal charges have been filed in relation to the defeats of Rodríguez and another Democratic senate candidate.", but Matrix and FPL have not been accused of wrongdoing.

The real culprit in the Guardian's story is a company called Matrix that appears to be specialized in doing any kind of dirty work required by companies in the fossil fuel and power distribution industries, essentially to help them protect and reinforce their monopolies.

The Guardian tells us that Matrix's work touched almost every level of politics in Florida, from influencing local mayoral and county commission elections to combating attempts to reshape the state constitution. In each of those cases, Matrix was working against politicians or policies fighting to curb the climate crisis by encouraging renewable power." Matrix has also been influencing politics in Alabama and at least six other states.

Historical Note

The Guardian notes that in the state of "Florida, FPL and Matrix demonstrated how a utility and its consultants can work in tandem to resist clean energy reforms." In the long history of political corruption in the US, exemplified by Tammany Hall in the 19th century, corruption usually tended to be a straight *quid pro quo*, though often cleverly concealed. Money for action. Today's corrupt practices are based not on simple subterfuges such as fake invoices, but on refining the apparently legitimate professional skills exercised by lobbyists and especially consultants, who know all the tricks of the trade.

The fact that this incident has led to criminal charges against five individuals (usually called "patsies") but not against the powerful actors – FPL and Matrix – reflects a sophisticated organizational intelligence capable of accomplishing astounding and obviously illegal feats without exposing the true perpetrators, who have done nothing but exercise their managerial talents. Subcontracting dirty work is the key. Those who are eventually nabbed for illegal acts are at several removes from the decision-makers and appear to be acting on their own.

The first basic organizational rule is to outsource all the concrete actions to true professionals. These are consultants skilled at navigating the law, people who understand what they can get

away with and know how to delegate to people further outside the direct commercial logic of the business: the patsies.

All this derives from the famous Thatcher/Reagan logic that glorified the wisdom of putting public services in private hands. People who only focus on profit are, according to this philosophy, the only ones capable of being "efficient." If efficiency involves removing political obstacles in a democracy, they are the ones who will know how to do it. And if everything happens this way thanks to the fact that public services will always have a character of monopoly, then any hope of realizing the dream of democracy – government of the people, by the people and for the people – will, in Lincoln's words, "perish from the earth." That is, if it hasn't already done so.

Corruption has evolved since Tammany Hall. Here is how [History](#) describes the true secret to Tammany Hall's success: "Although its name was synonymous with corruption to many, Tammany Hall's popularity and endurance resulted from its willingness to help the city's poor and immigrant populations."

Unlike Tammany Hall, FPL's and Matrix's corruption serves one purpose: to help rich monopolists.

CHAPTER 3

Corruption, Debt and the Crisis of Global Capitalism

The cases of Sri Lanka and Africa illustrate a changing perception of economic relations.

August 31, 2022

The pattern is becoming too obvious for the comfort of policymakers in Washington, DC. They must be aware of it, but they simply cannot change their habits. This is partly due to the fact that they count on the legacy media in the US to keep every story framed in the way they prefer. But readers across the globe have begun to catch on.

What is the pattern I'm referring to? Quite simply the systematic accusation of crimes committed by rival nations, which may be real enough, but rarely rise to the dimension and magnitude of the same crimes perpetrated by the US. The most obvious example was encapsulated in George W Bush's [gaffe](#) earlier this year when, intending to denounce Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine, he vilified "the decision of one man to launch a wholly unjustified and brutal invasion" of a country he inadvertently but accurately called Iraq.

Then there's the eternal question of corruption. The US prides itself on its standards of transparency that make corruption unthinkable in politics. At the same time, it routinely denounces the very real and often manifest corruption of nations in the Middle East and elsewhere.

For at least the past century the average American believed this to be true. After all, the nation's laws had made it practically impossible to engage in the simple *quid pro quos* commonly practiced in many parts of the world. Things have changed. According to a 2021 Pew [survey](#), 67% of Americans think that "most politicians" are corrupt. Serious studies have demonstrated that the entire political system – supposedly of, by and for the people – has become one

of [oligarchic](#) control. That number has probably risen in the past year as stories concerning Donald Trump, Nancy Pelosi and Hunter Biden have highlighted the incredible sums of money that end up in the hands and bank accounts of politicians and their families.

At a moment of history, the fear that rogue states, such as Iran, may possess and use nuclear weapons has never been more real. But that fear, a matter of vague speculation, pales in relation to a very real risk of nuclear annihilation provoked by the current situation in Ukraine, pitting the US against Russia. When US President Joe Biden [commits](#) to supporting the war "as long as it takes," the occasions for a nuclear "accident" will only multiply. The US is after all the only nation ever to have used nuclear weapons. And on that occasion, the target was almost exclusively civilian populations.

Ever since the beginning of China's proclaimed Belt and Road Initiative, Western analysts have denounced a practice they see as threatening to compromise the sovereignty of nations in need of external assistance. Andrew Backhouse writing for the Australian news site, [new.com.au](#) sums up the Western complaint. "Critics argue China is involved in 'debt trap diplomacy', alleging the country issues loans in order to eventually secure strategic international assets." But the art of pushing nations into a debt trap has been fundamental to US foreign policy at least since the end of World War II. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) have been systematically used to that end, not necessarily through direct manipulation, but through the imposition of ideological constraints.



Our diabolical definition:

Debt trap
diplomacy

The essential win-lose strategy – presenting initially as win-win — employed by those who know their superior power and resources will ensure domination over the long term

Contextual Note

Washington Post columnist Ishaan Tharoor in July [accused](#) China of having “a hand in Sri Lanka’s economic calamity.” He pointed out that in 2020 Sri Lanka “received a line of \$3 billion in easy credit from China to help in the repayment of its existing debts.” This choice was made “rather than taking the more painful steps of restructuring its debts in dialogue with the IMF and pushing through austerity measures to appease the Paris Club.” In other words, Sri Lanka broke ranks with the hallowed tradition of relying on Western management of struggling economies. The system was built to systematically favor the interests of Western investors, to the detriment of populations condemned to hoping some day to benefit from the vaunted liberal model of trickle-down economics. In reality, it is a system of “trickle out” to transnational corporations.

Tharoor blithely concludes that Sri Lanka’s choice “appears to have been a mistake.” He presents the current crisis as a cautionary tale about the risk of deviating from the traditional model of dependence. He cites as “realistic” the judgment of Ali Sabry, Sri Lanka’s caretaker finance minister who earlier this year complained, “we should have gone [to the IMF] at least 12 months before we did.”

There is no doubt that for a host of reasons Sri Lanka can be considered “a textbook case of how an economy should not be managed.” But laying

the blame on China alone makes no sense. Moreover, citing it as an example of China’s supposed debt-trap diplomacy, as many Western critics have been doing for the past two years, is contradicted by reality at every level. As progressive journalist Benjamin Norton has [noted](#): “Sri Lanka owes 81% of its external debt to US and European financial institutions and Western allies Japan and India. China owns just 10%. But Washington blames imaginary ‘Chinese debt traps’ for the nation’s crisis, as it considers a 17th IMF structural adjustment program.”

The most obvious contradiction of the Chinese debt-trap myth appeared in this week’s news about China’s massive act of debt forgiveness in Africa. Backhouse reports that “China has pledged to forgive 23 interest-free loans for 17 African countries and will also provide food assistance to the struggling nations.”

The Australian journalist goes on to cite recent studies that expose the myth of China’s supposed debt-trap diplomacy. “But the concept of a Chinese ‘debt trap’ has also been criticized, with a study in 2020 finding China had restructured or refinanced about \$21 billion of debt in Africa between 2000 and 2019. The study also noted there was no evidence of ‘asset seizures’ and that Chinese lenders had not used courts to enforce payments, or applied penalty interest rates to distressed borrowers.”

Historical Note

There can be no doubt that creditors, whatever their nationality, enjoy a position of relative power over their debtors. That power can easily be abused. Pretending that the financial assistance provided either by the IMF or China should be thought of as an act of pure, disinterested generosity may serve the interests of the creditor state's propaganda, but it flies in the face of both economic reality and human psychology. In his book, *...and forgive them their debts...* economist Michael Hudson exposed, in historical detail, the fact that in ancient times, dating back to the growth of Mesopotamian civilization, debt forgiveness was an essential tool of government. The late anthropologist David Graeber developed a similar thesis in his best-seller, *Debt: the first 5000 years*. Jubilees were acts of massive debt forgiveness that permitted not only the renewal of economic relations but also contributed to a sense of solidarity that is required in all complex societies.

Sri Lanka's crisis illustrates a much larger crisis, of both a geopolitical and economic nature. We are witnessing a major loss of faith not just in the authority that imposes and enforces the supposed rules, but of capitalism itself. The essential

problem derives from the rigidity of the rules themselves. All debts must be paid. All debtors must be humbled.

The rules-based order is incapable of even imagining, let alone implementing the great acts of debt forgiveness of Hammurabi and other powerful rulers in the remote past. But that limit on global political power is just one element of the current crisis. The misuse of economic power, a more banal version of debt-trap diplomacy that has been an integral feature of the vaunted "rules-based order" has now emerged visibly as the central weakness of a system that breeds injustice.

John Perkins' famous [book](#), *Confessions of an Economic Hit Man*, offers direct testimony highlighting how the creditor-debtor relationship built around the US dollar and the international institutions created to administer the rules-based order has contributed to the deprivation of sovereignty of many struggling nations, especially those rich in exploitable resources. By design, not only governments but entire populations were meant to fall helplessly into the trap .

CHAPTER 4

Pfizer’s Noble Struggle Against
the Diabolical Jared Kushner

*Forbes offers Pfizer’s CEO a platform to set the record straight
and defend the honor of the pharmaceutical industry.*

March 09, 2022

These days it’s rare to read in the media a story with a happy ending designed to comfort our belief that, at least occasionally, we live in the best of all possible worlds. Forbes has offered such an [occasion](#) to a self-proclaimed benefactor of humanity, Dr. Albert Bourla, the CEO of Pfizer. (Disclaimer: Pfizer is a company to whom I must express my personal gratitude for its generosity in supplying me with three doses of a vaccine that has enabled me to survive intact a prolonged pandemic and benefit from a government-approved pass on my cellphone permitting me to dine in restaurants and attend various public events.)

The Forbes article, an excerpt from Bourla’s book, “Moonshot,” ends with a moving story about how Pfizer boldly resisted the pressure of the evil [Jared Kushner](#), [Donald Trump’s](#) son-in-law, who had no qualms about depriving the rest of the world — even civilized countries such as Canada and Japan — of access to the [COVID-19](#) vaccine to serve the US in their stead.

“He insisted,” the good doctor explains, “that the U.S. should take its additional 100 doses before we sent doses to anyone else from our Kalamazoo plant. He reminded me that he represented the government, and they could ‘take measures’ to enforce their will.”



Our diabolical definition:

Take measures

Take measures

*Go well beyond any
measured response in
an act of intimidation*

Contextual Note

Bourla begins his narrative at the beginning, before the development of the vaccine, by asserting his company’s virtuous intentions and ethical credentials that would later be challenged by bureaucrats and venal politicians. “Vaccine equity was one of our principles from the start,” he writes. “Vaccine diplomacy, the idea of using vaccines as a bargaining chip, was not and never has been.”

Some readers may note that vaccine equity was only “one” of the principles. There were, of course, other more dominant ones, such as maximizing profit. But Bourla never mentions these other principles, instead offering a step-by-step narrative meant to make the reader believe that his focus was on minimizing profit. That, after all, is what a world afflicted by a raging and deadly pandemic might expect. A closer

examination of the process Bourla describes as well as the very real statistics about vaccine distribution reveals that, on the contrary, Pfizer would never even consider minimizing profits. It simply is not in their DNA.

Bourla proudly describes the phases of his virtuous thinking. The CEO even self-celebrates his out-of-the-ordinary sense of marketing, serving to burnish the image not only of his company but of the entire pharmaceutical industry. “We had a chance,” he boasts, “to gain back our industry’s reputation, which had been under fire for the last two decades. In the U.S., pharmaceuticals ranked near the bottom of all sectors, right next to the government, in terms of reputation.”

Thanks to his capacity to tone down his company’s instinctive corporate greed, Bourla now feels he has silenced his firm’s if not the entire industry’s critics when he makes this claim, “No one could say that we were using the pandemic as an opportunity to set prices at unusually high levels.” Some might, nevertheless, make the justifiable claim that what they did was set the prices at “usually” high levels. A close look at Bourla’s description of how the pricing decisions were made makes it clear that Pfizer never veered from seeking “high levels,” whether usual or unusual, during a pandemic that required as speedy and universal a response as possible.

Thanks to a subtle fudge on vocabulary, Bourla turns Pfizer’s vice into a virtue. He writes that when considering the calculation of the price Pfizer might charge per dose, he rejected the standard approach that was based on a savant calculation of the costs to patients theoretically saved by the drug. He explains the “different approach” he recommended. “I told the team to bring me the current cost of other cutting-edge vaccines like for measles, shingles, pneumonia, etc.” But it was the price and not the cost he was

comparing. When his team reported prices of “between \$150 and \$200 per dose,” he agreed “to match the low end of the existing vaccine prices.”

If Pfizer was reasoning, as most industries do, in terms of cost and not price, he would be calculating all the costs related to producing the doses required by the marketplace — in this case billions — and would have worked out the price on the basis of fixed costs, production and marketing costs plus margin. That would be the reasonable thing to do in the case of a pandemic, where his business can be compared to a public service and for which there is both a captive marketplace (all of humanity shares the need) and in which sales are based entirely on advanced purchase orders. That theoretically reduces marketing costs to zero.

But Bourla wrote the book to paint Pfizer as a public benefactor and himself as a modern Gaius Maecenas, the patron saint of patrons. Once his narrative establishes his commitment to the cause of human health and the renunciation of greed, he goes into detail about his encounter with Kushner. After wrangling with the bureaucrats at Operation Warp Speed created to meet the needs of the population during a pandemic, Bourla recounts the moment “when President Trump’s son-in-law and advisor, Jared Kushner, called me to resolve the issue.” That is when Kushner, like any good mafia boss, evokes his intent to “take measures,” a threat the brave Bourla resists in the name of the health of humanity and personal honor.

That leads to the heartwarming, honor-saving denouement, the happy ending that Bourla calls a miracle. “Thankfully, our manufacturing team continued to work miracles, and I received an improved manufacturing schedule that would allow us to provide the additional doses to the U.S. from April to July without cutting the supply to the other countries.”

Historical Note

Investopedia [sums](#) up the reasoning of pharmaceuticals when pricing their drugs: “Ultimately, the main objective of pharmaceutical companies when pricing drugs is to generate the most revenue.” In the history of Western pharmacy, that has not always been the case. Until the creation of the pharmaceutical industrial sector in the late 19th century, apothecaries, chemists and druggists worked in their communities to earn a living and like most artisans calculated their costs and their capacity for profit.

The Industrial Revolution changed all that, permitting large-scale investment in research and development that would have been impossible in an earlier age. But it also introduced the profit motive as the main driver of industrial strategy. What that meant is what we can see today. Pharmaceutical companies have become, as Albert Bourla himself notes, “ranked near the bottom of all sectors.” They exist for one reason: to make and accumulate profit. Industrial strategies often seek to prolong or extend a need

for drugs rather than facilitate cures. Advising a [biotech](#) company, Goldman Sachs famously asked, “Is curing patients a sustainable business model?” The implied answer was “no.” The greatest fear of the commercial health industry is of a cure that “exhaust[s] the available pool of treatable patients.”

In any case, COVID-19 has served Pfizer handsomely and is continuing to do so. In late 2021, the Peoples Vaccine Alliance [reported](#) “that the companies behind two of the most successful COVID-19 vaccines—Pfizer, BioNTech and Moderna—are making combined profits of \$65,000 every minute.” Furthermore, they “have sold the majority of

doses to rich countries, leaving low-income countries out in the cold. Pfizer and BioNTech have delivered less than one percent of their total vaccine supplies to low-income countries.”

At the beginning of the COVID-19 “project,” Bourla boasts, “I had made clear that return on investment should not be of any consideration” while patting himself on the back for focusing on the needs of the world. “In my mind, fairness had to come first.” With the results now in, he got his massive return on investment, while the world got two years and counting of a prolonged pandemic that will continue making a profit for Pfizer. At least he had the satisfaction of putting the ignoble Jared Kushner in his place.

PART II

Democracy

CHAPTER 5

Has Democracy Become a Threadbare Reality?

*The debate about whether elections are fair or rigged is secondary
when the institutions that define democracy fail.*

May 04, 2022

The idea that governments are the instrument of the people rather than an established ruling class became universally accepted as a feature of “evolved civilization” at some point in the 20th century. It is applied even in many traditional monarchies, such as the United Kingdom and Spain, though exceptions exist, notably in the Arabian Peninsula.

Modern dictatorships in the Marxist tradition think of themselves as governments of the people and for the people, though to a limited extent by the people. Otherwise, the standard model in most people’s minds is a liberal democracy, which essentially means a system in which ordinary people can cultivate the ambition to govern their peers and can hope to earn their trust by appealing to a popular vote. The fact that governments are elected by the people should mean that no outcome decided by a privileged class or obscure clan is foreordained. Crises may occur – due for example, to abuse of power – but they are rarely expected to destabilize a system that has empowered the people to impose their will. Such crises represent challenges to overcome not proof of the defeat of democracy.

Increasingly in recent years, public voices have begun lamenting the fragility of democracy and even predicting its demise. The crisis began long ago. But it has been unfolding in an increasingly visible manner ever since the 2000 presidential election in the United States. That was the historical moment in which the fate of the United States – and therefore of the world – teetered on the edge of a hanging [chad](#). The unease lasted in the following years, punctuated by clearly abusive wars and a massive collapse in 2008 of the economic system associated with the idea of democracy. Then it reached a paroxysm in 2016, a year marked by the unexpected results of an absurd referendum in the United Kingdom and the election of Donald Trump to the presidency of the United States.

Democracy has always been about debate. But debate has all but turned away from its original

model, human dialogue aiming at the intelligent sharing and exchange of information. Dialogue implies seeking some form of mutual understanding to mitigate conflict, a state that if allowed to fester can only be resolved by the victory of one side and the defeat of the other. At a time when the White House and the official theoreticians of security in the United States [evoke](#) a “battle brewing between authoritarianism and democracy,” the confusion about what democracy means and how it translates into government has never been greater. Contemporary democracy appears to have cultivated a taste for conflict and the minimizing of dialogue.

At the core of the problem is the idea, not that people in democracies are called upon to deliberate on their form of government and its policies, but that democracy is conveniently and definitively summed up in the contests we call elections. Instead of the government of the people, by the people, for the people, we have evolved towards the government of the people, by the polls, and for the political marketers. A professional class dominated by marketers has taken over the traditional role that aristocracies had in pre-democratic nations. The shift from open popular debate focused on issues to be resolved to elections as horse races to entertain the public has been radically successful. Even the most sophisticated media have bought into this logic.

In a New York Times [article](#) with the title, “Democrats Fear for Democracy, Why Aren’t They Running on It in 2022?” The authors, Reid J. Epstein and Jonathan Weisman, disapprove of the strategy Democratic candidates appear to have adopted that consists of focusing on economic issues rather than the mechanics of democracy. While noting that Republicans haven’t given up the specious claim that the 2020 presidential election was rigged, they agree with one Democratic operative who insists, “We need to be making sure people are aware of just how real the threat to democracy is.”



Our diabolical definition:

Threat to democracy

Threat to democracy

- 1. In the US, whatever the other party does or even says in relation to elections
- 2. In the eyes of US Republicans: Democrats
- 3. In the eyes of US Democrats: Russia and, secondarily, Republicans

Contextual Note

If either party, the Democrats or the Republicans, were truly concerned with the fate of democracy it would focus on the role of governance and the policies of government rather than simply election procedures and outcomes. Elections are one tiny, isolated factor in the complex process of democracy.

One might suppose that reacting to the admitted crisis of democracy, the New York Times and its quality journalists would devote their considerable resources to unpacking the complex workings of democracy in their entirety. But that is clearly not the case. The authors are content to complain about a single issue: that Democrats are not living up to the “paramount importance” of “protecting voting rights and fair elections.”

One of the traditional issues in US democracy is how the system deals with injustice to minorities, particularly the descendants of African slaves. Slavery was obviously antidemocratic. Jim Crow was structurally undemocratic. But an entire political and social system, including today’s criminal justice system, is built on the principle of systemic discriminatory injustice.

At one point, the authors cite a black leader, Angela Lang. “If people don’t see that Democrats are defending our right to vote, then people may not be enthused about coming out to vote.” Democrats need the black vote and generally expect to get it. But even if the question of voting rights were resolved, would it have any effect on the way democracy works? No. Black voters have begun to understand that it would simply provide a marginal electoral advantage to the Democrats, who have shown a consistent commitment to privileging the needs and wishes of donors (essentially white businesspeople) over voters. But that’s an issue The New York Times prefers to avoid.

The article cites one Democratic candidate who makes a claim the authors approve of. “It’s not jobs, it’s not gun violence — there are more important issues — but who you vote for affects all the other things.” That sounds reasonable because legislators are expected to deal with all those issues. The real problem to address is not who is elected, but why those who are elected consistently fail to achieve anything, no matter which party is governing.

Historical Note

The US Constitution was 37 years old when Phineas Taylor (P.T.) Barnum was born. The man who created the famous Barnum and Bailey circus claimed to dislike politics, but he served four terms as a representative in the Connecticut

legislature. In politics, he was a brave reformer who, though a former slaveowner himself, vehemently opposed slavery and showed real concern for the general welfare.

Barnum was also a philanthropist. He helped define the prestigious role philanthropy would subsequently attain in US culture. He promoted an idea he called “profitable philanthropy.” He obviously knew something about profit, having built his fortune out of circuses and freak shows where he exploited people’s tendency to believe the most extraordinary nonsense, which he presented as paid entertainment. For that he thus deserves the title of the godfather of American hyperreality.

Barnum had an indirect but powerful effect on how democratic politics would evolve. He proved that hyperreality was the principle at the core of American capitalism. It was about finding ways to seduce the public for a profit. This was very different from the practice of democracy as originally envisioned by the founding fathers, which turned out to be complex and intellectually challenging for the generations of entrepreneurs who would make the American economy hum in subsequent centuries. Barnum’s methods of convincing people of the reality of the illusion of democracy proved to be more effective. It turned the spotlight towards elections as spectacular, competitive events rather than moments of political reflection. Democracy became a form of entertainment.

Just as Barnum discovered that “profitable philanthropy” was possible, the US political system evolved towards what can justifiably be called “profitable democracy.” The key was to

focus on winning an election rather than on governing. That today’s journalists at the New York Times appear to endorse that view reveals not so much the existence of a “threat” to democracy as its terminal agony.

The New York Times can nevertheless be credited with producing at least one journalist up to the task and willing to focus on the meaning of democracy. Pulitzer prize winning Chris Hedges recently critiqued what he calls Joe Biden’s “pantomime of democracy,” [claiming](#) that “the political rot... now eating away at the nation is not going to be solved by elections.”

Some may, of course, remember that Hedges was fired by the New York Times two decades ago for his contumacious opposition to the paper’s reporting on the Iraq war. More recently, thanks to the new McCarthyism implemented in response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, all of Hedges’s informative and deeply analytical [broadcasts](#) produced over the past six years on RT have been taken down by YouTube. Many of them dealt with the continual degradation of democracy.

The New York Times is right to complain about the abuse of voting rights. But clearly, the crisis of US democracy cannot be exclusively attributed to the very real anomalies related to voting procedures and election results.

CHAPTER 6

The Unholy Alliance Between the US Security Apparatus and Big Tech

It’s no longer a secret that the monopolistic private sector is an essential component of the military-industrial complex.

April 27, 2022

A group of security heavyweights in the US has [issued](#) what it labels an “Open Letter from Former Defense, Intelligence, Homeland Security, and Cyber Officials Calling for National Security Review of Congressional Tech Legislation.” These wise custodians of the national interest employ their unimpeachable moral authority to claim that US tech monopolies with names like Google, Amazon and Twitter should be regarded as indispensable pillars of national security. Thanks to their ability to mobilize massive power not only over public communication channels but also over the average citizen’s thought and behavior, these oh so vulnerable monopolies must be protected from interference by legislators or other busybodies seeking to limit the reach of their defensive power.

That power now includes the indispensable capacity to censor and even suppress inconvenient viewpoints in the sacred name of national security. But instead of resorting to direct censorship, which most people in a democracy continue to condemn as a violation of free speech, the technology monopolies use a range of discretionary tools that include

deplatforming, demonetizing and much more subtle, indeed arcane algorithmic disappearing techniques. The truth those monopolies defend happens to correlate with whatever the security establishment wants people to think of as the truth.

Implementing this policy requires the kind of Manichean thinking that all authoritarian regimes — but certainly not democracies — traditionally encourage. They insist that theirs is the way of light and that everything else is darkness. No other voice needs to be heard, since allowing it to speak might obscure the light. Good must prevail and evil be suppressed.

Concerning the current conflict in Eastern Europe between Russia and Ukraine, two nations with an impossibly tangled history, our security experts do not hesitate to congratulate the tech monopolies for their brilliant work. “U.S. technology platforms,” they affirm, “have already taken concrete steps to shine a light on Russia’s actions to brutalize Ukraine. Through their efforts, the world knows what is truly happening in cities from Mariupol to Kiev, undistorted by manipulation from Moscow.”



Our diabolical definition:

Shine a light

Shine a light

1. Traditionally, enable a more thorough and accurate vision of an object or a situation
2. In the hands of modern tech media monopolies, direct a laser beam capable of incapacitating the receiver’s vision of reality

Contextual Note

The quoted sentences above contain two interesting distortions. The first is of course the Manichean assumption that the narratives the platforms choose not to suppress can be compared to the purity of light passing through a vacuum. Photons, after all, tell no lies. But all media, including social media, invent narratives that select the objects we are allowed to see. Even more significantly, they have the power to suppress the objects we are not allowed to see. Light lands where they choose it to land.

The second is the claim that because of the selections made by the media, “the world knows what is truly happening.” Only people or institutions with authoritarian instincts claim to “know what is truly happening.” And they do so knowing that they have the power to misrepresent the truth. In the era of deep fakes and monopolistic media, even in times of peace, nobody can legitimately claim to know what is “truly” happening. In times of war, propaganda takes over public discourse. Denying that is a patent lie. In times of war, honest citizens seriously curious about the truth should learn to distrust any of the narratives they are invited to consume.

The authors of the letter to Congress make it clear that the current war, which does not officially involve the US, is nevertheless a combat of virtue against vice. “This is a pivotal moment in modern history” they assert. “There is a battle brewing between authoritarianism and democracy, and the former is using all the tools at its disposal, including a broad disinformation campaign and the threat of cyberattacks, to bring about a change in the global order.” Any astute observer might notice that the same sentence would be just as true if we substituted “latter” for “former.” And whether there really is a battle between “authoritarianism” and “democracy” is itself a contestable proposition.

Democracies, and more particularly the United States, have learned to use the idea of war to become increasingly authoritarian in their own methods of government. It is easy to see that, over the past 70 years, the US has been far more enterprising and innovative in creating new tools of authoritarian control than many governments that pay less lip service to democracy.

From its first days in office, the Biden administration has insisted on framing its foreign policy along the lines of a new Cold War. This time the foes are not called capitalism and communism. The battle has been rechristened as a struggle between democracy and authoritarianism. But nothing prevents authoritarian regimes and democracies to live in peace, without interfering in each other’s affairs. The idea that this is a “battle” is not an innocent metaphor. It serves to justify ever expanding military budgets and a commitment to global military domination.

This group of “former Defense, Intelligence, Homeland Security, and Cyber Officials” who drafted the letter to Congress are by definition not just members of what some now [appropriately call](#) the “military-industrial-congressional complex;” they are its principle ideologues. These individuals tend to collaborate either with the notorious Washington think tanks, literally paid by corporate masters to invent policy and ideology that reflects their interests, serve as lobbyists for the defense industry or they work for the mainstream media and are presented as respected voices brought in to instruct Americans on what they should “truly” believe. Alas, the “light” they shine on public affairs resembles not a series of innocent photons but an offensive laser beam intended to blind the public to a reality they desperately want to see hidden from view.

Historical Note

In times of war, democracies traditionally fail at respecting their own democratic values. Could that phenomenon explain why some democracies have a predilection for always being involved in war? Most nations, democratic or not, cannot afford the luxury of permanent war. Only a nation whose money has been accepted as the

dominant global reserve currency can allow itself to engage in perennial war.

The history of the United States concerning its relations with the rest of the world throughout the 20th century turns almost exclusively around the theme of financing war. It includes the management of war-related debt and the

privileged status of its currency. Hesitating at first to enter World War I, the United States nevertheless began supplying weapons to the Allies. It belatedly joined the fray to ensure the defeat of Germany.

With the Treaty of Versailles, Germany was condemned to paying reparations to the Allies. But the European allies were held accountable for a massive debt to the United States corresponding to its contribution to their victory. The mismanagement of that debt — which could have been forgiven as a means of relieving tensions related to a global depression that began on Wall Street — had the effect of aggravating nationalistic rivalries in Europe. This in turn contributed directly to the outbreak of World War II.

The same story of debt repayments was repeated after World War II, once again brought to a conclusion thanks to the industrial capacity of the United States. The European allies of World War I were still paying off their debt from three decades earlier when they found themselves saddled with new debt. This forced them to abandon their global empires, which they could no longer support and implicitly transfer the wealth those former colonies represented to the nation that, with its stock of gold, had become the world's creditor. The US dollars became unequivocally the global reserve currency.

For more than two decades, following the Bretton Woods agreement, the US was theoretically obliged to ensure the convertibility of dollars to gold. But the appetite for building a neocolonial military presence across the face of the globe, spawning an endless series of wars and

regime change operations, turned the US from the world's creditor to its principal debtor. To rescue the US economy, President Richard Nixon unilaterally rescinded the [convertibility](#) of dollars to gold in 1971. From that point on, the already established status of the dollar as the dominant reserve currency meant that every creditor nation had no choice but to hold US Treasury bonds, effectively transferring the wealth their economies were generating back to the United States.

In more recent times, with the rise of China and what is perceived as the threat of a multipolar world in which wealth may be more equitably created and distributed, the US security apparatus has decided to justify its dominance by calling its global mission a “battle between democracy and authoritarianism.”

They have chosen American tech platforms — private businesses run by narcissistic billionaires specialized in the art of modeling their customers' behavior and thought — as the privileged vectors of the propaganda required to conduct a mission that reflects their Manichean view of the world. Those struggling monopolies must now be protected at all costs from the potentially irresponsible decisions of elected members of Congress. Whatever they say or publish will be deemed “the truth.” Billionaires understand the importance of such a relationship. Unless, of course, Elon Musk, the richest of the billionaires, having just taken over Twitter, chooses to upset the security experts' plan.

That, however, seems unlikely. Elon's personal ideology is quirky, his acts unpredictable, but upsetting security plans simply is not his style.

CHAPTER 7

What Really is the Popular Will in the Italian Election?

Giorgia Meloni triumphs and Western media demonstrates its highly selective interest in history itself.

September 29, 2022

The latest surprising – and for some, fear-inspiring – turn of political events took place in Italy on Sunday when Giorgia Meloni’s flag-waving party, Brothers of Italy (*Fratelli d’Italia*) obtained 26% of the vote. In the coming weeks it will most likely form a government and Meloni will become Italy’s first female prime minister.

Throughout the campaign the Western media chose to highlight a certain continuity between Meloni’s party and Benito Mussolini’s Fascist rule in the first half of the twentieth century. Similarities and even some odd historical continuities do exist, but the historical context is wildly different today. Meloni’s trendy throwback nationalism has no chance of replicating Mussolini’s meteoric rise to fame and power. The odds are any government she cobbles together will collapse within 18 months. That’s what almost all Italian governments do.

Fear of resurgent fascism currently ranks alongside fear of Russia as an effective ploy for getting the public’s attention. On the eve of the Italian election, Jason Horowitz at *The New York Times* wrote, “Italy could get its first leader whose party traces its roots to the wreckage of Fascism.” Horowitz recounts that “formerly taboo parties with Nazi or Fascist heritages that were long marginalized have elbowed their way into the mainstream. Some are even winning. A page of European history seems to be turning.” The idea

of turning the pages of history is sure to have NYT’s readers eagerly turning its pages, or at least scrolling down the web page.

Meloni has, of course, fueled the fire with her rhetoric, particularly thanks to her slogan “God, family, fatherland.” That’s a page she took straight out of Mussolini’s book. In the confused aftermath of the First World War, *il Duce* defined Italy as a proud European country ready to impose its geopolitical will in competition with its neighbors. These too are confused times. But Meloni is no Mussolini. Her rise to prominence, if not power, has more to do with the Italians’ growing frustration with the post-World War II constraints imposed on Italy, precisely to prevent a new Fascist takeover, than it does with a sudden conversion of the population to post-modern fascism.

In her victory speech, Meloni claimed – as all politicians tend to do these days – that the results were an unambiguous call for a new direction in Italian politics. Her score (26% of the vote) reveals, in her words, a “clear indication that [Italians] want a center-right government to guide Italy.” Equally as predictably, she promised not just to promote her party’s agenda but to unify the nation. “If we are called upon to govern this nation, we will do so for all Italians, with the aim of uniting the people



Our diabolical definition:

Clear indication

A concept developed and now ritualized in modern democracies that allows leaders to cite profoundly ambiguous results of elections as a clarion call for the implementation of a specific agenda which a clear majority of citizens and voters simply do not adhere to.

Contextual Note

The New York Times [notes](#) an important statistic, that “only about 64 percent of the population [cast] a vote, a staggering result in a country where voter participation traditionally has been high.” That further diminishes the significance of the 26% Meloni received, by more than one third. If those who fear a new Fascist regime in Italy and elsewhere in Europe were willing to be strictly objective, they should feel reassured. The trend may be worrying but numbers simply aren't there.

Meloni's “clear indication” has no meaning. Elections no longer reflect “the will of the people.” Claiming they do is either naïve or dishonest. We live in a world governed by hyperreal democratic rituals rather than democratic principles. The popular will is not expressed in elections. Democratic rituals focus on two things: media heavy electoral campaigns and the mechanical and largely symbolic act of individuals voting. Elections increasingly resemble the sour and shifting mood of an audience in a movie theater watching a film they are sorry they paid money to come and see.

The overall trend in electoral politics consists of growing disaffection of the public for both political debate and elections themselves. Debate is now dominated by triviality and grandstanding, supremely indifferent to the issues that matter.

Why bother voting? Increasing numbers don't. At the same time, many of those who vote do so with the intent of sending an easily decodable message to their elected officials: “Anything that undermines and contradicts the current system is preferable to ‘more of the same.’” Whether it's Trump, Meloni, LePen or even Boris Johnson (“Get Brexit done”), voters seem to be saying: “Please go ahead with your inane promises. Start dismantling a system we don't understand, we

don't control and we don't want to see continue in its current form.”

Repeated across multiple elections in a variety of Western democracies over the recent decades, the pattern should be obvious to all. But the media ignores the reality, perhaps to demonstrate its quasi-religious “belief” in democracy. Since the famous “hanging chads” of the 2000 presidential election, the US has provided multiple examples – both comic and tragic – of the most absurd democratic distortion, culminating with Trump's “Stop the steal.”

Acknowledging the dystopian system we have created will typically be branded as either subversion or defeatism. The fiction of a functioning democracy is too important for either politicians or the media to admit the disturbing reality: that “we the people” are the playthings rather than the agents of democracy.

That uncritical,unreflecting belief in our commitment to democracy is, in fact, the mother of all fake news. Its latest avatar is the absurd contention, promoted with Puritanical zeal by “right-thinking people,” that if only misinformation and disinformation could be rooted out and cast into some kind of cultural garbage heap, healthy democracy will be restored. But democracy, in the hands of venal politicians, has transformed into a magma of supposed “authority,” shared between political leadership and the media. This fetid glob of pulp political fiction has liquified to the point of becoming a fountain, not of lies (though there are plenty of those) but of permanent distortion. It acts like a filter that warps even the possibility of critical thinking. Never has there been such an insistence on official, sanitized truth that not only must be believed, but also has the right to banish anything that contradicts established political norms.

Historical Note

The NYT, ordinarily dismissive of the impact of history on current events, predictably lamented what it sees as a historical trend. “The victory, in an election with lower turnout than usual, comes as formerly taboo and marginalized parties with Nazi or fascist heritages are entering the mainstream — and winning elections — across Europe.” In Horowitz's article published on the eve of the election, he referred to the “indifference of Italian voters to the past.”

Coming from the *New York Times*, this concern with “indifference...to the past” should surprise any attentive reader. As the Ukraine war continues to rage, *NYT* and most of the media have consistently refused to evoke any of the significant events that preceded Russia's invasion on February 24. Here at the FO Devil's Dictionary have consistently pointed out the allergy of the newspaper and today's media in general to anything more than a superficial

consideration of a chain of the historical events that led up to the invasion. Those events date back to 1991 and reveal a consistent pattern that led to the current situation that has now brought the world to the brink of nuclear war, with no resolution in sight.

History happens to be useful. It structures constructive dialogue. It makes problem-solving possible. So does nuclear conflict, you might say, if you're more interested in ending rather than reducing the tension. But the definitiveness of that solution should give us pause.

With 64% of her 26% Meloni sees a "clear indication" of the will of the people. A group of appointed officials at the US State Department believe that by refusing to allow Ukraine to negotiate with Russia they are fulfilling the will of the American people. As two former high level US diplomats have pointed out in an [article](#) in Newsweek, a vast majority of the world simply does not agree.

More on that later.

PART III

International Politics

CHAPTER 8

Democracy and France’s Theater of the Absurd

France demonstrates that, with pressure on democracies to evolve a political order responsive to the people, today’s institutions are designed to orchestrate chaos.

April 13, 2022

In Sunday’s first round presidential race, even though the ultimate result is to set up a repeat of the 2017 runoff between the incumbent Emmanuel Macron and the xenophobic candidate Marine Le Pen, there were two enormous surprises. The first was the utter [humiliation](#) of the two political groupings that traded turns at running the country for the past 70 years. Valérie Pécresse, the candidate of the Republican party (the establishment right), ended up with 4.7% of the vote. The Socialists, heirs to the Mitterrand legacy and the last of the dominant parties to hold the office, didn’t even reach 2% (they got 1.75% of the vote), less than the communist candidate who got just over 2%.

The second surprise was the strong showing of Jean-Luc Mélenchon, a non-establishment leftist, who, it now transpires, would have overtaken Le Pen had any of the other candidates dropped out to line up behind him. It’s a moral victory of sorts for voters on the left, who have now been

excluded from the final round of the two most recent presidential elections. The compensation is that, with legislative elections looming in the immediate aftermath of the April 24th presidential face-off, it will inevitably lead to some kind of intriguing regrouping or redefinition.

In its reporting on the election, The New York Times focused on the one issue that is of most interest to its American readers: the impact on what it calls the “Western unity” US President Joe Biden has so solidly engineered in his response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. The Times foreign editor, Roger Cohen [expresses](#) the fear that, “in the event of an ultimate Le Pen victory” France will become “anti-NATO and more pro-Russia.” He adds that this “would cause deep concern in allied capitals, and could fracture the united trans-Atlantic response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.” In other words, make no mistake about it, The New York Times is rooting for Macron.



Our diabolical definition:

Anti-NATO

Opposed to the ideal the United States government imagines for Europe, defining it as a continent composed of free, enlightened democracies irremediably dependent — both economically and militarily — on the benevolent leadership of a powerful American Deep State and the sincere brotherly love offered by the American military-industrial complex.

Anti-NATO

Contextual Note

The Times may have reason to worry. While the odds still favor Macron, Le Pen could possibly duplicate Donald Trump’s incredible overcoming of the odds in 2016 when he won the US presidency, and largely for the same reasons. Macron has been a contested leader, branded by

opponents on the left and right as the “president of the rich.” Hillary Clinton similarly suffered from her image of being a tool of her Wall Street donors. There comes a point in every nation’s life when the people seem ready to take a chance with what appears to reasonable people as a bad bet.

Perhaps that time has come for France. Its electors exercised what they call “republican discipline” against far-right politicians when Jacques Chirac defeated Le Pen’s father, Jean-Marie, in 2002. He harvested 82% of the vote to Le Pen’s 18%. In 2017, though Macron was still an unknown entity with no serious support from either of the major political groupings, the young man easily defeated the far-right candidate with 64% of the vote to Le Pen’s 36%.

Prognosticating statisticians might simply follow the curve and assume that the downward slope will lead this time to a 50-50 election. They may be right. But the reason lies less in an arithmetical trend than in the growth of a largely non-partisan populist revolt directed against what is perceived to be an occult power establishment comprised of powerful industrialists, bankers, unrepresentative parties, corrupt politicians and a political class marked by an attitude of subservience to the American empire. Macron, the former Rothschild banker, has himself tried to burnish his image as a neutral, pan-European visionary who seeks to break free from the chokehold held by the power brokers of Washington DC, Arlington, Virginia and Wall Street. His attempts to negotiate with Vladimir Putin before and after the Russian invasion were undoubtedly designed to bolster that image.

Historical Note

If we tally up the scores of the candidates who are clearly anti-NATO — without including Macron who keeps his distance but adheres to the US alliance in the current campaign against Russia — the total climbs towards 60%. Historically, France is the only European country to have declared independence from NATO, when De Gaulle withdrew from NATO’s military structure and banished all NATO installations from the nation’s territory in 1966.

Roger Cohen’s and The Times’ concern may be justified, even if Macron wins the election. Even more so if the results are close. Very few commentators, even here in France, have begun trying to tease out what’s likely to emerge from June’s legislative elections. With the two traditional establishment parties on the ropes and utterly leaderless, is there any chance that a reassuringly “coherent order” dear to establishment politicians might reappear? Even if Macron wins, he never really managed to assemble a stable majority in his first term. The real questions now are these: among the defeated, who will talk to whom? And who will even

The explanation everyone likes to give for Marine Le Pen’s success in distancing her rivals — including fellow xenophobe, Eric Zemmour — is her focus on inflation. James Carville may be applauding from afar. It is, after all “the [economy](#), stupid.” The issue has been there throughout Macron’s term. It was the COVID lockdown and not Macron’s policies that cut short the dramatic “yellow vest” movement that was still smoldering when the pandemic struck. The French have not forgotten their own need for economic survival while living in a society in which the rich keep getting richer. Voters remember Macron’s joyous elimination of the wealth tax and the alacrity with which he announced higher gas taxes would fill the gap.

A musician I work with regularly told me recently: “I’m not voting in the first round, but I’ll vote against Macron in the second round.” In other words, of the possible rivals in the second round — Le Pen (far right), Mélenchon (progressive left), some even predicted Valérie Pécresse (right) — he would have voted for any one of them, just to eliminate Macron. I don’t believe he’s a racist, but he is now ready to be voting for a woman who has put xenophobia at the core of her political program.

grudgingly accept to defer to whose leadership? If Le Pen wins, it is unlikely she will be able to muster anything resembling a loyal majority. It is often said that “the French voters’ heart is on the left, but their vote is on the right.” With a president so far to the right, the voters won’t deliver a presidential majority in parliament, as they have so often done in the past.

Like the US and the UK, France’s democratic institutions have become profoundly dysfunctional. In no way does the political class even attempt to implement the “will of the people.” The globalized economy, with its arcane networks of power, had already diminished the meaning of democracy. The US is now consciously splitting in two that same globalized economy through its campaign of sanctions against Russia, possibly as a broader strategic move designed to create a degree of chaos that will ultimately embarrass its real enemy, China.

That radical split points in one direction: militarizing even further an economy already dominated by military technology. And as we have seen, a militarized economy means an

increasingly militarized society, in which surveillance, propaganda, control and enforced conformity in the name of security cancel any appeal not just to the will, but even to the needs of the people.

It is a real pity that Jean-Luc Mélenchon didn't make it to the second round, if only to enrich a largely impoverished debate. Independently of any of his political orientations concerning the economy or foreign policy, the leader of his party, *La France Insoumise* (France Unbowed), was already insisting in the previous election five years ago that the nation needed to replace with a 6th Republic an out-of-date 5th Republic created in 1958 by Charles de Gaulle. Mélenchon's idea of a 6th Republic contained less presidential power and weaker parties, meaning better access for the people.

A lot of water has flowed under the *Pont Neuf* since 1958, and neither of the candidates appears interested in reducing presidential powers. But the result of this election demonstrates clearly that both presidential power and the ability of parties to give direction to the politics of the nation have become non-existent as tools of democratic government. The results show that they have reached a point of no return. No one should be surprised to see — at some point in time after the legislative elections — France being rocked by a constitutional crisis on the scale of the one Pakistan lived through this past week. At which point, a 6th Republic may emerge from the ashes, Phoenix-like, but with more than a few burnt feathers.

CHAPTER 9

The Time is Ripe for Impertinent Questions

Most serious questions about the world never receive serious answers. The ways that exist to dodge questions are legion. To break the dodgers’ stranglehold on truth, there is a need to ask, not the usual “serious” questions but the impertinent ones designed to provoke, upset and embarrass.

July 06, 2022

As Secretary General of the United Nations, António Guterres holds a prestigious title that allows his voice to be heard in the media. Alas, his title is more impressive than the power he wields. His job consists essentially of monitoring trends affecting the globe and dutifully relaying that information to the international community. Guterres is little more than a teacher, drawing reasonable conclusions about what the trends mean and standing up from time to time to call the multiple political and economic influencers in the world – and more particularly the powerful nations – are in most cases undisciplined pupils, he spends much of his time taking them to task for their failure to act in the common interest of humanity.

Climate change is one of those trends, which most people now agree constitutes the biggest general threat to the future of humanity. They also acknowledge that various approaches to solving the problem have been suggested and, though little has been accomplished, at very high levels of political authority commitments have been made. The passive formulation – “commitments have been made” –reflects the culpable passivity of the actors in question.

Alongside climate change – and contributing directly to its aggravation – is another very general problem related specifically to human

institutions: wealth and income inequality. No one can ignore this question either, but, unlike the climate crisis to which every human being is equally exposed, those who are on the good side of inequality may feel less urgency about solving it, since it would inevitably imply reducing what they tend to believe are their “hard-earned” privileges. This has produced a specific quandary to the degree that literally every person exercising political power in every corner of the world happens to find themselves on the “good side” of inequality (i.e. even the most modest among them are members of the wealthy class).

The Secretary General exercised his privilege as the world’s teacher this past week when he [described](#) the state of play in terms of global economics. “Inequalities,” he reminded the world, “are still growing inside countries, but they are now growing in a morally unacceptable way between north and south and this is creating a divide which can be very dangerous from the point of view of peace and security.”

If that wasn’t bad enough, he got more specific. “That is why it is so concerning that the war in Ukraine has to a large extent kept out the focus on climate action. We need to do everything we can to bring again the climate issue as the most important issue in our collective agenda. It’s more than the planet, it is the human species that is also at risk.”



Our diabolical definition:

Collective agenda

Collective agenda

A list of things to do that, in a global culture dominated by the notion of competition, will never be done by any nation unless every other nation acts first.

Contextual Note

The above definition explains a well-known phenomenon usually referred to as “dragging one’s feet.” Guterres is very familiar with the pattern. It consistently plays out with every issue of major importance, from nuclear disarmament to climate change, clean water, wealth inequality, and the list goes on.

By focusing on the Ukraine war, the teacher now appears to go beyond the usual generalities.. With a tone of tragic disappointment, Guterres timidly expresses a suspicion that the Ukraine war is distracting the world’s attention from a far more pressing global crisis: climate change. With a slight change of tone, and a willingness to challenge the powers that be, the secretary general’s remark might be perceived as an impertinent question.

Impertinent questions rarely receive pertinent answers. The authorities thus challenged have multiple strategies for dodging their consequences. But that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t ask them. Even if no pertinent answer can ever be expected, formulating such questions accomplishes two goals. The first is personal. It focuses the questioner’s attention by raising a moral issue. The second goal is public. It signifies that the observers may be becoming wise to strategies designed to reduce them to silence. There is however a risk. Once those who refuse to answer the question understand that they are finally being challenged, they will most likely double down in their attempt to dodge the truth. This may go beyond mere “fake news” to include censorship and even persecution.

Anyone who doubts that that could happen in a democracy need simply meditate on the example of Julian Assange. He was guilty of asking a single impertinent question. After publishing a series of undeniable facts contained in official documents,

he implicitly asked the question, without needing to formulate it out loud: “What does this mean?” That was the height of impertinence.

If Guterres is right about the current state of the world, the time is ripe for all of us to start shouting out impertinent questions. The legacy media will do its damndest to keep out of print and off the airwaves, but if the voices of the world begin speaking up, they will eventually be heard. At Fair Observer we are inviting the public to participate in the salutary exercise of formulating impertinent questions. We will be initiating a campaign for all our readers and followers to submit impertinent questions.

To get the ball rolling, here is the long version of the first in our rubric of “Impertinent Questions.”

Given the link António Guterres has established between the dangerously deepening crises related to climate and inequality, could it be that one significant but unacknowledged factor in the motivation that led to triggering and now prolonging a cruel war in Eastern Europe is that it removes the pressure to act on the most serious issues politicians in the West should be focusing on?

Now we can reduce it to its essentials as we highlight the question to make sure no one sees it merely as a random, isolated thought in the middle of this column.

Has the United States nurtured the conditions that triggered a war and is now prolonging it in order to avoid being held to account for failing to address the issues the world most needs to resolve?

Historical Note

Impertinent questions are traditionally dismissed as stupid questions, ones that don’t even deserve to be asked or even thought about. Everyone is already supposed to know the answer.

Three and a half centuries ago, Isaac Newton asked the impertinent question: “If the apple falls, does the moon also fall?” Any wise person at the time would unhesitatingly answer: “No, it

doesn’t.” Because it is empirically true that the moon doesn’t fall, Newton should have shut up and lived with the answer. He didn’t and the rest, as they say, is history!

Historians have the duty to go beyond the superficial in their quest to understand the dramatic events of the past. For example: Did Brutus plot to kill Julius Caesar simply to prevent,

as he claimed, a tyrannical quest for absolute power? Some historians who have asked themselves that question [concluded](#) that “Brutus, in fact, acted in defense of his own class and a system which was already dying.” Both explanations may be true. But asking the question may reveal that Brutus was even more interested in preserving the privileges of the corrupt oligarchy he identified with.

Many people have asked a similar impertinent question about British Prime Minister, Maggie Thatcher's reasons for going to war with Argentina in the Falklands. The act sealed her popularity, strengthening her image as “The Iron Lady.” Reviewing the events of the time, Simon Jenkins pointed out in a 2013 [article](#) in *The Guardian* that her government had been “on the brink of collapse.” He noted that although “Thatcher could hardly be held directly responsible for the Argentinian invasion, it was

certainly the result of her style of rule and one-track approach to policy.” At the time, patriotism quelled any serious contradictory debate. Once she had achieved victory, people began noticing that it resembled a textbook illustration of the art of wagging the dog.

To some, Thatcher's “style of rule and one-track approach to policy” may seem eerily similar to that of US President Joe Biden and Secretary of State Anthony Blinken with regard to Ukraine. Like Thatcher, they cannot “be held directly responsible for the...invasion.” But ever since Caesar's time, those who wish to know the truth have been asking the most obvious impertinent question: *Cui bono?* (Who profits?).

If, as Guterres suggests, the Ukraine war is distracting the world's attention from the urgency of addressing climate change, shouldn't that merit our asking the same question?

CHAPTER 10

Coming to Terms With the Game Being Played on the Russia-Ukraine Border

Does anyone in the West understand the “play” in the so-called “Russian playbook”?

January 26, 2022

Over at least the past two months, US President Joe Biden’s White House has successfully inculcated in nearly all of the corporate media its firm belief that Russia’s leader, Vladimir Putin, has made the decision to mount a military invasion of Ukraine. Most of the articles published on the subject at best wonder about only two things. When will the invasion take place? And how far will it go?

Since the question of whether he will invade has been put aside, the pundits are asking themselves a different question. It concerns President Putin’s motives. Does Putin feel he needs to overthrow the Ukrainian government and reestablish a friendly regime that will serve as a buffer state between Russia and Europe? Or will he simply be content with controlling the Russian-speaking eastern parts of Ukraine, effectively destabilizing the current regime and thus preventing the possibility of the nation’s integration into NATO?

Given the apparently Beltway mantra that an invasion is imminent and that the West insists on Ukraine’s right to do what it wants, including joining NATO, it was therefore surprising to read in The New York Times this week that people in the White House — in this case, people who usually are removed from communication with the media — may have made a different assessment. In an [article](#) whose title “War May

Loom, but Are There Offramps?” is an acknowledgment of the level of uncertainty that surrounds the current geopolitical standoff, David E. Sanger reveals that “even President Biden’s top aides say they have no idea if a diplomatic solution, rather than the conquest of Ukraine, is what Mr. Putin has in mind.”

Like most Russians, and unlike most Americans, Putin knows something about how the game of chess is played. Geopolitics for Russians has always been a game of chess. Curiously, Western commentators instead seem to believe that the game logic Putin respects is similar to that of American football or basketball. They [incessantly](#) talk about Russia’s “playbook.” These are sports where you assign roles, plan actions and then try to execute. However complex the configurations may come, plays in a playbook follow a logic of going from step one to step two. Chess requires a different form and level of thinking.

It is reasonable to suppose that the Russian-American AP reporter Vladimir Isachenkov has a good understanding of Russian politics and Russian culture. Here is how he describes the [current situation](#): “Amid fears of an imminent attack on Ukraine, Russia has further upped the ante by announcing more military drills in the region



Our diabolical definition:

Up the ante
A metaphor from poker that when used correctly means to increase the initial stakes of a game, the amount that must be advanced by each player to enter the game. It is often used incorrectly as an equivalent of another poker term: call the bluff.

Contextual Note

Isachenkov predictably foresees the invasion authorities in the West almost seem to desire, and not only in Washington. This week, UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson [forecasted](#) Putin's "plan for a lightning war." Translated into German, that means Blitzkrieg, a term Johnson preferred to avoid using, though the innuendo was clear. The point of the entire effort to predict a Russian invasion is to instill the idea that Vladimir Putin is Adolf Hitler.

Russians, however, are not known for practicing Blitzkrieg. Chess players prefer to construct their game patiently through a series of maneuvers that look at a long-term evolution. They challenge their opponent's understanding of an evolving situation and are extremely sensitive to the layout on the chessboard, with the intent of making a checkmate inevitable. Americans, in particular, tend to go for strikes and are always hoping for a lucky strike.

Perhaps because Isachenkov believes Americans may not understand such strategies, instead of looking to the subtlety of chess for his gaming metaphor or even to Putin's documented experience of judo, he draws his literary inspiration from another quintessential American game, poker. He tells us Russia has "upped the ante." In so doing, he misinterprets not only the meaning of Putin's moves but even the practice of poker itself. Isachenkov appears to interpret "up the ante" as meaning "increase the pressure" or "raise the temperature." He didn't realize that

poker offers a better metaphor for Putin's actions: calling Biden's bluff.

No respectable Western commentator would frame the situation in those terms. It would mean acknowledging that the US resorts to the ignoble art of bluffing. Bluffing implies hypocrisy. The US has only one goal: to make the world more equitable and to help democracy prevail. Secretary of State Antony Blinken [defined](#) the mission in these terms: "It's about the sovereignty and self-determination of Ukraine and all states," before adding that "at its core, it's about Russia's rejection of a post-Cold War Europe that is whole, free, and at peace." And, just to make things clear: "It's about whether Ukraine has a right to be a democracy."

Isachenkov points out that Russia "has refused to rule out the possibility of military deployments to the Caribbean, and President Vladimir Putin has reached out to leaders opposed to the West." He calls this "military muscle-flexing" but perhaps fails to see this for the theater it is meant to be, coming from the president of a nation that gave us Pushkin, Gogol, Chekhov and Gorki. Evoking the Caribbean is Putin's way of alluding to the 1962 Cuban missile crisis. It may especially be meant to call Americans' attention to the idea that powerful nations do not look kindly to discovering an adverse military nuclear presence at its borders. If John F. Kennedy could force Nikita Khrushchev to back down 60 years ago, Putin should be allowed to do the same to Biden today.

Historical Note

If Vladimir Putin is calling Joe Biden's bluff, what is the nature of that bluff? In the simplest terms, Biden's bluff is the latest version of what President George H.W. Bush, after the demise of the Soviet Union, proudly called the "new world order." After defeating Donald Trump, Biden announced to his allies in Europe that "America is back," which was his way of saying "my version of America is great again," the version that uses its military reach to protect its business interests across the globe.

In a New York Times [op-ed](#) dated January 24, national security expert, Fiona Hill, who served under presidents George W. Bush, Barack Obama and Donald Trump, claims that Putin's aim is not just to annex all or part of Ukraine. He

isn't looking at taking a pawn or even a bishop. He has the whole chessboard in view. Hill is undoubtedly correct about Putin's real purpose, that he "wants to evict the United States from Europe."

"Right now," Hill writes, "all signs indicate that Mr. Putin will lock the United States into an endless tactical game, take more chunks out of Ukraine and exploit all the frictions and fractures in NATO and the European Union." In other words, the current posture of the United States is offering Putin a winning hand (poker) or setting itself up for a checkmate.

Former UN weapons inspector Scott Ritter, who knows something about the stakes associated

with warfare, makes a [complementary](#) point concerning the nature of the risk for the US: “It is another thing altogether to speak only of the pain sanctions would cause Russia, with little thought, if any, to the real consequences that will be paid on the home front.” If events get out of control, as is likely if there is no diplomatic solution, the effects on the West’s economy will be far more dramatic than any damage that can be inflicted on Russia through sanctions.

The US has refused to listen to the arguments not just of Putin, but also of foreign policy wonks such as John Mearsheimer. They believe that even the daydream of linking Ukraine with NATO crosses the reddest of lines, not just for Putin but for Russia itself. Failing to take that into account while insisting that it’s all a question of respecting an independent nation’s right to

join a hostile military alliance represents a position that makes war inevitable.

In a 2021 Geopolitical Monitor [article](#) with the title “Do We Live in Mearsheimer’s World?” Mahammad Mammadov cited “Mearsheimerian realism,” which he claims “sees Ukraine’s future as a stable and prosperous state in its being a ‘neutral buffer’ between multiple power poles, akin to Austria’s position during the Cold War. Accordingly, Russia is still a declining power with a one-dimensional economy and need not be contained.”

That seems like a solution most people in the West could live with... apart from the military-industrial complex, of course. And Democratic presidents seeking to prove they are not weaklings before this year’s midterm elections.

CHAPTER 11

Boris Johnson’s Convenient Bravado

The Ukraine crisis offers Johnson the chance to make Britain look great again.

February 02, 2022

In the prelude to World War I, Western nation-states, from North America to the Urals, found themselves involved in a strange game nobody really understood. It turned around their perception of each nation’s individual image on the world stage. Each nation imagined itself as wielding a form of geopolitical power whose hierarchy was impossible to define.

Even the borders of nations, the ultimate criterion for defining a nation-state, had become hard to understand. The idea of each nation was built on a mix of geographical, cultural, linguistic, ethnic, religious and ideological considerations. These became infinitely complicated by shifting relationships of dependency spawned by the dominant colonial model they all accepted as normal. And not just normal. Colonialism appeared to both Europeans and Americans as an ideal to aspire to.

Two world wars in the first half of the 20th century had the effect of seriously calming the obsession of Western nations with their individual images. For most of the nation-states emerging from the Second World War, an air of humility became the dominant mood. Two hegemons emerged: the [United States](#) and the [Soviet Union](#). But even those powerhouses accepted to work within the framework of an idealized system, the United Nations. That forced them to respect, at least superficially, a veneer of outward humility. The Cold War’s focus on ideologies — capitalism vs. communism — served to hide the fact that the new hegemons were the last two political entities authorized to assert the geopolitical power associated with the previous century’s colonial nation-states.

The current showdown between the US and [Russia](#) over events at the [Ukrainian](#) border shows signs of a return to the ambience that preceded the First World War. The Soviet Union disappeared 30 years ago, leaving a weak Russian state in its stead. The US has been on a steep decline for two decades since the confusion created on 9/11.

That should signify the existence of an opportunity for non-hegemonic nation-states to reemerge and potentially vie for influence on the world stage, as they did before World War I. After a century of adaptation to the consumer society on a global scale, however, the similarities may only be an illusion.

Still, some people appear to believe in an idea definitively discarded by history. The New York Times’ [take](#) on the latest posturing of [Great Britain](#) proves that the illusion is still alive in some people’s heads. In recent days, Prime Minister [Boris Johnson](#) has been diligently seeking to drag his isolated, Brexited nation into the fray of Eastern European border disputes, conjuring up reminiscences of pre-1914 Europe.

Over the weekend, British intelligence spread the “intelligence” that President [Vladimir Putin](#) is seeking to install a pro-Russian leader in Kyiv. Times reporter Mark Lander cites unnamed “British officials” who “cast it as part of a concerted strategy to be a muscular player in Europe’s showdown with Russia — a role it has played since Winston Churchill warned of an ‘Iron Curtain’ after World War II.”



Our diabolical definition:

Muscular player

An actor or performer whose wardrobe and makeup teams have the ability to turn the player into an image of Atlas or Hercules during a performance on a stage

Contextual Note

In the games that precede a major military conflagration, nations feel compelled to adopt attitudes that go well beyond their ability to perform. Lander quotes Malcolm Chalmers, the deputy director-general of a think tank in London, who explains that Johnson's Britain "is differentiating itself from Germany and France, and to some extent, even the U.S." He adds this pertinent observation: "That comes out of Brexit, and the sense that we have to define ourselves as an independent middle power."

There's much that is pathetic in this observation. In a totally globalized economy, it is reasonable to doubt the idea of a "middle power" has any meaning, at least not the meaning it once had. Outside of the US and China, Russia may be the only remaining middle power, because of two things. First, its geography, its sheer landmass and its future capacity to dominate the Arctic. Second, its military capacity carried over from the Soviet era. The rest of the world's nations, whether middle or small, should not even be called powers, but "powerlessnesses," nations with no hope of exercising power beyond their borders. Alongside the middle and small, there may also be two or three "major" powerless nations: India, Brazil and Australia.

But, of course, the most pathetic aspect of the description of Britain's ambition is the fact that Johnson's days as prime minister appear to be numbered. He is already being hauled over the coals by his own party for his impertinent habit of partying during a pandemic.

In a press conference in Kyiv on February 1, Johnson deployed his most muscular rhetoric. For once finding himself not just on the world stage but in the eye of the hurricane, he felt empowered to [rise](#) to the occasion. "This is a clear and present danger," he solemnly affirmed. "We see large numbers of troops massing, we see preparations for all kinds of operations that are consistent with an imminent military campaign,"

The hollowness of Johnson's discourse becomes apparent with his use of the expression, "clear and present danger," a locution that derives from a US Supreme Court case concerning the limits on free speech guaranteed by the First Amendment. Chief Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes used the phrase in his draft of the majority decision in 1919. It became a cliché in American culture, even reaching the distinction of providing the title of a Hollywood action movie based on a Tom Clancy novel.

As for his analysis of the clear and present danger, Johnson, who studied the classics at Oxford but maybe missed Aristotle, seems to ignore the logical inconsistency of assuming that if A (military buildup) is consistent with B (a military campaign), it does not make B predictable and even less "imminent." That, however, is the line the [Biden administration](#) has been pushing for weeks. Johnson's abject adherence to it may be a sign of the fact that Johnson is incapable of doing what Chalmers claimed he was trying to do: differentiate Britain — even "to some extent" — from the US.

Historical Note

The *Times*' Mark Lander is well aware of the hyperreal bravado that explains Johnson's move. "The theatrical timing and cloak-and-dagger nature of the intelligence disclosure," Lander writes, "which came in the midst of a roiling political scandal at home, raised a more cynical question: whether some in the British government were simply eager to deflect attention from the problems that threaten to topple Prime Minister Boris Johnson."

Lander goes on to cite Karen Pierce, the British ambassador to the United States, eager to remind people of the historical logic of Johnson's move. She refers to a British tradition rife with cloaks and daggers. "Where the Russians

are concerned, you'll always find the U.K. at the forward end of the spectrum." She wants us to think back to Britain's active participation in the Cold War, punctuated by an occasionally embarrassing episode such as the 1961 Profumo affair, starring model and escort Christine Keeler. But she knows that what best illustrates that glorious period for Britain in its holy struggle against the Soviet Union is James Bond, who has long been "at the forward end" of the Hollywood spectrum. In our hyperreal world, Pierce knows that fiction will always dominate and replace our understanding of reality.

We need to ask another question in a world conditioned by the image of Sylvester Stallone,

Arnold Schwarzenegger and Dwayne “the Rock” Johnson. Does the world really need muscular players today? The ancient Greeks imagined Heracles as a naturally muscular hero, who built up his bulk through his deeds, not through his workouts in the gym or to prepare for body-building competitions. Heracles was about killing lions with his bare hands, slaying Hydras, capturing bulls, and even cleaning stables — that is, getting things done. For the Greeks, Heracles was a muscular being, not a muscular player.

When Greek playwrights actually put Heracles on the stage, he could be tragic (Euripides, “The Tragedy of Herakles”) or comic (Aristophanes, “The Frogs”). In that sense, Arnold Schwarzenegger, from “Conan the Barbarian” to “Twins,” fits the role. The difference is that Heracles was a deity (the son of Zeus with the mortal Alcmene) and, thanks to the completion of his seven labors, became a god on Mount Olympus. When Schwarzenegger completed his labors as a muscular player in more than seven films, he became a Republican politician in California.

CHAPTER 12

An Expert Explains Why We Need a
New Cold War With China

It's all about finding the right enemy and sharing it with friends.

February 23, 2022

Michael Beckley is a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and the author of “Unrivaled: Why America Will Remain the World’s Sole Superpower.” He has no time for the commonly held thesis that [America’s](#) hegemonic power is in decline. He even claims that “it is now wealthier, more innovative, and more militarily powerful compared to China than it was in 1991.” If the regular expansion of the US defense budget is any indication, he may be right. President [Joe Biden](#) has just promised to increase it yet again, this time to \$770 billion.

In a new [article](#) for Foreign Affairs bearing the title, “Enemies of My Enemy: How Fear of China Is Forging a New World Order,” Beckley makes the case that having and sharing an easily identified enemy is the key to effective world government. The [Cold War](#) taught him that “the liberal order” has nothing to do with good intentions and being a force for good. Instead, it thrives on a strong dose of irrational fear that can be spread among friends.

As the Republican presidential candidate in 2000, [George W. Bush](#) produced these

immortal [words](#): “When I was coming up, it was a dangerous world, and you knew exactly who they were. It was us vs. them, and it was clear who them was. Today, we are not so sure who the they are, but we know they’re there.” Probably unwittingly, Beckley echoes Bush’s wisdom. “Today, the liberal order is fraying for many reasons,” Beckley writes, “but the underlying cause is that the threat it was originally designed to defeat—Soviet communism—disappeared three decades ago.” Unlike the clueless Bush, Beckley now knows who the “they” is. It’s [China](#).

History has moved on. China can now replace the [Soviet Union](#) as the star performer. Bush proposed Islamist terrorism as his coveted “them,” but that ultimately failed. The terrorists are still lurking in numerous shadows, but when President Biden withdrew the last American troops from [Afghanistan](#) in August 2021, he definitively delegitimized it as a threat worthy of spawning a new Cold War. And now, even while [Russia](#) is being touted as the best supporting actor, the stage is finally clear to push China into the limelight.



Our diabolical definition:

Shared enemy

A powerful nation whose negative image can be modeled by another powerful nation in such a way that its name alone inspires fear, to the point that it may be generously offered to governments of weaker nations on the pretext of forming a profitable alliance

Contextual Note

For Beckley, US hegemony needs China’s help. Now that the Middle Kingdom has now achieved the status of a high-profile enemy to be generously shared with obedient allies, the liberal order may thrive again, as it did during the Cold War. For Beckley, it is China, not [Donald Trump](#), that will “make America great again.”

Some may find Beckley’s historical logic slightly skewed. He explains that the modern liberal order was “designed to defeat ... Soviet communism.” If it was “designed,” what does he have to say about the designer? Who indeed could that have been, and what were their real motives? Could it have been the Dulles brothers, whose combined clout in the Dwight Eisenhower years allowed them to dictate US foreign policy? More alarmingly, Beckley seems to be suggesting that without a pretext for paranoia, the liberal order would not or could not exist.

Beckley is probably right but for reasons he might not appreciate. The idea of needing an identifiable enemy stands as a purely negative justification of the liberal order. But Beckley has already dismissed the idea that it is all about bettering the world. He seems to underestimate the need ordinary Americans have to think of their country as a shining city on a hill, endowed with the most powerful military in the history of the world whose mission is not to maraud, destroy, displace populations and kill, but to intervene as a “force for good.”

Historical Note

Michael Beckley is certainly very knowledgeable about China. He admires Chinese civilization and many of its accomplishments. He also believes a war between the United States and China is far from inevitable. Moreover, he is a realist. He admits that, as many people across the globe affirm, the US represents the biggest threat to world peace. At the same time, he [believes](#) “that the United States has the most potential to be the biggest contributor to peace.” He lucidly notes that “when the United States puts its weight behind something the world gets remade, for better or for worse.” But, having said this, he eludes the implicit moral question. If both the better and worse are possible, the rest of the world should be the ones to decide every time its reality is “remade” whether that remaking was for the better or the worse.

It’s not as if social harmony was the norm in the [United States](#). The one thing that prevents the country from descending into a chaos of consumer individualism, or from becoming a nation populated by angry Hobbesian egos intolerant of the behavior of other egos, is the ideology that Beckley denigrates but which politicians continue to celebrate: the “enlightened call to make the world a better place.” Americans would fall into a state of despair if they no longer believed that their exceptional and indispensable nation exists as an ideal for humanity.

But recent events have begun to shake their faith in what now appears to be a manifestly not very egalitarian democracy. Increasingly oligarchic, if not plutocratic, American society remains “liberal” (i.e., free) for those who control the growing mountains of cash that visibly circulate among the elite but rarely trickle down to meet any real human needs.

As the defender of an idealized liberal order, Beckley is right to assume that, with so many factors undermining the American consensus, the cultivation of a shared enemy may be the necessary key to maintaining that order. Fear has always had the unique virtue of diverting attention from serious and worsening problems. Between income inequality, climate change and an enduring pandemic punctuated by contestable government mandates, people’s attention definitely needs to be diverted.

As Pew [studies](#) show, most people outside the US appear to believe that American initiatives across the globe over at least the past half-century have been predominantly for the worse. Beckley himself cites Iraq and Vietnam as egregious examples. But, ever the optimist, he sees in what he calls the ability of the “system of US alliances” to create “zones of peace” the proof that the worse isn’t as bad as some might think.

Beckley recognizes that alliances are not created out of generosity and goodwill alone. In his influential book, “Super-Imperialism,” the economist Michael Hudson describes the workings of what is known as the “Washington Consensus,” a system of economic and military control that, in the decades after World War II, managed, somewhat perversely, to miraculously transfer the immense burden of its own debt,

generated by its military adventurism, to the rest of the world. The “Treasury-bill Standard,” an innovation President Richard Nixon called into being to replace the gold standard in 1971, played a major role. With the dollar as the world’s reserve currency, Hudson notes that “foreign governments were obliged to invest their surplus dollars in U.S. Treasury securities.” It was part of a complex financial, diplomatic and military system that forced US allies to finance American debt.

Beckley’s “zones of peace” are zones of dependence. Every country that participated in the system found itself forced to hold US Treasury bonds, including China. They thus had an interest in maintaining the stability of a system that dictated the flow of money across the globe. To a large extent, that is still the case. It explains why attempts to dethrone the dollar are systemically countered, sometimes violently

through military action (as in Libya, to scotch Muammar Gaddafi’s plans for a pan-African currency).

None of that worries the eternal optimist Beckley, clearly a disciple of Voltaire’s Pangloss. He believes that — even while admitting the US has “wrecked the world in various ways” — its “potential” for peace trumps the reality of persistent war and that its “capability to make the world much more peaceful and prosperous” absolves it from the wreckage it has already produced.

From a cultural point of view, Beckley is right. Americans always believe that what is “potential” trumps what is real and that “capability” effaces past examples of incapable behavior. That describes a central feature of American hyperreality.

CHAPTER 13

Will the Pakistani Prime Minister’s Campaign
Slogan Be “Yes, We Khan”?

*To avoid a no-confidence vote, Imran Khan, Pakistan’s prime minister,
dissolved Pakistan’s parliament.*

April 06, 2022

Nikkei Asia [describes](#) Prime Minister Imran Khan’s initiative that will send voters to the polls as “paving the way for [the] South Asian nation’s first ‘foreign policy election.’” As everything having to do with politics in Pakistan is complex, though perhaps never as complex as it has become today, untangling the threads of this constitutional crisis will not be easy. Nikkei’s characterization of what is likely to follow as a “foreign policy election” is accurate, though whether there will be an election depends on a decision of the Supreme Court.

Pakistan has perhaps the most complex history of any Asian nation. At this moment of global repositioning accelerated by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, things have become more complicated than ever. This is due to the fact that Pakistan has been part of a geopolitical game involving India, China and Russia while sharing a traditionally porous border with Afghanistan. At the same time, this young Muslim nation has the reputation of being consistently aligned with the United States since its creation in 1947. The US was persistently and largely embarrassingly

involved in Afghanistan for four decades until President Joe Biden decided to pull out of a two-decade military occupation last summer.

When the political crisis reached its peak on Sunday and Khan succeeded in avoiding a non-confidence vote, perhaps the most astonishing comment came from Major General Babar Iftikhar, the head of the military’s public relations wing, who [declared](#) that the “Army has nothing to do with the political process.” This might surprise attentive observers of Pakistani politics who have long understood that the military has always been the force controlling all the nation’s political processes.

Khan has succeeded thanks to what some call a ruse. He has defined the crux of the current crisis to be Pakistan’s relationship with the United States. It has never been a secret that the nation’s military, as Chief of the Army Staff General Kamar Bajwa [explained](#) last week, shares “a long and excellent strategic relationship with the US which remains our largest export market.”



Our diabolical definition:

Strategic
relationship

**Strategic
relationship**

A term to describe the level of cooperation, collaboration and respect that exists between two nations, the quality of which can range from a bond of mutually acknowledged equality to the exploitation of a lord over a vassal.

Contextual Note

Before the actual move to dissolve parliament on Sunday, the BBC [provided](#) its description of the state of political play. “Imran Khan, elected in July 2018 vowing to tackle corruption and fix the economy, remains popular with some voters, even though a lot of his public support has been lost as a result of rocketing inflation and ballooning foreign debt.” Khan was clearly aware of the public’s dissatisfaction with economic trends and may have reasons to fear the results of a general election. But, to his credit, Khan has been more active than previous prime ministers in reining in corruption.

However, Pakistanis are so inured to corruption, they don’t necessarily see it as a disqualifying criterion. In an earlier article, the BBC [quoted](#) a disappointed citizen encountered in a barber shop who had voted for Khan in 2018 but appears ready to favor Khan’s opponents. They are allied with the Bhuttos and Sharifs, two families that have previously dominated Pakistani politics and are reputed to be notoriously corrupt. The BBC interlocutor did not seem to care much about that and said, “They might be corrupt but at least they help poor people.”

Still, the political stakes may not be just “the economy, stupid.” The BBC cites another customer of the same barber shop. “We have to endure this hard time,” he stoically proclaims. “Imran Khan has taken a stance and we should stand with him.” What may not have been quite as clear at the time of the BBC’s survey of barber shop opinion is that Khan was ready turn the debate into exactly what Nikkei Asia described: “the nation’s first ‘foreign policy election.’”

If that is the case, it will be interesting to see how Pakistan’s military seeks to influence the outcome of the crisis. The new formulation of the army’s neutrality concerning political processes seems even more surprising when taking into account a defiant remark General Bajwa made in March, when he attempted to push Khan to resign. He justified his activism with these words: “Allah didn’t allow us to be neutral as only animals are neutral.”

Although Bajwa insisted on the longstanding alliance with the US — highlighting the American market’s importance for the economy as a destination for Pakistani exports — another [remark](#) he made helps to explain how Pakistan’s geopolitical positioning may be shifting. “I believe,” he declared, that “the world today is built by those who believe in cooperation, respect and equality, instead of division, war-mongering and dominance.” This raises the interesting question of whom the Pakistanis see as nations focused on “cooperation, respect and equality” and whom they identify as warmongers. Bajwa squarely identified Russia’s incursion into Ukraine as putting it on the evil side of the balance, which contrasts with Khan’s insistence on not taking sides on the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

Khan has focused on the perception of the US, which he sees as promoting the very “division, war-mongering and dominance” General Bajwa vilifies. The prime minister has made two claims: that he has evidence of a US plot to overthrow his regime and that the Pakistani military has sent him “written threats to step down.”

Historical Note

Stepping back to situate these events in a broader historical context can help to clarify the issues. Recently talk of a “new world order” has made its way into the headlines. This idea has come from two opposite directions: Xi Jinping’s China and Joe Biden’s America. Xi’s version of a new world order is explicitly multipolar. “The rules set by one or several countries,” Xi [proclaimed](#) last year, “should not be imposed on others, and the unilateralism of individual countries should not give the whole world a rhythm.”

Biden’s [version](#) sounds not only different from Xi’s, as we might expect, but is paradoxically

identical with what most people recognize as the old world order. “Now is a time when things are shifting,” Biden declared a week ago. “We’re going to — there’s going to be a new world order out there, and we’ve got to lead it. And we’ve got to unite the rest of the free world in doing it.” Anyone with a sense of historical reality may find it difficult to see any deep semantic difference between Xi’s evocation of imposing rules on others and Biden’s idea that “we’ve got to lead it.” The “unilateralism” Xi disparages appears to be precisely what Biden’s champions by insisting that “we’ve got to lead it.”

In January, The Financial Times summed up the [conclusion](#) reached by Xi and Putin in the definition of their newly solidified partnership, noting that “the Russian and Chinese leaders are united by a belief that the US is plotting to undermine and overthrow their governments.” That is the message Khan has put forward and which will likely dominate the eventual election campaign that will follow the dissolution of parliament. More significantly, the increasingly obvious US strategy that consists of avoiding or undermining peace talks between Ukraine and Russia makes it look as if the US is focused on two basic objectives: undermining every government in the world that doesn't fall into line and turning NATO into the superstructure of a unilateral empire controlled financially and militarily from Washington.

Instead of a new world order, if that is the strategy of the US, it is little more than a

reinforced version of the old world order, more military than ever. The major obstacle, however, is that a traditional ally such as Pakistan or a more recent one like India, who though opposed amongst themselves, can no longer be counted on to toe the line.

Khan is probably right about a US-led effort at regime change. That seems to be the first reflex of any US president's foreign policy. It has rarely, if ever worked, but at the core of US culture is the resolution to always “try again.” A lot of ordinary people around the world have become aware of the futility of that pattern. The political elites are only just beginning to feel the pressure to change this worn out pattern.

What that means is that we are witnessing essentially a new world disorder. What follows is anyone's guess.

CHAPTER 14

When Bad Habits are Set in Stone, Is a Reset Possible?

A heavily indebted world needs not so much a new world order as a real world order.

May 25, 2022

For any citizen of the world today, there is no lack of reasons for worry on a global scale. For a start, the climate crisis is impossible to ignore. Though some, for political or economic reasons, publicly deny its reality, any rational human with access to any form of media will be aware of two simple facts. The first is the accumulating evidence of worryingly abnormal weather events. The second is the lack of any willingness on the part of our political institutions to address the problem in a way even vaguely commensurate with its gravity.

Then there's COVID-19 that has now been with us for two and a half years and counting. And just as we were beginning to adjust to the idea of reduced military tension in the Middle East and Central/South Asia after the Biden administration's withdrawal from Afghanistan, the world has been offered the spectacle of a prolonged drama in Eastern Europe, the response to which in the West has seemingly been designed to upset the global economy on an unheard of scale.

The economy still hasn't recovered from the lingering aftereffects of the financial shock of 2007-09. The medication prescribed at the time, bearing the label Quantitative Easing (QE), turned out to be an addictive drug. It had the great merit of ensuring a growing asset bubble that shared the same "forever" characteristic we ended up associating with Middle Eastern wars. It turned out to be quantitatively easy for the rich who simply got richer while the masses hoped that the promised trickle-down effect would be sufficient to meet their daily requirement of OxyContin or whatever other drug they took to ease the pain.

The latest disaster to add to the heap, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, has nevertheless proved a

great boon for two sectors: the West's armaments industries and its media. The job of the latter has become essentially finding multiple ways of praising a defense-obsessed economic and political system. The militarization of the economy — already vehemently denounced by President Dwight Eisenhower in 1961 — has finished by usurping what's left of the theoretical moral authority of the people in a democracy. The same militarized economy has spawned the information technology currently employed by a few billionaire geniuses to suck everything that moves into the vortex of their global platforms. The addiction is total. With a looming metaverse around which everything will be organized, it is likely to become absolute.

But even in a world where the diverse drugs supplied by Raytheon, Purdue Pharma, Fox News and *The New York Times* (and even the US Treasury with its QE) help to keep a majority of the population in a state of basic survival, animated by their growing need for another daily dose, many of the nations of the world are teetering on the brink of collapse due to the uncontrollable growth of sovereign debt.

Highlighting the global debt problem, Ellen Brown, a lawyer and economist, founder of the Public Banking Institute, [explained](#) that beyond a certain point of growing instability a reckoning becomes inevitable. It can take the form of a general crash. But we appear to have learned at least one lesson from the 1929 stock market crash. The response 80 years later, in 2009, was a bailout aiming to save the institutions that were too big to fail. But that only put off the reckoning. "Today," Brown writes, "the remedy for an unsustainable debt buildup is called a 'reset.'"

Our diabolical definition:

Reset

Reset

The idea of re-establishing a set of rules that are no longer respected, typically in a context in which hardly anyone has the foggiest idea of what the original rules were and even fewer of what a new set of rules that could be generally accepted might look like.

Contextual Note

The idea of a reset rather than some kind of temporary drug or placebo such as a bailout or QE has recently been in the news thanks to the insistence of the World Economic Forum's (WEF) not just on a reset, but on a "Great Reset." Klaus Schwab, the founder of the Davos extravaganza, championed the idea in 2020 as a response to the early impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the global economy. It was the capitalist class announcing its own revolution.

When the kind of people who participate in the WEF promote a solution to humanity's

problems, they don't just propose a cure, they propose a "great" cure. A "great" solution of course means a top-down solution, decided by those who claim to exercise a monopoly on practical (i.e. financially workable) knowledge.

Ellen Brown has no illusions. "The 'Great Reset' being driven forward by the World Economic Forum," she writes, "would lock the world into a form of technocratic feudalism." Digging into ancient history, Brown cites a model of reset that appears to make a lot more sense.

Historical Note

Instead of imagining a sophisticated top-down redesign of an admittedly unstable system that might subsequently be put under the "rational" control of intelligent technologies managed by enlightened industrial leaders, the tradition she cites is that of the ancient Mesopotamian Jubilee. It was a moment in the historical cycle in which a royal decree declared the cancellation of debts to permit society to begin functioning anew. Lucidly analyzed by both the economist Michael Hudson in his [book](#), *...and forgive them their debts* and the late anthropologist David Graeber in his [book](#), *Debt, the First 5,000 Years*, jubilees aimed at liberating the energies of a population increasingly shackled by unpayable debt. These were occasions on which society was invited to put the value of human relationship ahead of the value of money.

The industrial age and the "economic science" that underpinned the capitalist revolution did the contrary. It definitively turned money into an absolute, a universal measure of everything. Debt defined an unbreakable dependence that no human being, under the law — not even a king or a president — was empowered to abrogate. Since the 2008 financial collapse, whenever a crisis threatens to cripple the economy, the solution has become to create new levels of debt borne by the entire population. Such debt is engineered to enrich the debtors — those who are never allowed to fail — and squeeze the anonymous creditors, who must support the burden over time. Individuals have no personal title to a collective debt, but they effectively become creditors who are allowed to fail or simply be crushed by their inability to earn. The debtors — the holders of assets, consistently

bailed out thanks to devices such as quantitative easing — will be encouraged and supported by the system.

In 2009, a different reset briefly made the news, almost as a comic interlude. With the benefit of hindsight, this trivial incident could be seen as a telling moment in an unfolding tragedy that has now exploded in our faces. I'm referring to the cordial [encounter](#) between Barack Obama's newly appointed Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, and Russia's Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov.

The State Department of the newly elected President Obama felt the need to recalibrate the relationship between the two former rivals of the Cold War. The presidencies of Hillary's husband, Bill and then George Bush, in contrasting ways, had done little more than aggravate the inevitable chaos that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union. It was time, Hillary may have been thinking, to program a "reset."

In 2008, at the NATO conference in April, Bush had insisted on inviting Ukraine and Georgia to join NATO, generally understood to be a red line that Russian President Vladimir Putin would not allow to be crossed. Four months later, with the red line threatened, Russia successfully invaded Georgia. Three months after that, Obama was elected president on a program of hope and change.

Secretary Clinton chose to publicly dramatize the coming change in the US-Russia relationship. To demonstrate her good humor and Yankee playfulness, she did what Americans are so often

tempted to do: find a way of reducing complexity to a trivial gesture. In this case, she unveiled a toy for the two chief diplomats to play with. She called it a “reset button.” The object, with its big red button at the center, bore a Russian word the State Department translators mistakenly believed to mean “reset.”

After presenting the toy, Clinton then asked Lavrov the [question](#) one should never ask. “We worked hard to get the right Russian word,” she boasted. “Do you think we got it?” Lavrov calmly pointed out that the Russian word they had chosen meant “overcharge.” Trying to save face, Clinton responded to the idea of overcharge:

“We won’t let you do that to us.” She took overcharge to mean “invoice an excessive amount” rather than the more obvious meaning, given the context: charge a battery beyond its capacity.

After all, in a nation that believes “time is money,” one may also be inclined to believe diplomacy is also money, which after all is the measure of all value. Her immediate reflex was to blurt out that being in debt to Russia was unthinkable. Finally, for those who may not be following the evolution of relations between the two countries, the reset Clinton promised never appears to have achieved its goal.

CHAPTER 15

Will Europe Continue to Support the US Taste for Endless War?

June 15, 2022

In the weeks following the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, pundits began claiming that, if the campaign lasted more than a few weeks it would constitute a fatal humiliation for Russia’s President Vladimir Putin. Nearly four months later, with no end in sight, most commentators have relabeled the operation a war while acknowledging that whatever humiliation Putin may have suffered, it wasn’t quite fatal.

Everyone nevertheless seems to agree that Putin badly miscalculated. One of the reasons they cite is the unexpected scope and intensity of the Ukrainian resistance. Another is of course the massive and largely unexpected support provided by the West, notably in the form of military equipment.

Various statements from authoritative voices in Washington indicate not only that the war is likely to drag on, but that a forever war is what the American strategists have been hoping to see. On his visit to Poland in March, US President Joe Biden [invited](#) his faithful followers “to steel ourselves for a long fight ahead...” Three months later, his prediction that the “battle will not be won in days or months” appears to be accurate. Less accurate, however, was his claim that the Russian ruble would be reduced to rubble and that the back of the Russian economy was about to be broken. In April the ruble bounced

back to [become](#) “the strongest currency in the world this year.” Despite the massive sanctions imposed on Russia and the constraints of war, its economy is still ticking over.

If the pundits, politicians and military elite in Washington, sitting 5,000 miles away, seem more than comfortable with a war that will keep Russia occupied for many months or even years to come, it may be that the people on whose behalf they are stoking the war, standing on the front line of Russian aggression, will become less euphoric as time goes by. So could most Europeans facing the prospect of a dire winter with rationed heating and exploding gas prices. So indeed could Americans themselves, who are already beginning to complain.

The most pitiable victims are obviously the Ukrainians. Even when conducted with an endless supply of modern weapons, the heroism of resistance offers cold comfort to the heroes themselves when as many as 100 Ukrainians die every day and cities are leveled in a war announced as never-ending. Still, the Ukrainians seem committed. But they increasingly worry their allies may cave. Al Jazeera [reports](#) that “officials in Kyiv have expressed fears that the specter of ‘war fatigue’ could erode the West’s resolve to help the country push back Moscow’s aggression.”



Our diabolical definition:

War fatigue

Not to be confused with the military apparel known as battle fatigues, a psychological state provoked by enduring wars with no defined goals and afflicting individuals and sometimes entire populations, with the exception of politicians, lobbyists and administration officials working in and around the Beltway.

War fatigue

Contextual Note

In recent days, Biden himself no longer sounds quite as triumphal as he did during his speech in Warsaw last March. But US policy has not changed, nor is it likely to change. Losing face is too costly to any politician's historical legacy. Nevertheless, Edward Luce in the *Financial Times* [notes](#) that "tedium is beginning to creep in" even in Washington, where "Joe Biden's recent utterances show awareness of the problem."

Military realism may also be slowly creeping in after months of romanticizing the Ukrainian resistance and self-celebrating the financial support provided by the US and its European allies. "Many of the defects in today's Russian military — low morale, shoddy equipment, lack of initiative and brutality within its ranks — were also true of Stalin's Red Army, which eventually defeated the German Wehrmacht," Luce pertinently notes.

Then there's Europe, a continent of illusion, where an economically powerful union perennially demonstrates the fact that it is still a collection of culturally and linguistically disparate populations. As a formal union, some things do appear to take collective form but there are no solid structures designed to maintain the coherence of the European Union in the face of ever-present centrifugal forces. At the beginning of this war, the political class, followed by the media, succeeded in stirring a spontaneous identification with the Ukrainian resistance. After all, in the past century, Europeans had finally learned that war on one's own terrain was always a lose-lose proposition. Invaders should be reviled and automatically punished.

Unlike Americans, however, Europeans do not equate condign punishment with endlessly prosecuted war. They know war induces fatigue. They also tend to be less trusting of the wisdom of their politicians. The average European has no reason to feel proud of NATO or identify with the institution. European politicians, on the other hand, appreciate NATO as a symbolic presence, overseen by Washington, that seems to guarantee that peace, at least among European nations, will endure. Europeans may react instinctively against Russian aggression towards a bordering nation, but they are far less convinced that NATO and the US military umbrella is the permanent key to peaceful relations.

The Ukraine war has revealed a newfound taste among European governments for militarization. And though NATO is at the core of the common security framework, the shock of this war has pushed European governments to think more seriously about an autonomous military collaboration that no longer depends on the US for leadership. That will be complicated to achieve and will take time. But, for various reasons, it may be inevitable.

Few commentators noticed that in the first round of the French presidential election in April, a clear majority voted for candidates that were openly hostile to NATO, on both the left and the extreme right. That may have less to do with war fatigue than NATO fatigue. The monumental damage already being wrought on the European economy as a result of Washington's insistence on integrating Ukraine into NATO will leave increasingly evident traces in the months and years to come.

Historical Note

Less than a week after the Russian invasion, Hillary Clinton appeared on MSNBC to [express](#) what appeared to be the geopolitical reasoning already current in the corridors of power in Washington. She not only forecast a prolonged war, supported by the United States, but she also appeared to relish the idea. She felt it would have an effect similar to that of Russia's decade-long war in Afghanistan in the 1980s, considered one of the factors that precipitated the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Clinton even described this plan to trap Russia in a quagmire as "the model people are looking toward." By "people" she was obviously referring to the Washington elite, especially the State Department, which she headed for four years under President Barack Obama. Clinton's description of this model may have seemed to some observers to be a random thought in her head. But subsequent events indicate that, even on March 1, five days after the launch of Russia's

“special operation,” it was in all likelihood a strategy already fully elaborated, months before Russia’s invasion. This would help to explain the bizarre sequence of events in which the news cycle was dominated by the US announcing the date on which Russia would start its war.

Both Clinton and Biden in their public discourse following the outbreak of the Ukraine war have savored the idea of Russia agonizing on its own without any direct American military presence in the war zone. Washington’s military strategists adhere to the historical model of Russia in Afghanistan that played out in the 1980s. They are now seeking to repeat the pattern in 2022. When Biden’s Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin [evokes](#) a “weakened” Russia that no longer has “the capacity to invade its neighbors,” he echoes his president with both seeing a hoped-for parallel between the collapse of the Soviet

Union. Biden’s own [express wish](#) is that “this man [Putin] cannot remain in power.” US defense strategy is rarely about defending the nation from aggression and almost always about regime change somewhere else in the world.

In May, Le Monde’s Washington correspondent [described](#) “an undeniable euphoria that has gripped part of the ‘blob,’ as Washington’s foreign policy establishment often informally called. This euphoria may even last for a while but not forever. Even the hippie generation, after turning on, tuning in and dropping out, at one point realized that euphoria has its own expiration date. Many of them experienced drug fatigue and communal living fatigue. In the following decades quite a few of them also ended up in the blob, seeking another kind of euphoria.

CHAPTER 16

Condoleezza Rice Proves Integration Can Provoke Disintegration

The historical teachings of Condoleezza Rice are as pertinent as they were in the halcyon days of the Bush administration.

July 27, 2022

As George W Bush's National Security Advisor and subsequently Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice was a prominent face in the news two decades ago. Young, black, female, attractive and single, she stood out in the pale crowd, giving a kind of offbeat credibility to a team of aging establishment white men.

Rice disappeared from the news cycle when a young, attractive black male, Barack Obama, who was also a brilliant rhetorician, triumphantly replaced the Bush administration. Obama displayed a star power not even Rice could compete with at a moment in history when the electorate wanted to dismiss from memory everything associated with the Bush years.

In contrast with Obama's Kenyan heritage, Rice's ancestors were slaves liberated by Abraham Lincoln's [Emancipation Proclamation](#) of 1863. Jim Crow, the brutal apartheid-style system that replaced slavery, lasted 100 years. Forced to act by a well-organized, non-violent civil rights movement, President Lyndon Johnson pushed through the Civil Rights Act of 1964. This monumental legislation demonstrated the willingness of a majority of white politicians to entertain the idea that blacks deserved the same respect before the law as "normal Americans," defined at the time, in the dominant cultural mindset, as White Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASPs). Today, Fox News host Tucker Carlson refers to them as [legacy Americans](#).

Born a year before the fateful day that saw Rosa Parks refuse to obey a Montgomery, Alabama bus driver's order to give up her seat to a white person, Condoleezza Rice grew up during a momentous period of history for black Americans. The incident in the bus set off a decade of growing protests that led to the legislation of 1964, but also – just to prove that nothing had really changed – to Martin Luther King's assassination in 1968.

In 1982, at the age of 28, Rice underwent a political conversion. She abandoned the Democratic party that had so vehemently pushed

through the civil rights legislation under Johnson. She joined the Republican party that had already become the new home of traditional Southern racists. Rice claims her decision was [influenced](#) by her father, who never forgave the Jim Crow Democrats for preventing him from registering to vote. Had the young lady failed to notice the radical switch in the racial politics of the two parties? In any case, she clearly felt at home in the Republican party.

In 1963, Birmingham, Alabama sealed its place in US history books when four black girls, one of them a classmate of young Condoleezza, died in the KKK bombing of a Baptist church. This should have taught the Birmingham native something about segregation and racism and the urgent need to overturn a few nasty cultural habits and maybe even some institutions. But she already lived in a different [world](#). At the age of three, she was learning French, figure skating and practicing ballet in Alabama. As a teenager she attended an exclusive Catholic school in Denver, Colorado. During this period, her father disparaged the civil rights movement, whose leaders he called "uneducated" and "misguided."

Growing up as a black kid, first in the deep South and then in the genteel North, Rice should have acquired a sense of history permitting her to notice, in today's world, after the events surrounding George Floyd's death in 2020, to what extent the movement towards integration inaugurated by the Civil Rights movement has failed. That is why it sounds surprising to hear her stand up today to defend her political class's contribution to a different attempt at integration, one that implicates all recent presidents of the United States and has come to the fore in the guise of a global catastrophe.

[Speaking](#) last week at the Aspen Security Forum, Rice said, "I will go out on a limb here and say that I think everybody from the Clinton administration to the Bush administration, to the Obama administration, to the Trump administration did everything possible to try to integrate Russia into the international system."



Our diabolical definition:

Integrate

Integrate

Apply measures intended to make a minority conform to the expectations of a dominant majority and ultimately be judged by its inevitable failure to follow the majority’s cultural dictates.

Contextual Note

Rice’s rhetorical willingness to “go out on a limb” signals how unsure she is of her historical footing here. She may be unconsciously aware, on the basis of the history of her own people, that doing “everything possible to integrate” a group of people into a “system” is a process fraught with dangers. The more one insists on conformity to pre-established principles instead of the need to mutually adapt to a new, more complex reality, the more likely integration will fail. The uprising provoked by George Floyd’s murder at the hands of a white policeman two years ago demonstrates that, other than in the realms of sports and entertainment, racial integration has remained a chimera in the US.

But Rice’s evocation today of integration has nothing to do with the relationship between blacks and whites. It concerns a nation whose identity officially changed in 1991 from the Soviet Empire to the Russian Federation. Rice is now concerned with defending the honor of her clan, the presidents and administrations from both

parties who have clearly misunderstood and consequently mismanaged their attempts at integrating the remnants of the Soviet Union into the American global financial, economic and military empire.

The established political class in Washington feels it necessary at all times to deny any responsibility for its role in an obvious historical mess. Despite the fact that the Bill Clinton administration could, at one point, proudly boast about its successful [meddling](#) in the 1996 Russian election. The article that cites Rice’s declarations in Aspen also quotes Clinton, the president who oversaw a chaotic campaign by American politicians, economists and consultants to “modernize” and thereby integrate the Russian economy into the dollar-based global economy under US guidance. That effort included finding clever ways to dismiss the protest of an inebriated Boris Yeltsin about the danger of expanding NATO eastward.

Historical Note

Looking back at history, Bill Clinton now dogmatically insists: “It is not true that we did anything to isolate, humiliate or ignore Putin. That’s the biggest load of bull you’ll ever hear.” This is the same trained lawyer who denied having sexual relations with Monica Lewinsky on the [grounds](#), that it “all depends on what the meaning of the word ‘is’ is.”

Clinton is technically correct when he claims that he did nothing to “humiliate or ignore Putin,” who only emerged as a leader in the final 18 months of Clinton’s second term. Clinton humiliated and ignored Russia by cleverly exploiting Boris Yeltsin’s alcoholism. He accelerated policies initiated under George H.W. Bush that were designed to turn Russia into a docile annex of a kind of North Atlantic confederacy governed by Washington and its vaunted “rules-based order.” That order rested

on universal acceptance of the domination of the dollar as the global reserve currency and its corollary, the petrodollar, imposed on [OPEC](#) with which Russia collaborates even if it is not a member. And the whole deal was sealed by the formal structure of NATO that implicitly cast all European countries as feudal dependencies of Washington.

Recounting his time in Moscow, William J Burns, Clinton's ambassador to Russia and currently the director of the CIA, [described](#) "the tangled and repetitive story of post-Cold War relations between the two countries, in which troubles were never exactly foreordained, but recurred with depressing regularity." When troubles recur with depressing regularity, at some point a wise diplomat or policymaker is likely to decide to do something rather than allow them to repeat endlessly. Therefore, Burns dutifully cabled Washington to inform the Clinton administration of the "acute sense that the West is taking advantage of Russia's weakness."

That was a quarter of a century ago. In the meantime, NATO kept expanding. In 2008, Burns sent this message to none other than Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice: "Ukrainian entry into NATO is the brightest of all redlines

for the Russian elite (not just Putin)." Just as Rice's ballet classes and her interest in classical piano – rather than say, John Coltrane's *Alabama* – may have helped her forget about her murdered classmate in Birmingham, she seems now to have forgotten that what Burns wrote to her in 2008 literally described a failure to do "everything possible to try to integrate Russia into the international system."

In 2006, expressing her opposition to a ceasefire on Israel's attacks on Lebanon, Rice [described](#) the growing disorder provoked by the Bush administration's policies in the region as the "birth pangs of a new Middle East." The pregnancy lasted another 15 years, officially ending with President Joe Biden's withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan last year. Does she recognize now that the child was stillborn?

Interestingly, in her defense of past administrations, Rice cited four of the most recent American presidents: Clinton, Bush, Obama and Trump. She failed to mention the current president, Biden. Does that mean she blames him alone? Is he the one, in her mind, who has deliberately transformed integration into what is looking increasingly like disintegration of the vaunted *rules-based order*?

CHAPTER 17

Turkish President Recep Erdoğan’s Talent for Mischief

The Turkish president has engaged a double initiative that could undermine the vaunted solidarity of NATO.

September 14, 2022

Turkey joined NATO in 1952, the year the late Queen Elizabeth II acceded to the throne of the United Kingdom. At the time, Turkey played a critical role in Eurasian geopolitics, not only because it occupied the gateway between Europe and Asia, but also because, as a non-Arabic Muslim country, it represented an obviously pivotal historical presence in the oil-rich Middle East.

Though once the core of the Byzantine and then the Ottoman Empire, Turkey’s presence in NATO represented for the West far more than a merely symbolic position in an American strategy aimed at containment of the Soviet Union. A decade later, though the fact was long kept secret, Turkey was to emerge as the card President John Kennedy could play to save the world from a nuclear holocaust by defusing the Cuban Missile crisis in 1962. Once Kennedy had consented to withdrawing US nuclear missiles from Turkey, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev could agree to denuclearize Cuba. This act of “cowardice” in the

eyes of US militarists could not be made public at the time.

Turkey has recently been very much in the news recently, following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February. Ankara hosted the high-level peace [talks](#) between Ukraine and Russia that, at one point, almost appeared to produce a result in late March. President Recep Erdoğan has since repeated his wish to [sponsor](#) more talks. More significantly, after first threatening to use his veto against the admission of Sweden and Finland into the NATO club, Erdoğan did an about-face.

The Americans rejoiced at the display of unanimity, but it turns out Erdoğan has another trick up his sleeve to keep his allies on their feet. Al Jazeera [reports](#) that Erdoğan, after insisting on maintaining “a policy of balance between Ukraine and Russia,” last week launched an ominous warning directed towards the powers in the West: “As long as you try to wage such a war of provocations, you will not be able to get the needed result.



Our diabolical definition:

War of provocations

War of provocations

A largely verbal modern art form created in the United States designed to replace a much older and far less efficient artform known as diplomacy.

Contextual Note

In his remarks, Erdoğan teasingly demonstrated the kind of historical analysis the US State Department has banished from its own discourse. By repeatedly calling the Russian

invasion “unprovoked,” US officials and the American media have branded as heretical everything serious analysts such as George Friedman and John Mearsheimer have been

saying for the past seven years: that certain actions by the US in the past may have had the effect of provoking Russia's invasion. The case can credibly be made that the provocations were specifically intended to lure Russia into a quagmire.

Until Erdoğan's complaint about a war of provocation, no member of NATO has dared to counter the official line, even if French President Emmanuel Macron's [call](#) in June to avoid "humiliating" Putin implicitly acknowledged a possible justification of Russia's response to repeated provocations ever since the 2014 coup and the failure of Ukraine to implement the Minsk agreements. In the same interview, Erdoğan reiterated his conviction not just that there have been provocations, but that it defines the policy of a country he refrains from naming. "I can say very clearly that I do not find the attitude of the West, no need to mention names, to be correct, because it is a policy based on provocations."

So much for a unanimity of bellicose intentions of all those involved in NATO. Erdoğan seems to be saying that one can be part of the military alliance and not necessarily follow the leader on all occasions. Dissidence is possible. In this particular case, Ukraine is not part of NATO. That means Turkey has no commitment to Ukraine's cause, while having the power to veto or simply ignore decisions made by NATO countries but not covered by the terms of the alliance.

Until now, every other member — including future entrants, Sweden and Finland — has indicated its willingness to obediently follow suit on a mission defined essentially by the United States. That does not mean that at some point, not only Turkey, but one or more other European countries exasperated by what increasingly resembles another American forever war that threatens their own economies, may not opt out of an adventure essentially designed to bolster the US defense industry and But the potential absurdity signaled by Erdoğan's position doesn't stop there. According to *Business Insider*, Greece — itself a member of NATO — has begun [complaining](#) that Turkey is planning an invasion of Greece. Now that raises a deeper existential question about the nature of NATO than the acquiescence of the alliance's members in the US proxy war against Russia. The author of the article, John Haltiwanger reports that "Erdoğan over the weekend accused Greece of occupying demilitarized islands in the Aegean, warning that Turkey will do 'what's necessary' when the time comes." Apart from resembling the language of a mafia *capo*, cultivating imprecision about the punishment and its timing, even in traditional diplomatic culture, this is the language of war. Whose side will NATO be on? To make his point clearer, Erdoğan warned that Turkey's reaction might "come down suddenly one night."

Historical Note

Note that Erdoğan used the plural of provocation. He is undoubtedly thinking back across a span of time that includes the three decades since the collapse of the Soviet Union. His sense of history also includes his memory of a perennial state of rivalry with Greece, a state that has, on many occasions, turned to enmity and open conflict. That two members of NATO might be at war in the near future could constitute the kiss of death of the historical justification of the institution, which was created after World War II with a double purpose: to end the nasty, centuries-old habit of European nations to go to war against one another and to focus all their collective hostility on what Ronald Reagan called "the evil empire," the Soviet Union.

On the one hand, Erdoğan appears to be reminding the world that the Soviet Union no longer exists and that, in his eyes, Russia is just another country, not the designated enemy of the

Western alliance. On the other hand, he seems to be saying the idea that NATO's logic of mutual defense means that all members must treat one another as indefectible allies, has no meaning when there are issues between those members that may lead to conflict.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, Francis Fukuyama famously launched the idea that US-style liberal democracy had won the battle of Armeggedon and there was an "end of history." This idea resonated with Americans, who had long been taught to see their mission as one of "manifest destiny" not limited to conquering and subduing a continent "from sea to shining sea." America's destiny was to dominate and ultimately abolish history, installing the consumer society as a global normal. *The New York Times'* columnist, Thomas Friedman, triumphantly called it a "flat world," in which all other cultures were eventually flattened by an ethos imported from

the US along with its supposedly democratizing technology.

The publication of *The World is Flat* in 2005 corresponded roughly to the emergence of Facebook and the idea of social media, or Web 2.0. Even though the events of September 11, 2001 seemed to contradict Fukuyama's thesis, telling us that the end of history hadn't quite been sealed, the eternal presence of social media, through which the future was being created on a daily basis, signaled the triumph of the ideal implicit in US culture, of refusing to dwell on the past and focusing on constructing a future with as few links as possible with history.

The State Department's campaign to erase history from the discussion of the Ukraine war has been wildly successful to the extent that Western media have taken it seriously and almost exclusively focused on the evil being, Vladimir Putin, responsible for this affront to a "rules-based order." They have failed to point out that this order is engineered for the needs of the US economy in the aftermath of World War II.

It turns out that the idea that rules alone could cancel historical memory has turned out to be deeply mistaken. Perhaps pertinently, Erdoğan reminds a world attempting to subject a war to its abstract interpretation of supposedly shared rules: "Look at history, if you go further, the price will be heavy."

CHAPTER 18

What Were Modi and Putin Really Talking About?

Western media tries to understand and fails miserably.

September 21, 2022

After the apparent success of a Ukrainian counter-offensive, politicians and the media have taken to evoking what they see as a “turning-point.” Doughty warriors such as General David Petraeus, for example, have [expressed](#) in the media their counter-intuitive belief that Ukraine can win the war. Earlier this year, in May, Patraeus had already asserted that “Ukraine has won,” so no one should be surprised to learn that he now [believes](#) the Ukrainians can win. Turning points are always good for believers.

There are nevertheless three compelling reasons to suppose that a Ukrainian victory is less imminent than the adepts of turning points are inclined to believe. The first is the obvious fact that even after the change of fortune and exceptional pressure on their own resources, Russia still represents a stronger force than Ukraine. That would point to a stalemate rather than a victory for either side. The second is that the decision-makers in the White House, the Pentagon and Congress appear to favor a lasting standoff to a decisive victory. The third is that the apparent triumphs of September may be eclipsed by the imminent bad news developing in Europe, as the cost of electricity and heating begins to skyrocket at the approach of winter.

Without the kind of high-level political solidarity that European governments have demonstrated

throughout the spring and summer, a Ukrainian victory is unimaginable. Many European governments will soon find themselves under serious pressure coming from their populations that were not consulted on a commitment to war, especially a prolonged war. The people are less likely than ever over the past seven decades to identify with the idea of following the dictates of Washington and London. They now find themselves trapped in apparently uncontrollable inflation coupled with an ever more likely recession. After the chaotic US withdrawal from Afghanistan last year, Europeans are less inclined to believe that the US can be trusted as their ally and protector.

The problem is becoming more severe in the rest of the world. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has bravely resisted all the blandishments and subtle pressure of the US to align with the West against Russia. But the West has never given up hope that that might change. Last week, Modi met with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Samarkand, Uzbekistan and made headlines in the West, who applauded Modi for challenging the Russian leader. The headline of an [article](#) by Mary Ilyushina in *The Washington Post* stated, “Modi rebukes Putin over his war in Ukraine.” In the meeting Modi famously said: “Today’s era is not an era of war, and I have spoken to you on the phone about this.”



Our diabolical definition:

Era of war

Any moment in history, even those epochs in which people believe that peace is the norm made inevitable by their proclaimed belief in the ideals of democratic harmony, the rule of law and a prosperous globalized economy from which everyone is expected to gain an advantage.

Era of war

Contextual Note

Should this be called a rebuke? Only Western media, desperately seeking to interpret any remark that isn't praise as condemnation could consider this a reprimand, reproach or rebuke. *Business Insider* avoids using the word rebuke and instead, more accurately, [calls](#) it a "remark." But using in the same sentence the now obligatory epithet "unprovoked war," the author conveys a similar meaning and even suggests that it is part of a global trend. "The Russian president's remarks to his Indian counterpart echoed comments on Russia's unprovoked war in Ukraine that he made to Chinese leader Xi Jinping the day prior. 'We highly value the balanced position of our Chinese friends when it comes to the Ukraine crisis,' Putin said to Xi at the summit in Uzbekistan."

Any student of rhetoric should recognize the language of polite, level-headed, realistic and decidedly non-confrontational diplomacy. There is no trace of the kind of moral judgment the notion of rebuke conveys. And yet Ilyushina in *The Washington Post* described it as a case of Putin being "[c]hallenged bluntly and publicly by Indian Prime Minister Narendra." In the binary thinking so common in US media, anything short of abject flattery appears to be a "rebuke."

Here is the first sentence of the [article](#) in *The India Times*: "In some straight talk with Russian President Vladimir Putin, PM Narendra Modi told him Friday that this wasn't the era of war, while also underlining the significance of democracy, dialogue and diplomacy." The idea of "straight talk" and "dialogue" evokes less rebuke than frank, constructive exchange.

Historical Note

The US media rarely shows any interest in history, but when it does, the facts tend to become confusing. *The Washington Post* article mentions that during the meeting Putin "accused Ukraine of refusing to negotiate," adding the non-sequitur, "although Putin ordered the invasion and his troops are still occupying a large swath of Ukrainian territory." Instead of denying the obvious truth – not only that Ukraine refused to negotiate but that it was instructed by the West to refuse to negotiate – it cites the occupation of Ukrainian territory as apparent proof that Russia does not want to negotiate. Every diplomat knows that a nation in a position of strength has good reason to negotiate.

The same article offers some instructive and informative insight into the strategy behind Modi's gambit. "Modi's remarks, delivered publicly and in his first in-person meeting with Putin since Russia launched its military operation in Ukraine, are expected to assuage the feeling in the West that India has aligned itself with Moscow on the Ukraine issue by not just not condemning Moscow but also by increasing its crude and other imports from Russia."

Business Insider cites the always anonymous "foreign policy experts and Russia watchers" who "say that the war in Ukraine appears to be driving a major wedge in relations." That wedge sounds more like wishful thinking than accurate reporting. Because it would weaken their idea of a fatal "wedge," the Western media avoid one significant quote by Modi cited by *The India Times*: "I will also get an opportunity to understand your viewpoint." As John Mearsheimer and others have noted for some time, when it comes to Russia, Western diplomacy long ago gave up the idea of trying to understand its viewpoint.

And just to remove the last trace of ambiguity, *The India Times* notes, "Modi also said in his opening remarks that the whole world knew and acknowledged there was an unbreakable bond between India and Russia." Western media usually rely on this kind of language to describe the relationship between the US and Israel, in which, as the song goes, "seldom is heard a discouraging word," let alone the slightest rebuke.

The New York Times ([NYT](#)) [pushes](#) the absurdity further. "Taken together, the distancing from Mr. Putin by the heads of the world's two most populous countries — both of which have been pivotal to sustaining Russia's economy in the face of Western sanctions — punctured the Kremlin's message that Russia was far from a global pariah." *The Washington Post's* "rebuke" becomes NYT's "distancing" and it is powerful enough to identify Russia as a "pariah," which just happens to be Joe Biden's favorite term of insult for any country the US chooses to confront, and especially Russia.

To underline the sense of historical threat now systematically associated with Russia – whether concerning interference in presidential elections or the now discredited (as probably imaginary) “Havana Syndrome” — *NYT* offers a bit of dramatic tension. “But Mr. Putin’s own next steps remain a mystery, and Western officials believe that he could still drastically escalate the intensity of Russia’s assault if he is confronted with further defeats.”

Modi’s analysis may be correct. After the American withdrawal from Afghanistan last year and the end of the “forever wars” in the Middle East, we should think of this epoch as an era of peace, not of war. The tone that consistently appears in the Western press, nevertheless, demonstrates a manifest taste for framing even visible diplomacy in which dialogue is the central feature as just another brick in an era of permanent war.

CHAPTER 19

Is the US Seeking to Undermine Globalization?

Though Western media seems indifferent, the logic that defined “the American Century” may be disappearing.

October 06, 2022

Today, reading any news item focused on geopolitics has become an exercise in intellectual frustration. Nearly every prominent news outlet in the West can be counted on to follow an exasperatingly predictable editorial line. Random speculation about unverified intentions is rife. Among the celebrity pundits whose job is to analyze the news, insight into systemic relationships, long-term trends and the deeper dynamics of history routinely go missing.

“Nearly 90 Percent of the World Isn’t Following Us on Ukraine” is the title of an [article](#) Newsweek, an otherwise reliably establishment outlet, dared to publish. The authors are two high-level former American diplomats. David H. Rundell held the post of Chief of Mission at the US embassy in Saudi Arabia. Ambassador Michael Gfoeller was senior political advisor to General David Petraeus from 2008 to 2010. Gfoeller even participated in two of the famously secretive Bildenberg events said to be the place the powerful consult, if not conspire, on the governance of a globalized world.

Neither of these men can be thought of as a bitter loser, a radicalized opponent of the established order or a disabused lackey with an ax to grind. These two diplomats go well beyond the now

established trend of reporting the news as a contest of wills or a zero sum game between two ideologies or styles of political organization. Instead, they are keenly aware of a stunning tectonic shift in history itself. The implications go far beyond any single border.

Most editorial boards have been doggedly treating the struggle in Ukraine as a kind of media-friendly but exceptionally violent Superbowl pitting two teams –the world’s two most imposing nuclear powers – against each other in a proxy war whose outcome will result in the crowning of the 21st century’s imperial champion, destined to reign over humanity for the coming decades.

Rundell and Gfoeller focus on the significance of the quintessential tool that the currently reigning – but clearly waning – global power has used to exercise that power: economic sanctions. They focus on the blowback that the USA’s strategy of constant intimidation, if not overt aggression has ultimately provoked. “Economic sanctions,” they observe,” have united our adversaries in shared resistance. Less predictably, the outbreak of Cold War II, has also led countries that were once partners or non-aligned to become increasingly multi-aligned.”



Our diabolical definition:

Multi-aligned

The equivalent in diplomacy of quantum uncertainty in physics, describing a geopolitical reality that defies simple dichotomies and acknowledges permanent non-determination.

Contextual Note

In a world supposedly regulated by a “rules-based order based on the idea of a simplistic opposition between what is licit and illicit, nations were forced to decide whether they were for or against their preferred dominant power. The concept atavistically prolonged the logic of feudalism, in which everyone and every grouping was subject to a *Seigneur*: a lord or king. In contrast, a world of multi-aligned nations fluctuates like quanta between two indeterminate states, as either a particle or a wave, or both at the same time.

Rundell and Gfoeller maintain that the system known as the neoliberal order – taught in schools and accepted by economists and politicians across the globe as a set of natural laws governing humanity’s collective behavior – may not be the actual source of the supposedly “natural” laws that govern the political economy. Nature is more complex than we are encouraged by our institutions to believe. Because a sense of morality remains a persistent psychological component of our collective behavior, the perception of equity can sometimes trump or at least disturb the cynical economic “realism” on which we have been taught to believe the neoliberal order has been founded.

“Globalization,” the two diplomats write, “can function only if most participants believe it advances their interests.” The defense of self-interest defines the starting point of any value system. When power is concentrated, self-interest may be obscured, as the need to align becomes dominant. But even in such cases it is wrong to neglect the role of perception by those subjected to a power that claims the authority to define the rules. The authors make this simple point, of deep historical significance: “If the rest believe the West is unfairly using the system for its own benefit, the rules- based international order falls apart and alternatives will emerge.”

So how does that perception play out in today’s real world? At a joint press [conference](#) conducted last week with US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken, India’s Minister of External Affairs, S Jaishankar offered some delicately worded hints.

While diplomatically insisting on the quality of India’s dialogue with the US, the minister made it clear that there is now room for some quantum uncertainty in international relations. Clearly contradicting the US approach to the global economy, Jaishankar put it brutally: “India does not believe that the efficacy or indeed the quality of democracy should be decided by world banks.” The rules-based order has always been a dollars-based order. (The State Department’s transcription read “word banks” instead of “world banks.” Could this be a voluntary mistake?)

Jaishankar offered another mild reminder of Indian dissent. Concerning the Ukraine war – which the US is committed to prolonging despite the disastrous consequences for much of the world, including the people of the United States – the minister insisted that India has “always advocated that the best way forward is to return to dialogue and diplomacy.”

Perhaps just as telling was Jaishankar’s remark concerning the tenor of talks with UN’s Secretary General, António Guterres. “So there was some discussion with the UN secretary general as well. I don’t think it would be right for me to kind of go into specifics at this time.” Not in a friendly exchange with Blinken, in any case. The minister clearly shares an appreciation similar to that of Rundell and Gfoeller and Guterres himself, that the refusal to acknowledge the needs and desires of a majority of the earth’s population cannot be a productive policy.

“These concerns,” Rundell and Gfoeller write, “are generating considerable anti-Western sentiment across much of the Global South.” In the article’s final sentence, concerning the war in Ukraine, they offer this obvious insight, identical with Jaishankar’s: “Our most promising solution to this dilemma is likely to be some sort of diplomatic compromise.” Just as obviously, that orientation is at odds with that of a Biden administration [committed](#) to conducting a proxy war “as long as it takes.”

Historical Note

At the [core](#) of quantum mechanics we find “the wacky behavior of photons, electrons and the other particles that make up the universe.” It seems wacky to us, but that is how the universe works. The elementary physical units scientists

cannot simply decide whether they are particles or waves.

The political history of the past three quarters of a century, at least as promoted in the West, has

consistently relied on a logic in which nations were pressured into making a definitive choice. Particle or wave. Capitalist or communist. Democratic or authoritarian. Choose your side and be prepared for a struggle against the other side.

The original Cold War created a culture of binary choice designated as alignment. For complex historical reasons following its independence in 1947, India somehow managed to define and maintain its position as a non-aligned nation in a geopolitical world governed by the logic popular in the US: "You are either with us or against us." On its [current website](#), Jaishankar's ministry proudly recounts India's historical role, stating that the "Movement of Non-Aligned Countries has played a fundamental role in the preservation of world peace and security."

In the context of a binary Cold War, India and other third world countries successfully imposed, at least in theory, a third choice: non-alignment. The seismic shift in geopolitics we are witnessing today is proving to be qualitatively different. A multi-aligned position better corresponds to the reality of an increasingly multipolar world.

Having lost its control of what appeared to be a unipolar world born of the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the US may grudgingly accept the kind of bipolar world that characterized the original Cold War. But, as the basis of a globalized economy, a multipolar world of multi-aligned nations would actually be far more coherent and respectful of a diverse political reality. It would also mean the end of "the American century." Will any US president allow this to happen? Joe Biden's commitment to a prolonged proxy war in Ukraine may be the clearest sign that the US will continue to resist..

CHAPTER 20

Joe Biden Promises to Take on Mohammed bin Salman

The latest sign of continental drift in the world of geopolitics bodes poorly for Joe Biden’s Democrats in next month’s midterm elections.

October 19, 2022

It [started](#) with an ill-considered fist bump. In July, US President Joe Biden tried to make his uncomfortable peace with a man he deemed to be a murderer and a nation he called a “pariah.” The nation was Saudi Arabia and the man, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS). Biden hoped his traditional ally would help in his noble quest to keep down the price of gas at the pump for Americans in a midterm election year. US sanctions on Russia drove the price up. The Saudis need to obediently drive the price down. That is their traditional role.

Throughout the summer, the president hoped to have made his point. But then came the dreaded October surprise. Biden appeared shocked by what *The Washington Post* [described](#) as a “move by OPEC Plus last week to cut its oil output by 2 million barrels a day,” a decision that would most certainly “boost oil prices in the United States and worldwide.”

MBS should have known that bucking the always wisely calculated requests of the United States can be risky. The US will not brook insubordination. In this case, Biden’s reaction appears to be deeper than usual. Reducing production and letting prices drift upwards is one thing. Choosing the worst possible moment to do so is another. As *The Post* notes, “its timing a month before the midterm elections was a political blow to Biden that some in the president’s circle saw as a personal shot at the president.”

The insult MBS inflicted was so severe the White House is now officially calling into question the formerly stable and traditionally tight relationship that literally oiled the American global economic empire over the past 80 years. “President Biden,” we learned last week, “is kicking off a process of reevaluating, and potentially altering, the U.S. relationship with Saudi Arabia following the announcement by a Saudi-led coalition that it would slash oil production.”



Our diabolical definition:

Reevaluating a relationship

Reevaluating a relationship

In US foreign policy, applying a variable set of often extreme punitive measures leveled against any disrespectful ally who fails to toe the

Contextual Note

An article co-signed by *The Washington Post* and AP offered this tasty [morsel](#) designed to further embarrass Biden: “Saudi Arabia said Thursday that the U.S. had urged it to postpone a decision

by OPEC and its allies — including Russia — to cut oil production by a month.” The White House desperately wanted to prevent a spike in gas prices ahead of November’s midterm elections.” This is clearly a low blow. Normally,

diplomacy avoids deconstructing the ally's partisan motives. The Saudis are telling Americans that Biden is more focused on electing Democrats to Congress than easing the pain of American citizens.

Gambrell notes that "the Saudi Foreign Ministry's lengthy statement showed how tense relations between the two countries have become." Tense is the right word. The past tense may henceforth be required when narrating the once unbreakable Saudi-US friendship, which, built around the petrodollar, had more closely come to resemble a collusion.

Biden's team denied any purely electoral motivation. Instead, White House staffer John Kirby accused Saudi Arabia of coercing other OPEC members into endorsing a decision they didn't agree with. Washington added the inevitable [insinuation](#) that the Saudis were "siding with Russia in its war in Ukraine." The Saudis in turn responded that the decision was technical. Delaying it for a month would have had

"negative economic consequences." They took the moral high ground, claiming that they were guided by their "noble objectives to protect the global economy from oil market volatility."

This is the kind of accusatory dialogue that occurs when two nations eager to vaunt their commitment to "noble objectives" suddenly fall to quarreling. Each wants the world to understand that its mission consists of sacrificing its self-interest for the well-being of the entire planet. Who could doubt America's commitment to justice in the world or the Saudis' to the stability of markets?

With neither side willing to back down, the debate ended with Biden predictably promising the kind of punishment for nonconformity the US routinely applies, while at the same time refusing to define what form it might take. "I'm not going to get into what I'd consider and what I have in mind," Biden insisted. "But there will be — there will be consequences," he maintained, with a more menacing tone.

Historical Note

Though some claim it is all about the Saudis' hope to see Donald Trump in the White House again, the rift between the US and Saudi Arabia is real and is likely to be lasting. It may have begun with the gruesome murder of Jamal Khashoggi four years ago, but it has now become a major geopolitical psychodrama, linked to the polarizing effect of the war in Ukraine.

Alliances deemed unbreakable are now unequivocally exposing their fragility. New alliances will undoubtedly emerge. To what end, nobody knows. The US, ensconced in its "as long as it takes" posture, appears to have fabricated in Ukraine its latest "forever war." By excluding any consideration of a negotiated settlement, it has brought the world to the brink of a nuclear holocaust. The escalating instability of a geopolitical reality no longer controlled by Washington, and even less by the United Nations, appears to be approaching a tipping point. When things get that grim, new configurations of alliances become as inevitable as they are unpredictable.

Here is how John Kirby put it: "In light of recent developments and the OPEC Plus decision about oil production, the president believes we should review the bilateral relationship with Saudi Arabia and take a look to see if that relationship is where it needs to be." Only in American culture can a

relationship be thought of as something to be defined in terms of what it "needs to be." What could possibly be the criteria for defining such needs?

So, Washington is busy working on a new needs analysis. *The Washington Post* reveals that "calls to revisit America's support for Saudi Arabia have emerged in Congress and elsewhere. Officials said Tuesday that Biden is doing so, but they offered no details on how the relationship might shift or what policies the president is considering." We will only know once Biden begins his effort to "discuss this relationship with members of Congress." That should produce some exciting dialogue focused on formulating and meting out appropriate punishment for the Saudis' bad behavior. It is expected to include "limiting security cooperation; reducing arms sales; and removing OPEC Plus's exemption from U.S. antitrust laws."

Congressman Chris Murphy from Connecticut made this revealing comment: "The whole point of looking the other way when it comes to the Saudi war in Yemen and their awful human rights record was to make sure they would pick us in the middle of an international crisis, and instead they chose the Russians." Punishment is clearly required.

Murphy's comment sounds like the complaint of a lover who has been jilted. That means emotion is likely to trump reason. But it gets worse. CNN [reports](#) that the White House circulated "draft talking points" that "warned that it could be taken as a 'hostile act.'"

Nostalgic for the halcyon days of the Cold War, the US has spent the past 30 years turning the ghost of an eviscerated post-Soviet Russia into not just a theoretical enemy but a frightening bugbear. It began when US experts intervened to redesign Russia's economy along the lines of their neoliberal "rules-based order." When that experiment failed and Vladimir Putin began his

work of reverting to a Tsarist style of authority to restore order, Russia the new US ally became Russia the much-needed traditional adversary.

Can the same thing happen with Saudi Arabia? It seems unlikely for multiple reasons. But if an adversarial relationship develops, who will the Saudis turn to and what will that mean for the balance of power across Africa, the Middle East and Asia and the ability of the US to maintain its global hegemony?

The increasingly hyperreal and hyper-militarized US once again seems surprised by events it can't control. Welcome to the very real 21st century.

PART IV

Law

CHAPTER 21

Judicial Creativity Makes the News

The end of 2021 offered several examples of how justice in the US can serve other ends.

January 04, 2022

The criminal justice system in the United States may not be the best imaginable model for producing effective crime control. Given the numbers of people incarcerated, neither does it appear to be an effective tool of dissuasion. Its rate of [629](#) people incarcerated per 100,000 is five times as high as France (119) and seven times higher than [Italy](#) (89), the home of Cosa Nostra, [Ndrangheta](#) and the Camorra. Only [El Salvador](#) begins to approach the US figure (572), an ungovernable, poverty-stricken nation in which criminality has become a way of life for its youth, largely deprived of any other perspectives.

On the other hand, it has consistently demonstrated its creativity. American legislators at both the state and federal level have always found imaginative ways of improving the performance of a legal system designed to protect and sometimes even reward anyone who can afford an expensive lawyer (or team of lawyers) and crush anyone who cannot, especially if their ethnicity places them in a group reputed to be inclined to criminal activity.

California's creative legislators were the first to initiate the brilliant [idea](#), subsequently followed by more than 20 other states, of "three strikes and you're out." The national sport, baseball, provided them with the perfect model for setting the rules of civil behavior. The law was apparently "crafted to be largely symbolic." It quickly achieved its purpose of consolidating in the public's mind the idea of an identifiable, always-to-be-feared criminal class.

Legislators and jurists invested much of their creative energy in finding acceptable ways to avoid sending people with lavish lifestyles to jail for a broad class of antisocial behavior, corporate crime, despite the fact that it frequently provokes major societal disasters. Senator Mitt Romney and the Supreme Court insisted that we think of corporations as people. But when they commit crimes, even with catastrophic consequences for millions of people's lives, the courts not only cannot send a corporation to prison, they refrain from being too hard on the people at the top of those corporations who implemented the crimes since, after all, they were just doing their (well-paid) job and serving the economy. The same

logic applies to members of the political establishment whose job responsibilities occasionally include committing war crimes across broad swaths of the world in the name of America's sacrosanct "national security."

Jeffrey Epstein clearly belonged to that same elite. Given the sums of money he controlled, he achieved something akin to a corporate identity. In 2008, he was convicted in a Florida court on an absurdly mild charge that had little to do with the crimes he was known to have committed. Thanks to arrangements that were made with federal prosecutors, he served a simulacrum of incarceration in which for 13 months he was free during the day but condemned to spend his nights in a public jail.

In 2019, the mounting evidence of his criminality made the decision to arrest him unavoidable. Possibly in consideration of his powerful friends and associates, Epstein had the good sense to commit suicide in his jail cell when nobody was looking. Could there have been some complicity in his noble self-sacrifice? As Bill Gates famously [said](#), "he's dead, so in general you always have to be careful," meaning that once he could no longer talk, Epstein's friends conveniently no longer needed to be so careful.

Epstein's demise in jail — whether assisted or self-inflicted — was a new crime scene. The criminals, in this case, were identified as the two black prison guards who were charged with monitoring his cell. Instead, they slept or surfed the web on that fatal night. They falsified their report and, like everyone else in the institution, were totally unconcerned by the fact that the video surveillance system was not working. Being the kind of people they were (black working class), they were duly called to account for their crime.

Last week, the [BBC](#) reports, "US prosecutors have dismissed charges against two prison guards who falsified records the night Jeffrey Epstein killed himself on their watch." The prosecutors "asked a judge to dismiss their case, saying the pair have complied with a plea deal."



Our diabolical definition:

Plea deal

A procedure that allows judicial authorities to avoid the literal application of the law and to arrange things in whatever they deem the public interest to be, either in the interest of identifying the true, powerful, higher-level culprits hiding in the wings or in the interest of protecting them.

Plea deal

Contextual Note

The case of these two prison guards undoubtedly deserves a bit more reflection than US media seem willing to offer. The briefest attempt at reflection might include the consideration that subjecting the guards to the full force of the law in a trial involve the risk that they might implicate other people, including their own superiors, to prove their innocence.

In the imagined case that the two guards were not just neglectful but had received specific instructions not to carry out their normal duties that night, faced with the prospect of prosecution, they would undoubtedly be inclined to reveal in a public courtroom that they were simply following orders. In the equally imagined case that they were offered a chance to live their lives in peace after some sort of agreed settlement, part of the settlement would obviously include the dismissal of any charges against them.

Instead of entertaining and investigating such hypotheses, the prosecutors issued this statement: “After a thorough investigation and based on the facts of this case and the personal circumstances of the defendants, the

Government has determined that the interests of justice will best be served by deferring prosecution.” How, we might ask them, do they define “the interests of justice,” and justice for whom?

Senator Ben Sasse, a Republican member of the Senate Judiciary Committee, found the procedure suspicious. He called the plea deal “unacceptable” and [demanded](#) “a report detailing the prison agency’s failures.” The BBC article subtly expresses its own doubts in the following remark: “It is unclear why the document was not filed until 30 December.” Let the reader wonder about that.

“As part of a plea deal,” the BBC reports, “the pair agreed to complete 100 hours of community service and co-operate with an investigation by the justice department’s inspector general.” What about the other parts of the deal? And what does cooperating entail? Could it involve agreeing to a law of silence? The reader is still wondering.

A classic plea deal seeks to implicate people higher up on the criminal ladder. But nothing prevents it from doing just the opposite.

Historical Note

Ironically, just this week, Glenn Greenwald [exposed](#) a different, equally suspect story of a possible plea deal, this one concerning WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange. Denouncing the control intelligence agencies have achieved over corporate news media, exemplified by the permanent presence of former high-level officials

of the CIA and FBI as salaried staff of the networks, Greenwald cites former FBI Assistant Director and MSNBC employee Frank Figliuzzi. He argues that if extradited from the UK, “Assange may be able to help the U.S. government in exchange for more lenient charges or a plea deal. Prosecutions can make for strange

bedfellows. A trade that offers a deal to a thief who steals data, in return for him flipping on someone who tried to steal democracy sounds like a deal worth doing.”

This would be a plea deal with purely political ends and no relation to any form or idea of justice. Instead, it relies on the radical injustice of obsessively prosecuting whistleblowers. The enmity between the intelligence agencies and Donald Trump is such that any prospect of legally embarrassing the former president appears worthwhile in the eyes of many people at MSNBC and in the establishment of the Democratic Party.

Then there’s the case of Ghislaine Maxwell, convicted last week of sex trafficking as Jeffrey Epstein’s partner and accomplice. Many in the media are speculating about the [possibility](#) of a reduced sentence if she is willing to name names. The prosecution ” confirmed no plea bargain offers were made or received,” according to Ghislaine’s brother, Ian Maxwell, who expects “that position to be maintained.

Plea deals clearly offer scope for impressive feats of creativity by those in the judicial system who know how to use them.

CHAPTER 22

Justice in the US Is an Art Form

The verdict in the Theranos trial updates the story of the American dream.

January 06, 2022

On any given day, US media will offer an abundance of reports on the sometimes strange workings of its justice system. This first week of January has proved to be rich in examples, with the high-profile cases of Ghislaine Maxwell and Elizabeth Holmes complemented by a host of stories about smaller cases over the antics of local judges or the ambiguity of legislation in particular states.

The ultimate effect of these stories may appear to justify the remark made by Mr. Bumble, in Charles Dickens’ “Oliver Twist,” who cited the proverbial phrase, “the law is an ass.” Dickens painted Bumble as an appalling hypocrite and the hapless husband of a tyrannical wife. When told that “the law supposes that your wife acts under your direction,” Bumble correctly identifies the gap between the principles expressed in the law and reality. Reacting to the supposed “suppositions” of the law, Bumble wishes “that his eye may be opened by experience — by experience.”

In this comic passage, Dickens identified one of the central problems of any system of law, the friction created when suppositions concerning human behavior meet the facts of actual human experience. In most people’s minds, the notion of

equality before the law requires that the letter of the law be applied uniformly to everyone, regardless of circumstance. But justice requires two things not contained in the law. Application of the law should take into account variable circumstances. But it should also mobilize the human ability to treat language — the wording of the law — as the not quite reliable artifact all language tends to be. The latter seems to represent a formidable challenge.

A New York Times article with the title, “Language Mistake in Georgia Death Penalty Law Creates a Daunting Hurdle” exposes how the careless [wording](#) of a Georgia law has inverted its intended logic. At one point it quotes a pearl of wisdom from 2013 uttered by future Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh. “It is essential,” Kavanaugh opined, “that we follow both the words and the music of Supreme Court opinions.”

Most people agree that music is a sublime art form practiced in all human cultures that derives from our ability to modulate the pitch, rhythm and sympathetic resonance of sounds produced by both the human voice and the skillful manipulation of a wide variety of physical objects.



Our diabolical definition:

Music of opinion

The practice of using the art form of music’s absence of propositional content to make irresponsible assertions sound as if they reflect deep and serious reasoning

Music of opinion

Contextual Note

Perhaps Kavanaugh imagines the US criminal justice system as something akin to the pre-Copernican universe in which the sun was believed to revolve around the Earth and where, at the summit of the heavens, one could hear the celestial music of the spheres. That is a far cry from the more accurate description of the law's workings by Mr. Bumble, who wished the law might descend from its principled heights and open its eyes to deal with human experience.

The verdict in the trial of Theranos founder Elizabeth Holmes confirmed the spectacular fall of a one-time darling of the techno-financial-political establishment and youthful billionaire. It also illustrates that while Kavanaugh's imaginary legal music didn't play much of a role in determining the verdict, a certain form of cultural mythology figured prominently.

Under the headline, "EXCLUSIVE: Juror speaks out after convicting Elizabeth Holmes," ABC

News [reports](#) on how the jury's deliberation reached a verdict that ended up blaming Holmes for bilking the millionaires and billionaires who invested in her company but found her innocent of conning a gullible public into purchasing a fraudulent product.

One of the jurors, Wayne Kaatz, described by ABC News as "a daytime Emmy-award-winning TV writer," observed a phenomenon that any author of fiction and media professional would be expected to notice. "It's tough," Kaatz explained, "to convict somebody, especially somebody so likable, with such a positive dream." He insisted that the jury "respected Elizabeth's belief in her technology, in her dream." He added that in their mind, Holmes "still believes in it, and we still believe she believes in it." In US culture, believing in a "positive dream" is in itself an act of moral virtue. Believing in those whom you believe is nearly as good.

Historical Note

The idea of the American dream was first promoted by the businessman and historian James Truslow Adams. In his best-selling 1931 book "[Epic of America](#)," he described it as the "dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement." Later commentators, according to music historian [Nicholas Tawa](#), "would claim that the American Dream was mostly the quest for financial betterment and the accumulation of bigger and better material goods." Truslow launched the phrase describing his "positive dream" just about the time Edward Bernays, the godfather of public relations, was consolidating the ideology that would underpin the growth of the consumer society in subsequent decades.

Martin Luther King cleverly exploited the idea of the American dream in his famous "I have a dream" speech. Instead of putting it in a consumerist framework, Reverend King framed the black American's dream in terms of future justice. The justice-inspired dream has consistently challenged Truslow's consumerist version aggressively promoted by Bernays and the powerful agencies of Madison Avenue.

In other words, even within the US justice system, it isn't King's dream of justice but Truslow's consumerist model that dominates, unconsciously orientating the average American's perception of the world. The vaunted personal belief in one's money-making dream (and scheme) typically contains some wildly positive outcome for the world.

In the case of Elizabeth Holmes, what the jury called a "positive dream" was the promise of an instantaneous deciphering of every citizen's state of health thanks to a drop of blood produced with a pinprick. For the incomparably successful Elon Musk, it's the return of the planet to ecological health thanks to expensive electric cars. Or, alternatively, the colonization of Mars when the emerging truth about the failure of electric cars to save the Earth offers humanity no other choice than to escape to another planet.

These generously optimistic beliefs held by brave entrepreneurs (funded by equally brave billionaires) may be seen to justify lying and other forms of skulduggery. After all, if you have a great idea and don't accept to play hardball by aggressively promoting the dream you are intent on turning into reality, you will fail and return to

the dustheap from which you came: the cohort of anonymous losers. The jury admired Holmes for trying, even though the effort required some serious lying to a gullible public.

In contrast, the jury had no trouble finding Holmes guilty of the much more serious crime of pulling the wool over the eyes of America's nobility, the wealthy elite who agreed to back her dream with their cash. In a guest article for The New York Times, Vanity Fair's [Bethany McLean](#) admits to hoping that justice would be served with the opposite verdict. She wanted Holmes "convicted on the charges of lying to patients but found not guilty of the charges that she defrauded investors." McLean believes that they "should have done the homework that others who refused to give Theranos money did."

The A-list investors and political celebrities who backed Holmes' dream had the means to do due diligence but, charmed by the music of the dream,

didn't bother. Worse, the confidence projected by such prestigious investors — including former Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, Henry Kissinger, Oracle's Larry Ellison, James Mattis (Donald Trump's future defense secretary), Rupert Murdoch and the Walton family — gave added credibility to the lies Theranos' patients were subjected to.

Holmes is now awaiting sentencing. She will probably serve significant time in prison, though that may be attenuated and her time in prison reduced thanks to the kind of prevailing sympathy that exists for those who believe in their dream (especially young white females). That sympathy may have been a factor in the lenient sentence given to sex-trafficker Jeffrey Epstein in 2008, though no jury was involved. Perhaps that's just one feature of the music of the law that Justice Kavanaugh believes to be real, always ready to produce its seductive strains, at least in those moments when it isn't braying like an ass.

CHAPTER 23

The Art of Prince Andrew’s Lawyers

Watching a member of British royalty suffer for his least noble proclivities has become a spectator sport for the media.

February 09, 2022

With everything that has been going on as the world seeks to weigh the chances of a nuclear war and a realignment of nations across the globe, fans of the media may have failed to tune into the real news that broke in recent weeks. Forget [Ukraine](#), there is another drama whose suspense is building. It obviously concerns the fate of the battered [Prince Andrew](#) because of his role in the [Jeffrey Epstein/Ghislaine Maxwell](#) saga that has already produced an officially (and conveniently) declared “suicide” (Epstein’s) and a celebrity criminal trial (Maxwell’s).

Since a US judge has now agreed to bring Virginia Giuffre’s civil lawsuit to trial, it means that for the first time, a prince of England, a member of the [royal family](#), will be officially put on the hot seat in an American courtroom. The rebelling colonists couldn’t get King George III to answer for his crimes, but they now appear to have a son of Elizabeth II in their grasp.

For weeks, the media have been running updates specifically on speculation about the legal strategy Andrew’s attorneys are likely to adopt. Though for the moment it remains mere speculation, it does have the power for attentive observers to provoke a few comic effects. The

latest [hypothesis](#) has the lawyers seeking to turn the tables on Giuffre by accusing her of sex trafficking. They aren’t claiming Andrew is innocent, but they want her to appear guilty. Business Insider considers that ploy “risky” because the tactic consists of getting a witness — another of Epstein’s victims — to make that claim about Giuffre. It risks backfiring because the witness could actually contradict Andrew’s adamant claim that he never had sex with Giuffre.

Actually, the legal team appears already to have prepared a strategy for that eventuality. On January 26, NPR [reported](#) that Andrew’s lawyers addressed a message to the court saying, “that if any sexual activity did occur between the prince and Virginia Giuffre, it was consensual.” This may sound odd because the accused’s lawyers should know if he did or didn’t, but the law is never about knowledge, only the impression a good attorney can make on a judge or a jury.

NPR continues its description of the lawyers’ position: “The court filing made clear that Andrew wasn’t admitting sexual contact with Giuffre. But it said if the case wasn’t dismissed, the defense wants a trial in which it would argue that her abuse claims ‘are barred by the doctrine of consent.’”



Our diabolical definition:

Consent

Consent

Agreement on something perceived as illicit between two or more people, including, in some extreme cases, a member of the British royal family and a 17-year-old American girl turned into a sex slave by the royal’s best American friend

Contextual Note

Since lawyers live in a world of hypotheticals, evoking the idea that “if” a judge and jury were to decide sexual contact between the two was real, it should enable the legal team to make a claim they expect the court to understand as: She was asking for it. In civil cases, all lawyers know that attack is the best defense.

Thus, Andrew’s legal team is now being paid, not to prove the prince’s innocence, but to establish the guilt of the victim. They are seeking to create the impression that the Virginia Roberts of two decades ago was already a wolf in sheep’s clothing

when she consented to consorting with a prince. And, of course, continues to be one as she seeks to profit from the civil trial today.

Most commentators doubt that Andrew has a case. This has permitted the media to revel in the humiliation of a man who has always been perceived as [supercilious](#) and deserving of no one’s attention apart from being the queen’s “favourite son.” That is why this has been nothing but bad news for Buckingham Palace.

And it looks to get worse. So stay tuned.

Historical Note

Legal [experts](#) tell us that what the prince’s lawyers refer to as the “doctrine of consent” is officially described as the “doctrine of informed consent.” More pertinently, the consent referred to focuses entirely on cases in the realm of medical treatment. It is all about a patient’s agreement to a medical procedure that may be risky. It defines the physician’s duty to inform the patient of all the risks associated with a recommended procedure. If consent is obtained, the physician will be clear of responsibility should any of the risks be realized.

It may seem odd that Prince Andrew’s lawyers are appealing to a doctrine established specifically for medical practice. But while many will not think of lawyers themselves as appealing, whenever they lose a case, you can be sure that they will be appealing it. But that isn’t the only kind of appealing they do. When preparing a case, they will appeal to any random principle or odd fact that appears to serve their purpose. This should surprise no one because, just like politicians who focus on winning elections rather than governing, lawyers focus on winning cases for their clients rather than on justice.

The sad truth, however, for those who believe that justice is a fine thing to have as a feature of an advanced civilization is that the lawyers are not only right to follow that logic; the best of their lot are also very skillful in making it work. Which is why what we call the justice system will always be more “just” for those who can afford to pay for the most skillful lawyers.

The final irony of this story lies in the fact that, in their diligence, the lawyers have borrowed the idea behind the doctrine of consent, not from the

world of sexual predation, but from the realm of therapy and medical practice. They need to be careful at this point. Even Andrew and his lawyers should know that if you insert a space in the word “therapist,” it points to the image Prince Andrew has in some people’s minds: “the rapist.” The mountains of testimony from Jeffrey Epstein’s countless victims reveal that, though they were undoubtedly consenting in some sense to the masterful manipulation of the deceased billionaire and friend to the famous and wealthy (as well as possibly a spy), all of them have been to some degree traumatized for life by the experience.

As Bill Gates [explained](#) when questioned about the problem of his own (he claims ill-informed) consent to whatever he was up to with Epstein, for him there could be no serious regrets. The problem no longer exists because, well, “he’s dead” (referring to his pal, Jeffrey). Prince Andrew is still alive, though this whole business has deprived him of all his royal privileges, making him something of a dead branch on the royal family tree. Virginia Giuffre is also still alive, though undoubtedly disturbed by her experience as a tool in the hands of Jeffrey Epstein, Ghislaine Maxwell and Prince Andrew.

So, unless a nuclear war intervenes in the coming weeks between the US and Russia making everything else redundant (including the collapse of Meta’s stock), the interesting news will turn around the legal fate in the US of two prominent Brits. The first is a socialite (and possibly also a spy) as well as a high-profile heiress, Ghislaine Maxwell. She is expected to have a retrial sometime in the future. The second is none other than the queen’s favorite son.

PART V

Propaganda

CHAPTER 24

Finding a Way to Diss Information

In times of war, everything and its opposite may be true.

March 16, 2022

On March 11, at the United Nations, [Russia](#) accused the [United States](#) and [Ukraine](#) of collaborating on developing chemical and biological weapons. Russian officials claimed to have documents proving an attempt to destroy evidence of this illegal activity. None of the coverage reveals whether the [documents](#) published on the Russian Defense Ministry’s website make a credible case. In other words, the Russian accusations may or may not be true. Whether such activity is likely or not is another question, but even if it were considered likely, that does not make it true.

The US and Ukraine have consistently and emphatically denied any even potentially offensive operations. The debate became complicated last week when at a Senate hearing, US Under Secretary of State [Victoria Nuland](#) admitted that the laboratories exist and were conducting research that might have dangerous consequences if it fell into Russian hands. She revealed nothing about the nature of

the research. Various US officials explained that the research existed but aimed at preventing the use of such weapons rather than their development. That disclaimer may or may not be true.

At the United Nations meeting, the US ambassador to the UN, Linda Thomas-Greenfield categorically denied any activity with these words: “I will say this once: ‘Ukraine does not have a biological weapons program.’” As [The Guardian reports](#), the ambassador then “went on to turn the accusation back on Moscow” when she accused Russia of maintaining a biological weapon program. That may or may not be true. In fact, both accusations have a strong likelihood of being true.

ABC News [summarized](#) the issue in these terms: “Russia is doubling down on its false claims that the U.S. and Ukraine are developing chemical or biological weapons for use against invading Russian forces, bringing the accusation to the United Nations Security Council on Friday.”



Our diabolical definition:

False claims

False claims
Hypotheses that are likely enough to be true but difficult to prove conclusively

Contextual Note

The basic claim made by ABC News is true, at least if we reduce the message to the incontestable fact that the Russians brought the

“accusation to the United Nations Security Council on Friday.” What may or may not be true is the reporter’s assertion that these are “false claims.” As noted above, the Russian claims may

or may not be true, meaning they may or may not be false.

For news reporting in times of war, propaganda becomes the norm. It trumps any form of serious inquiry, that the legacy media in the US bases its reporting on two complementary suppositions: that everything US authorities tell them is true and that most everything Russians claim is false. Those same reporters who suppose their side is telling the truth and the other side is lying also suppose that their readers share the same suppositions. In times like these, propaganda is the most effective and especially the most marketable form of communication.

The second sentence in the ABC News article adds a new dimension to the assertion. It complains that a “web of disinformation, not only from Russian state media but also Chinese propaganda outlets and even some American voices, have increasingly spread the conspiracy theory this week.” The metaphor of a spider’s web conveniently brings back the sinister logic of the McCarthy era, when certain Americans were accused of being witting or unwitting vectors of communist propaganda. And it inexorably links with the idea of spreading a “conspiracy theory.”

It’s worth stopping for a moment to note that each sentence in the ABC News article is a paragraph. Single-sentence paragraphing is a journalistic technique designed to make reading easier and faster. Subtle writers and thinkers, such as Al Jazeera’s Marwan Bishara, can sometimes

employ the [technique](#) to create a percussive effect. But in times of heightened propaganda, the popular media resorts to the practice to short-circuit any temptation on the reader’s part to think, reason, compare ideas or analyze the facts. In journalistic terms, it’s the equivalent of aerial bombing as opposed to house-to-house combat.

The third sentence in the ABC News article delivers a new explosive payload, this time with appropriately added emotion (“heightened concern”) and a horrified hint at sophisticated strategy (“false flag”). It speaks of “heightened concern among U.S. and Ukrainian officials that Russia itself may be planning to deploy chemical or biological weapons against Ukrainian targets or as part of a so-called ‘false flag’ operation.”

In just three sentences, the article has mobilized the standard web of associations journalists use for propaganda masquerading as news. The vocabulary may include any of the following terms: “disinformation,” “fake news,” “false flag,” “conspiracy theory,” “propaganda,” “misinformation,” and, on occasion, the more traditional pair, “deception and lies.”

The article’s fourth sentence is a quote from Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky: “This makes me really worried because we’ve been repeatedly convinced if you want to know Russia’s plans, look at what Russia accuses others of.” That is a trope the Biden administration has been using throughout this controversy. Zelensky has read the script and the journalist is there to transcribe it.

Historical Note

The still-developing history of [COVID-19](#) that has been with us for nearly two and a half years should have taught us at least two things. Governments have a penchant for presenting a unique version of the truth that insists no other version is possible. They also excel at putting in place a system that suppresses any alternative account, especially if it appears to approach an inconvenient truth. Whether you prefer the wet market or the lab leak theory is still a matter of debate. Both narratives have life in them. In other words, either of them may or may not be true. For a year, thinking so was not permitted.

The second thing we should have learned is that the kind of experimentation done in biological and chemical research labs will always have both a defensive and an offensive potential. From a

scientific point of view, claiming that research is strictly limited to defensive applications makes no sense. Even if the instructions given to research teams explicitly focus on prevention, the work can at any moment be harnessed for offensive purposes. Victoria Nuland appeared to be saying just that when she expressed the fear that Russians (the bad guys) might seek to do something the Ukrainians and Americans (the good guys) would never allow themselves to do.

Or would they? That is the point Glenn Greenwald [made](#) in citing the history of the weaponized anthrax that created a wave of panic in the days and weeks following the 9/11 attacks in 2001. [George W. Bush’s](#) White House, followed by the media, clearly promoted the idea that the “evidence” (a note with the message

“Allah is Great”) pointed to the Middle East and specifically at Iraq’s Saddam Hussein. Even before 9/11, Bush’s White House had [told](#) the Pentagon to “accelerate planning for possible military action against Iraq.” In January 2002, the president officially launched the meme of “the axis of evil” that included Iraq, Iran and North Korea.

In retrospect, even though no legacy news media will admit this, the most credible interpretation of the anthrax attacks that killed five Americans was as a failed false flag operation designed to “prove” that Iraq was already using biological weapons. As the White House was preparing for war in Afghanistan, it sought a motive to include Iraq in the operations. The plan failed when it became undeniable that the strain of anthrax had been created in a military lab in the US.

Years later, the FBI “successfully” pinned the crime on a scientist at Fort Detrick called Bruce Ivins, the Lee Harvey Oswald of the anthrax attacks. The FBI was successful not in trying

Ivins but in pushing him to commit suicide, meaning there would be no review of the evidence or reflection on the motive for the attacks. This at least is the most likely explanation because it aligns a number of obvious and less obvious facts. Nevertheless, even this narrative accusing the Bush administration of engineering what was essentially a more lethal version of a Watergate-style crime may or may not be true.

The moral of all these stories is that in times of conflict, everything we hear or read should be reviewed with scrutiny and nothing taken at face value. And just as we have learned to live with unsolved — or rather artificially solved — assassinations of presidents, prominent politicians and civil rights leaders, we have to live with the fact that the authorities, with the complicity of an enterprising media skilled at guiding their audience’s perception, will never allow us to know the truth.

CHAPTER 25

A Russian-American Game of Mirrors

The game of emulation between cultures that seek to impose the idea of being opposites can turn them into identical twins.

March 23, 2022

Most of the propaganda Western media is now mass-producing focuses on the very real belligerence and lies of [Russian](#) President Vladimir Putin. Print and broadcast media have thrown themselves into a propaganda game serving to cast them in the noble role of prosecutors of an evildoer and defenders of victimized Ukrainians. Some academic-style publications have begun to join the fray, in an attempt to refine the propagandizing strategies.

One good example is an [article](#) in The American Purpose by the National Endowment for Democracy’s vice-president for studies and analysis, Christopher Walker. In the piece titled, “The Kleptocratic Sources of Russia’s Conduct,” Walker builds his case around the idea that “Vladimir Putin and his gang are fixated on wealth and power.” The author admits being inspired by political analyst Daniel Kimmage, who in 2009 produced what Walker terms a “clear-eyed assessment of Putin’s Russia.” He cites this wisdom he gleaned

from Kimmage: “The primary goal of the Russian elite is not to advance an abstract ideal of the national interest or restore some imagined Soviet idyll,” but “to retain its hold on money and power.”

Kimmage sums up one difficulty Americans have felt when dealing with Putin as an ideological adversary. Whereas the Soviet Union’s embrace of communism made the ideological gap visible even to moronic voters, Putin reigns over a nation that American consultants transformed in the 1990s into a capitalist paradise (i.e., a paradise for owners of capital). To distinguish Putin’s evil capitalism from America’s benevolent capitalism, Kimmage called the Russian version a “selectively capitalist kleptocracy.”

Walker notes that “the system of ‘selectively capitalist kleptocracy’ in Russia that Daniel Kimmage described” 13 years ago has now “evolved in ways that are even more threatening to democracy and its institutions.



Our diabolical definition:

Kleptocracy

Kleptocracy

The form of government universally adopted by all powerful nations at the end of the 20th century.

Contextual Note

An acerbic critic might be excused for not feeling particularly illuminated to learn that Putin and his cronies “are fixated on wealth and power.” Who would expect them to have a different philosophy and mindset than the leaders of every other powerful country in the world? The list includes

those that claim to be faultless democracies, committed to implementing the will of the people. The first among them is, of course, the [United States](#), but [France](#), the [United Kingdom](#) and others adhere to the same sets of values, even if each of them has worked out more

subtle ways of applying them. And, of course, Saudi Arabia stands at the head of everyone's class as the exemplar of leaderships fixated on wealth and power.

Kimmage's description of [Russia](#) as a "selectively capitalist kleptocracy" may be helpful in ways he may not have intended. Russia's selective capitalist kleptocracy contrasts with America's non-selectively capitalist kleptocracy. The real question turns around what it means to be selective or non-selective. Walker makes no attempt to differentiate the two because he believes the term kleptocracy only applies to Russia. But statistics about wealth inequality reveal that the American capitalist system has become a plutocracy that can make its own claim to being a kleptocracy.

In 1989, the top 10% of income earners in the United States earned 42% of the total [income](#), which is already significant. In 2016, they accounted for 50%. "By the start of 2021, the richest 1% of Americans held 32% of the nation's wealth," [according](#) to The New York Times. Between the start of 2020 and July 2021, "the richest 1% gained \$10 trillion" in accumulated wealth.

The gap is destined to keep widening. Unlike Putin's oligarchy, composed of his "selected" friends and other winners of Russia's industrial casino, the 1% in the US have non-selectively emerged to constitute a kleptocratic class that, thanks to a sophisticated system of governance, writes the laws, applies the rules and captures the new wealth that is programmed to gravitate towards them.

Kimmage's idea of a fixation "with wealth and power" correctly describes the mindset of the members of the American kleptocratic class, whether they are entrepreneurs with names like [Jeff Bezos](#), [Elon Musk](#), [Mark Zuckerberg](#) or Bill Gates, or politicians like [Bill Clinton](#) and [Barack Obama](#) who rose from poverty to convert power into riches and earn their place as servants of the kleptocratic class.

Unlike Putin's mafia-like political culture, the system in the US is subtle and sophisticated. It contains convenient paths to join the kleptocratic class, such as a Harvard or Stanford degree. But mostly it relies on fixation. Within the US kleptocratic class diversity exists. Some may be more focused on power (including cultural power) than wealth. But the fascination with both wealth and power is common to all. The system is built on the symmetrical principle that wealth feeds power and power feeds wealth.

Walker accuses Putin of another grave sin, beyond kleptomania but including it: expansionism. He denounces the "spread of the roots and branches of a transnational kleptocratic system that stretches well beyond the Russian Federation to pose a multidimensional threat to free societies."

How could a discerning reader not notice the dramatic irony here? Has Walker forgotten that Putin's complaint about NATO is that, despite promises made to the contrary, it has spent 30 years aggressively expanding toward Russia's most sensitive borders? Putin may be interested in expansion, but Eastern Europe has become a slow tug-of-war in which NATO, under US impulsion, has been the most active and insistent aggressor.

In short, Walker has produced an essay that correctly identifies very real political evils within the Russian system. But they share the same basic traits as the politico-economic culture of the West under US leadership. In an absolute failure of self-recognition, Walker somehow manages to avoid acknowledging his own culture's image reflected back to him into the mirror that has become the target of his complaints. That is because, in this article, he has focused on producing just one more example of what has now become the shameless, knee-jerk propaganda that pollutes Western media in this climate of an existential war from which the US has abstained, preferring to let the Ukrainians endure the sacrifice for the sake of American principles.

Historical Note

In the 17th century, European history began a radical transformation of its political institutions lasting roughly 300 years. After England's Puritans beheaded their king and declared a short-lived Commonwealth, European intellectuals began toying with an idea that would eventually lead to the triumph of the idea, if not

the reality of democracy, a system Winston Churchill generously called "the worst form of government except for all the others."

For the best part of the 19th and 20th centuries, representative democracy became the standard reference for everyone's idea of what an honest

government should be like, while struggling to find its footing with the concurrent rise of industrial capitalism. Capitalism generated huge inequality that seemed at least theoretically anomalous with the idea of democracy.

During the late 20th century, industrial capitalism that had previously focused on production, productivity and mass distribution, gave way to financial capitalism. This new version of capitalism focused uniquely on wealth and power. In other words, democracies switched their orientation from a belief in their citizens' anarchic quest for personal prosperity in the name of the "pursuit of happiness" to the elite's concentrated focus on the acquisition and accumulation of money and clout.

This new social model merged the logic of democratically designed institutions with economic and legal mechanisms that created a sophisticated system at the service of a small number of individuals who understood and controlled the levers of wealth and political power. Their major cultural achievement consisted of giving a sufficiently wide base to this

new form of plutocracy that disguised its kleptocratic reality.

For nearly half a century, the Cold War promoted the spectacle of a combat between democratic capitalism and autocratic communism. Both sides seized the opportunity to build military powerhouses that could provide an effective shelter for the kleptocratic class. Once the heresy of communism was banished from Russia, it could morph, under Boris Yeltsin and then Vladimir Putin, into a caricature of the much more subtle kleptocracy encapsulated in Reaganomics.

The Russian and American versions of economic power management shared the same orientations but deployed them in contrasting ways. Kleptocratic rule was at the core of both. Using a musical analogy, the American philharmonic version of kleptocracy was delivered in Carnegie Hall, with a fully orchestrated score. Russia offered an improvisational version delivered by local musicians in an animated tavern. In both cases, as the proverb says, "he who pays the piper calls the tune."

CHAPTER 26

The New York Times’ Anti-Russian Inquisition Cancels History (again)

When will New York Times readers begin to react against the practice of creating and publishing news that is clearly unfit to print?

April 20, 2022

For at least the past five years, The New York Times has put on display its total commitment to highlighting and exaggerating any story that appears, in any way, to implicate Russia in real or imaginary crimes against the United States, the Democratic party, CIA staff, members of prominent American political families or chosen strategic allies the State Department finds it convenient to influence, if not manipulate. Russia’s very real and very illegal invasion of Ukraine has brought about a monumental intensification of this commitment. We have witnessed an impressive multiplication of articles intended to buttress Ronald Reagan’s 40 year-old meme of “the evil empire.” It is an empire that used to be evil because it was a communist regime. Now it is evil simply because it is Russia.

Like one of Lockheed’s advanced radars ([SPY-7](#)), The Times has deployed its sensitive antennae not only to detect foreign threats but also to identify anything individual American citizens say that might somehow resemble assertions made by Russian officials. The Times commissioned a trio of writers — Paul Mozur, Steven Lee Myers and John Liu — to write an article on what the paper clearly believes to be a form of dangerous heresy, in which some of the individual heretics deserve to be named.

The title of the [article](#) — “China’s Echoes of Russia’s Alternate Reality Intensify Around the

World” — identifies the enemy, a pair of powerful nations, and specifies the crime. But the authors, in their investigative zeal that recalls the McCarthy era, also want their readers to understand that there are American accomplices in the deception who must be shamed and branded for deviating from the holy truth fed to The Times by the US State Department.

Complaining more generally about a “group of internet celebrities, pundits and influencers,” the three reporters focus on an investigative reporter known for his commitment to exposing flaws and even crimes in the recent history of US foreign policy. “One of them, Benjamin Norton, is a journalist who claimed that a coup sponsored by the United States government took place in Ukraine in 2014 and that U.S. officials had installed the leaders of the current Ukrainian government.” Times readers will immediately understand that Norton’s claim cannot be true for the simple reason that, as maintained by all media now reporting on the “unprovoked war” launched on February 24, 2022, there was no history that preceded that event.

Norton’s guilt is sealed in the following sentence: “He first explained the conspiracy theory on RT, although it was later picked up by Chinese state media and tweeted by accounts like Frontline.”



Our diabolical definition: Conspiracy theory

- Conspiracy theory
1. Any set of historical facts authoritative publications, such as The New York Times, deem inconsistent with the official unquestioned narrative provided to the journal by authorities in whose honesty and sincerity the journalists are instructed to have unassailable faith.
 2. The thesis developed in a text appearing in The New York Times authored by three or more journalists

Contextual Note

The Times authors are careful to mention that Norton delivered this analysis on RT, a channel broadcasting in the US produced by independent American news professionals but funded by the Russian government. Because of the Kremlin's funding, Times readers will immediately understand this to mean that Norton's discourse was scripted by Vladimir Putin himself. If, moreover, it was "picked up by Chinese state media" as they claim, that surely means it was edited by Xi Jinping. The noble Times trio of writers has identified a subtly complicit trio of international criminals: Vladimir Putin (Moscow) and Xi Jinping (Beijing) and Ben Norton (an American residing in Nicaragua).

The key words in the title of the article are carefully chosen: China, Echoes, Russia, alternate reality, intensify, and "around the World." The title seeks to inspire fear. It relies on associations that have been present in US culture for the better part of a century in the form of political paranoia. This is aggravated by the belief that China and Russia are not just enemies but symbols of every idea that challenges US identity. What either China or Russia wants separately is bad enough, but if one "echoes" the other while at the same time "intensifying" the "alternate reality," the threat must be seen as positively evil. Worse, it appears to be omnipresent thanks to the further affirmation that, like the COVID pandemic, it is now found "around the world." The title of the article alone is an exercise in conspiracy theory.

Conspiracy theories are meant by their promoters to sound sinister, but to a rational listener they often appear comic. QAnon inspired indignation and pity but never fear in those who understood

its delusional claims. Its absurdity was too patent. One could only laugh at its outlandish imaginings. To anyone curious enough to consult any of numerous available serious [sources](#) concerning Ukraine's recent [history](#), the Times authors' claim that Norton's account is a conspiracy theory is literally laughable, in the same way that QAnon is laughable. The difference is that QAnon never tried to hide behind the [status](#) of a *newspaper of record*.

But should one laugh or cry at the wilful ignorance of three journalists conspiring together? Norton's incriminating discourse occurred on the Russian state funded channel, RT, in an open interview with the "serious" satirical comic, Lee Camp. What he recounted was quite simply factual commentary. He has consistently made the same points in places where Putin is not the paymaster. So have many American geopolitical experts, including specialists of international affairs such as [Michael J. Brenner](#) or [John Mearsheimer](#) and [George Friedman](#), the latter two prominent conservative defenders of US hegemony. All of which proves one thing: that discourse disseminated on an outlet supposed to be biased and governed by the enemy may be true (Norton on RT) and discourse published in a paper of record supposedly committed to the objective reporting facts may be false (the three authors at The Times).

In other words, when a respectable newspaper's article specifically lamenting other people's propaganda reveals itself to be a far more shameless example of propaganda than the examples it criticizes, crying may well be a far more appropriate reaction than laughing.

Historical Note

In the history of The Times' years-long campaign to blame Russia for every political inconvenience experienced in the US, the patience shown by the paper's readers may seem just as inexplicable as the complacency of a well-paid editorial staff content with endlessly repeating the same misleading narrative and applying it to everything that moves. The Russiagate campaign that began in 2016 spawned a mountain of hype that built to a paroxysm around the Mueller report, whose inconclusive finale should have put to bed the very idea of blaming Donald Trump's victory on Russia. In private, executive editor Dean Baquet

confessed as much when, addressing the editorial staff, he [admitted](#), "We're a little tiny bit flat-footed. I mean, that's what happens when a story looks a certain way for two years. Right?"

That was in 2019, but even after acknowledging that the story no longer looked that "certain way", The Times continued to assign every scandal, whether caused by Cuban crickets (Havana Syndrome) or Hunter Biden, to the Russians. The newspaper quietly stopped making such accusations long after their source, the intelligence community, began hinting that there was no substance to them. More than a year ago

the CIA internally renamed Havana Syndrome “Anomalous Health Incidents.” And it was only this past January that the CIA admitted, after six years of suspecting Russia, that there was no reason to believe the incidents were provoked by a foreign attack. In its latest post on the subject, The Times nevertheless still took the trouble to say that some professionals (could they be conspiracy theorists?) found that thesis of Russian culpability “probable.”

For The Times, the Hunter Biden laptop story was “Russian disinformation” until, more than a year later, it was acknowledged to be authentic. But even then, its contents were deemed to be of no concern to readers of The Times or Washington Post. Megan McArdle at the Post insisted on [setting the record straight by daring to write](#) about the Post’s erroneous take in some detail. In so doing she was careful to call it a “a wee disinformation problem of our own.” She ends by absolving her entire corporate media sector, concluding that “some right-wing media have gone much further with crazy election conspiracies than any mainstream outlet ever did with Russophobia.” The disinformation of good media will always be “wee” in comparison to the bad media.

The Times and The Post are not unique in their persistence to blame Russia for everything bad that happens and their alacrity to suspect anyone who fails to adhere to their orthodoxy of being either a Russian agent (e.g. Tulsi Gabbard) or a conspiracy theorist (e.g. Ben Norton). All the corporate media in the US, as McArdle seems to admit, have fallen into line.

Not all contrary voices have been silenced. They tend to migrate to platforms such as Substack, Patreon and Rumble . Tolerating them allows the

powerful corporate media to proclaim that the noble ideal of freedom of expression still reigns, even at a time when a war in a distant nation in Eastern Europe provides a new “freedom fries” opportunity to cancel anyone who deviates from orthodoxy and has a chance of being listened to. In recent weeks, we have witnessed the active censorship of some of the nation’s most vociferous and well-informed independent voices. Whether it’s former Times journalist and Pulitzer prize winner Chris Hedges, former Marine intelligence officer and UN weapons inspector Scott Ritter, or even more obviously, Julian Assange, freedom of expression is being trampled if not effectively suppressed. Short of censorship, vilifying journalists such as Ben Norton ensures that they will be branded as dangerous and excluded from respectable platforms.

Even Elon Musk, who publicly supports the kind of militaristic [coup](#) the US engineered in Ukraine in 2013-14, claims his bid to acquire Twitter aims at reestablishing freedom of expression. It was Twitter that [suspended](#) Scott Ritter’s account twice in recent weeks for contradicting the White House’s account of the Bucha massacre. Interviewed about the Twitter suspension, Ritter gives his account of the meaning of free expression. “When you’re engaged in complicated issues,” he explains, “it’s not about being right. It’s about being motivated to promote the pursuit of truth.”

What was the motivation of the trio of Times writers who accused Ben Norton of promoting a conspiracy theory? Quite simply, the interest of their corporate masters, who appear guided by other considerations than promoting “the pursuit of truth.”

CHAPTER 27

How It Took Six Years to Achieve the Victory of Polarization

The Ukraine war offers an illustration of the triumph of a culture groomed to be receptive to propaganda.

June 22, 2022

Six years ago, the world's news cycle was treated to what in the movie business is called a double feature. It began with a British tragicomedy called *Brexit*, in the category of a heist drama, starring blonde bombshell Boris Johnson as the brains of a brilliantly designed and executed scam. It was followed by the American triumph of Donald Trump in a superhero movie with a psychological twist. Instead of rescuing the persecuted lady (played by Hillary Clinton), he focused on rescuing a border by building a wall.

Those two events symbolized, prolonged and accelerated a civilizational trend: the polarization of everything. The great advantage of polarization, especially in the consumer society, is that unlike the quandary of selecting a flavor of ice cream or a pair of shoes when the choice appears to be infinite, decision-making is simplified. With polarization you can simply decide what you want to reject, even if you are not convinced by what you choose.

In the culture wars that have been raging in the US, people simply have to decide which side they are on, even in issues of life and death. On the question of abortion, they must be either pro-choice or pro-life. There's nothing to think about other than which camp one must identify with. The same applies to gun control or choosing one's pronouns. In all cases, you will be on one side or the other. As Larry Beck has [maintained](#) in his columns, you have the simple choice of deciding whether the second amendment is about the rights of individual (originally white) citizens or the responsibility of states to organize militias. Once you have chosen your side, you know who your enemies are.

When simplistically contradictory debate replaces nuanced discussion or even argument, as the Monty Python [demonstrated](#) decades ago, the news media themselves are transformed into platforms for propaganda. Now that polarization

has become the official political religion, the narrow opening that once existed giving access to information and contributing to decision-making has closed. Why waste time weighing the facts or assessing their consequences when the conclusion is ready-made?

If 2016 got the momentum going, 2022 may be remembered as the year when, thanks to a polarizing war in a faraway land, facts and assessment of their consequences were officially banished from even the West's supposedly "serious" media. With news itself slinking away into the wings, propaganda could take center stage.

The Guardian is a serious newspaper that covers many non-controversial topics where the play of creative thinking is still allowed. But when it comes to the war in Ukraine, it has aligned with the Washington thesis, that humanity should be neatly divided into those who support Ukraine and those who support the Kremlin. We knew that would be true of *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, whose geopolitical lifeline is connected directly to the US intelligence community. But *The Guardian* appears too respectable not to follow suit and support the same narrative.

Last week *The Guardian* featured an [article](#) presenting as news the opinion of Admiral Sir Tony Radakin, head of the UK's armed forces. Sir Tony made the claim that Russia has 'strategically lost' the war in Ukraine. This assertion does not merit the title of "news." It is the statement of someone who has an obvious interest in promoting a particular official narrative.

At one point the article quotes Radakin's words: "This is a dreadful mistake by Russia. Russia will never take control of Ukraine."



Our diabolical definition:

Take control

A flexible verb collocation that suggests a spectrum of meanings that spans the extremes between mastering (good) and oppressing (bad), making it ideal for tendentious use in political contexts.

Take control

Contextual Note

Summarizing the admiral’s reasoning *The Guardian* explains that “the Russian president Vladimir Putin, had lost 25% of Russia’s land power for only ‘tiny’ gains and it would emerge a ‘more diminished power’ while strengthening Nato.” Since the beginning of the war, with precious little evidence, Western media have relentlessly developed the thesis that Russia was losing the war and Ukraine was winning. Almost every expert not involved in producing and disseminating propaganda – and never quoted in the corporate media – has been saying, “Not so fast!” Russia may in fact be slowly achieving its objectives.

Propaganda is the art of taking very real facts and citing other imaginary facts or intentions to create an emotionally explosive linguistic cocktail. That is what *The Guardian* has done here with Radakin’s narrative. The newspaper’s account begins with a simple, though not necessarily verified fact, that “the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, had lost 25% of Russia’s land power.”

The Guardian draws this seemingly logical conclusion: that Russia “would emerge a ‘more diminished power.’” This correlates precisely with Washington’s narrative about the West’s real goal in the conflict, as explained by US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin. Washington wants “to see Russia weakened.” There is a surreptitious semantic shift in both Radakin’s and *The Guardian*’s reasoning based precisely on the goal stated by Austin. Describing Russia’s material losses as implying that Russia is “a diminished power” is baseless.

Radakin cites a figure of 50,000 Russian casualties, which is impressive. It appears to derive from Ukrainian claims repeated by President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. On June 3, *Le Monde* offered a more serious evaluation of the current state of knowledge. “Nobody really knows,” it wrote, “how many combatants or civilians have died, and claims of casualties by government officials — who may sometimes be exaggerating or lowballing their figures for public relations reasons — are all but impossible to verify.”

But Radakin went further, claiming that “Russia has strategically lost already.” He cited Finland and Sweden “looking to join” NATO as proof. The average reader may take away the idea that Russia has already literally “lost” the war, which supposes the corollary: that Ukraine has won. But Radakin’s assertion can only work if we assume (i.e. speculate) that Russia was seeking to control Ukraine and neutralize NATO rather than “liberate” the Donbas in what it continues to claim is a “special military operation.”

Radakin avoids acknowledging that a country can strategically lose at various points and ultimately win a war. Assessing strategic success or failure requires knowing the enemy’s actual intentions. But propaganda is always about distorting the intentions on both sides. This includes one’s own intentions, which may be far less noble than announced, and the adversary’s intentions, which may be less evil than claimed.

Historical Note

As far as propaganda goes, the Ukraine war may occupy a unique place in history. War always and inevitably generates propaganda among the warring parties. But this may be the first time an overseas war with a complex historical background has produced such intensively developed propaganda in nations that have no direct stake in the issues behind the war. Unless, of course, they actually do have an unavowed stake in the war.

Propaganda in times of war can be described as the art of writing history before historians have the time or the means to understand its components. It sets in place a frame of reference that serves both a short-term and long-term objective. In the short term, it fixes a population's attention on a single and generally simplistic reading of responsibilities: who is to blame. With the liberty of a writer of creative fiction, it also describes the intentions on both sides, noble at home and devious on the enemy's side. This is designed to prevent the local population from critiquing its government or suspecting any real or imaginary ulterior motives. The public can also

be counted on to accept any sacrifice that is demanded.

In so doing, for the long term, it prepares the account that will appear in future history books. This is important for the continuity of the emotion we call patriotism. Patriotism is essential to the future security of the state. History will thus be prewritten in a way that promotes the idea that the nation has always looked after the interests of its people and defended their shared ideals.

One unanswered question for the West will depend on the duration and ultimate outcome of the Ukraine war. Given the tenuousness of the connection with Ukraine, will the populations of the West continue to perceive the war as serving their interests and ideals? That perception is beginning to erode in Europe as well as in the US. Whether it accelerates and intensifies or not, we can nevertheless be sure that the propaganda will still be there to "take control" of the people's emotions.

CHAPTER 28

Even the BBC Now Offers US-friendly Propaganda on Nancy Pelosi's Taiwan Melodrama

BBC keeps pace with US propaganda in crafting its own sanitized version of yet another foreign policy fiasco.

August 10, 2022

Though her precise intentions were a matter of speculation, Speaker Nancy Pelosi clearly crafted her feigned impromptu visit to Taiwan as a provocation. She knew it would trigger a reaction from China followed by the display of some kind of fireworks. The world – and especially most of Asia – watched in trepidation as it tried to contain fears that the fireworks might turn nuclear.

Could Pelosi really have failed to understand that her friendly gesture would unsettle the situation of the very people she believed she was helping? As one Taiwanese professor writing for *Newsweek* [explained](#), “Taiwan has been relegated to serving as the proving ground for Great Power insecurities.” Is that the role she imagines the Taiwanese would like to be playing in geopolitics?

Her president, Joe Biden, warned her of possible unintended consequences. Ironically, that warning produced unintended consequences for Biden himself, who was left looking like a president unable to get his own party's Congressional leader to make and enforce foreign policy, his job and not hers. What does it mean to be “leader of the free world”? In Ukraine the US is fully engaged in a war it refuses to fight but believes it will win. The vaunted “strategic ambiguity” that defines its Taiwan policy has become 100% ambiguity and 0% strategy. Apart from poking nuclear bears and hoping their excessive reaction will make the US look like an innocent victim to the outside world, does the US have any kind of consistent geopolitical strategy?

In such a context, how should Washington's allies react? Europe has shown solidarity on Ukraine, but that may already be fraying. At least the US can count on the UK to always be at its side. The automatic alignment shown by the then prime minister Tony Blair two decades ago, and still prime minister Boris Johnson this year, has cast Britain as the poodle of its former 13 colonies who have since expanded across the continent. It's slightly more surprising that the UK's “serious” (non-tabloid) media, with a reputation for independence, now follows suit, dutifully echoing its US counterparts. Just as the CIA has long been dictating the content of its reporting to *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, MI6 may be fulfilling the same function for the BBC, *The Guardian* and others in London.

Not only is there a noticeable “close alignment” between foreign policy in London and Washington” as the BBC [reported](#) last year, but the BBC itself appears to embrace that alignment. Reporting from Beijing on the consequences of Pelosi's visit, BBC's Stephen McDonnell offers a take on Pelosi's visit that paints China as the unique *provocateur*.

“Those with more militaristic tendencies in the upper echelons of power here,” McDonnell speculates, “must have secretly welcomed the visit by Ms Pelosi. It has provided an ideal excuse to ramp up the war games around Taiwan in preparation for what they see as the inevitable day when it will be seized by force.”



Our diabolical definition: Militaristic tendencies

A pathology shared not only by a majority of politicians in increasingly militarized nations but also by establishment and corporate news media as evidenced in its reporting

Militaristic tendencies

Contextual Note

Readers should notice that the title of McDonell's piece twists the logic of the entire episode by metaphorically describing it as a sporting event: "Pelosi visit: Taiwan puts the ball firmly in Xi Jinping's court." This framing curiously casts Taiwan in an active role. It hides the reality that neither China nor Taiwan sought to play an active role in this chain of events. Even Biden appeared to be passive. Pelosi is the one throwing unplayable balls in other people's courts.

To skirt any reference to the idea that Pelosi's visit was an unnecessary and risky provocation, McDonell redefines the drama as evidence of China's deep belligerence, implicitly contrasting it with the peaceful pursuit of democratic ideals by the US. In this showdown, China is the aggressive military power to be feared. Certainly not the US.

Less than a week later, McDonell is at it again. In a new [article](#), "China-Taiwan: What we learned from Beijing's drills around the island," McDonell returns to his mindreading of the Chinese elite. "The hardliners in the upper echelons of the Chinese Communist Party," he writes, "would probably be quite happy with where Nancy Pelosi's visit has left them." In the original article, he claimed that the Chinese "must have secretly welcomed the visit by Ms Pelosi." A claim based on "must have" and supported by "would probably be" is not journalism. It is the language of polemic and more specifically propaganda. The supposed probability of attributed emotions is not something honest reporters on the beat should be expected to cover.

Despite the lack of discernible consistency in Washington's foreign policy, McDonell proves consistent in his journalistic practices. Once again, he frames the drama in terms of sport. He claims that the Chinese militarized response to the provocation "is seen as a win for those who want it to happen." Pelosi's unneeded and unwanted diplomatic meddling is no longer a factor. It's all about Chinese belligerence.

McDonell thus proves his commitment to prolonging the style of propaganda that has accompanied the Russia-Ukraine conflict. It is all about denying that the US could ever provoke a drama elsewhere. If and when military hostilities do break out around Taiwan, thanks to reporters

like McDonell we can understand and endlessly repeat that it boils down to an "unprovoked" aggression by an autocratic government controlled by evil-minded "hardliners," Putin being the archetype of an autocratic hardliner.

This usefully simplifies the public's understanding of the Taiwan drama. On the "democratic" side, there was a "visit," a perfectly friendly gesture. Who doesn't like to be visited? On the autocratic side, there is – or will soon be – an unprovoked aggression. The template already exists, at least since February 24 of this year. But it has other precedents: the [incident](#) in the Gulf of Tonkin in 1964 or Saddam Hussein's terrifying (but non-existent) weapons of mass destruction. Autocracies – and never democracies – are addicted to starting unprovoked wars.

McDonell employs another trick that has become common thanks to the Ukraine conflict. It consists of the journalist leaping inside the brain of designated enemies to reveal their secret thoughts. We have seen endless examples in recent months of professional and citizen journalists alike telling us what Vladimir Putin (aka Peter the Great reborn) is really thinking. McDonell doesn't dare imagine what the obviously "inscrutable" Xi Jinping is thinking, but he does suppose that Xi was one of the clique in the "upper echelons of power" who "must have secretly welcomed the visit by Ms Pelosi."

Journalism about US foreign policy has become formulaic on both sides of the Atlantic. At least since George Bush's invasion of Iraq, *The New York Times* has been the consistent leader, probably creating the template McDonell could follow. This week, David Sanger and Amy Qin at *The New York Times* also invoke a sports metaphor in the title of their [article](#) written in the aftermath of the Pelosi visit: "As China Plans Drills Circling Taiwan, U.S. Officials Fear a Squeeze Play." The authors claim that US officials "worry that the events of the next few days could trigger an unintended confrontation between China's forces and Taiwan's." By "unintended" they mean accidental, as they cite imaginary scenarios of "a missile over the island" or "an incursion into disputed airspace" leading "to a midair conflict." In other words, if it happens, don't blame Pelosi. She had nothing to do with it. It's those inscrutable Chinese hardliners.

Historical Note

Most serious commentators acknowledge that, intentional or not, Pelosi's move was not just a friendly "visit" but a game-changer that marks a historical turning-point. The consensus, supported by [initiatives](#) currently in the US Congress towards recognizing Taiwan's independence, is that the "strategic ambiguity" initiated four decades ago has already morphed into an increasingly ambiguous non-strategy that is likely at some point to turn into conflict. The question will not be if, but on what scale?

This year, the media has done a superb job evacuating history from its reporting of the Ukraine conflict. Despite his status as a celebrity, Henry Kissinger's warnings that there are

historical factors complicating the narrative left the media indifferent. That same media has totally excluded authoritative and active voices such as John Mearsheimer – people who know the history – from any mention on its airwaves or in its columns.

As the tacit acceptance of "strategic ambiguity" fades, we can begin watching the construction of a new pseudo-historical narrative. If the Ukraine coverage is anything to go by, more speculation about the nature and depth of the Chinese enemy's private thoughts will replace any reference to actual historical reality. That is already borne out by McDonnell's reporting at the BBC.

CHAPTER 29

In Times of War History Goes Missing

*The fact that Zelenskyy was open to negotiations in March has not just been forgotten.
US media suppressed it as soon as it began to emerge.*

August 24, 2022

Over the past six months, most reporting on the Ukraine war in US media has failed to acknowledge or even consider any event that may have occurred prior to February 21 of this year. On that date Russian President Vladimir Putin delivered a lengthy televised disquisition on the history of relations between Russia and Ukraine. It was obvious to attentive observers that an invasion of the latter by the former was imminent.

Until then, despite Putin's protestations, history in the region had become irrelevant, if not non-existent in the eyes of American media. Of course, Russian troops had been massing at the border and the US expected an invasion, but that could be explained not by history but simply by the volatile personality of the man in the Kremlin. The US State Department could carry on patiently preparing for the inevitable. In fact, they had been planning the coming showdown for decades as they continued focusing on the integration of Ukraine into the Utopian space of the Western world. That integration represented a slow campaign led by a series of American presidents, including two Bushes, Bill Clinton, Barack Obama, Donald Trump and now Joe Biden. For Americans, who are usually hurried because of their belief that time is money, the process appeared to be comparable to the geological phenomenon of continental drift. It might take time but it was inevitable, an overseas version of manifest destiny.

Ukraine's drift from the Asian to the European continent and its integration into the Western sphere had been underway – and under US management – since 1991. Three decades is a long time, but so were the two decades spent playing soldier in Afghanistan. The Ukrainian drift was so slow that even the various revolutions – orange and otherwise – that dotted that historical span were made to appear to the public as little more than the natural earthquakes that always accompany continental drift.

In other words, Putin's history lesson had no meaning, since, as Caesar once said, the die was cast, already, back in 1991. The Soviet Union was

falling apart and, in the ripeness of time, Russia would meet the same fate. The result has been that in the six months since the invasion, there has been a blackout on all reference to the history that preceded the fatal date of February 24, when Russian troops began crossing the border.

Those who were paying attention in the period preceding the invasion will recall the attempts of the US State Department to predict the date while claiming that it would all begin with a false flag operation. One got the impression they were itching for the day to come, just to say, "I told you so." Observers may remember that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy at the time insisted that all would be well. As Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) once said, "the only thing to fear was fear itself." That was before the former actor's role switched – in the eyes of the media – from being the incarnation of FDR to that of Winston Churchill.

Now it appears, according to *The Washington Post*, that Zelenskyy's image among Ukrainians is being [degraded](#) to resembling something closer to Neville Chamberlain than either FDR or Churchill. The president's compatriots are now complaining of "his failure to share with Ukrainians details of repeated U.S. warnings that Russia planned to invade." They specifically regret that "Zelensky had prioritized the health of the economy over their well-being."

In another [article](#) concerning the lead-up to the war, *The Post* appears to be joining the chorus of those who blame Zelenskyy. While insisting that the US – as always – did the right thing, the Ukrainian government failed to follow orders. "Guys, dig the trenches!" one US official told the Ukrainians at the time. "I'm serious. Start digging trenches... You will be attacked. A large-scale attack, and you have to prepare for it." Instead, Zelenskyy insisted on remaining calm.

This reported dialogue concludes with a quote from Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba: "We asked [the Americans] for details; there were none."



Our diabolical definition:

Details

Facts that, for strategic reasons, must never be shared or explained by a party who is in a position of commanding power for fear of seeing one’s power diminish, even if those facts are essential to the well-being of those the power has committed to protect.

Details

Contextual Note

In the court of media law, Zelenskyy and his government have been judged guilty not just of failing to obey orders from the US but also of asking too many questions. Though the order was clear, no trenches were dug, despite a clear warning by the authoritative voice of the US State Department, who should be counted on to know when a war it has spent decades provoking is likely to occur. In such cases, no details are needed.

It is therefore high time to reassess Zelenskyy’s role in a major historical event that has split a formerly globalized world into two opposing camps, both economically and politically. This drift in the unexpected hero’s image merits the

attention of the pundits and indeed of every politician and media commentator. It should now be obvious that this is the US State Department’s war to have and to hold, till death do Ukrainians part.

A tide has turned. French President Emmanuel Macron, who made headlines attempting to precipitate negotiations between Ukraine and Russia, is now resigned to spending his time [persuading](#) France’s citizenry to accept the economic burden this has created as “the price of freedom.” He finally realizes that once the US State Department has defined the course of history there is nothing more to say.

Historical Note

When the history of the Ukraine war is finally written, if ever that day comes, some of the “details” of events back in February and March may prove intriguing. On March 7, ABC News managed to secure an exclusive [interview](#) with Zelenskyy conducted by celebrity news anchor, David Muir. Referring to a Russian proposal containing “conditions to end this war,” Muir solicited the president’s reaction. The proposal included changing the constitution to prevent Ukraine from joining NATO, the recognition of Crimea as a Russian territory and the independence of Donetsk and Luhansk.

“Are you willing to go along with all three of those conditions?” Muir solemnly asks. “What is

your message to Vladimir Putin right now?” Zelenskyy replies that he is “ready for a dialogue” but not “capitulation.” He adds that NATO is no longer an issue. In other words, the Russian proposal is worth considering.

Muir, however, can’t take peace for an answer. Reformulating Zelenskyy’s response, he turns it on its head. After repeating the three conditions and insisting that this interview should be viewed as a “message” to Vladimir Putin, Muir contradicts everything his interviewee has just said. He calls the proposal “a non-starter” and asserts that Zelenskyy is “not willing to [inaudible] those three conditions right now.” Zelenskyy then disobediently reaffirms his

willingness to negotiate, saying, “we can discuss and find a compromise.”

An honest journalist seeking to clarify the issues surrounding a catastrophic war would then try to dig into the “details” concerning a prospect for ending the war. But Muir had no time either to be honest or to explore a hypothesis that he understood the US State Department was seeking to avoid even considering. This state of affairs became evident later in the month of March, when UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson was sent to Kyiv to personally deliver the message to Zelenskyy. Under no circumstances will there be negotiations. This is a war that Joe Biden, even today, informs us the US will continue to [support](#) “as long as it takes.”

As usual, Biden has provided no details defining what the “it” in “as long as it takes” might mean.

Presumably this refers, as Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin has hinted, to “weakening” Russia. Or, as Biden himself suggested with his famous [quote](#), “this man cannot remain in power,” regime change. We will only know for sure the day Biden can stand in front of a banner marked, “Mission accomplished.”

The most astonishing thing about the Muir interview doesn’t concern Biden or Zelenskyy. It’s the spectacle of a journalist directly contradicting the president of a sovereign nation, twisting his words to correlate with an interpretation he clearly received from the State Department. To some this may seem like a detail, but is there any better proof that corporate media in the US is not just connected to the deep state. It is the deep state.

CHAPTER 30

The Truth About the “Havana Syndrome”

CNN produces a hyperreal drama that The New York Times (NYT) promoted for years. Note that the NYT precipitously abandoned covering this hyperreality earlier this year when the CIA punctured its long-running obsession.

October 12, 2022

In September, CNN proudly announced the latest example of its always deeply researched and carefully resourced investigative journalism. It proposed a CNN Special Report with the title: “Immaculate Concussion: The Truth Behind Havana Syndrome.” It then explained that “CNN Chief Medical Correspondent Dr. Sanjay Gupta investigates one of the most complex and controversial health mysteries in recent years known as ‘Havana Syndrome.’”

The special report purportedly aimed at clarifying for an ignorant public one of the most troubling unsolved crimes of our times. It began in 2016 and kept the audiences of most of the corporate media in the US on the edge of its seats for nearly six years. The Havana Syndrome offered spectators and readers the thrill of a James Bond movie, with spies in a tropical setting, to which it added some speculative science fiction [focused](#) on imaginary weapons thought to be capable of projecting “pulsed electromagnetic energy.”

CNN’s promotional [pitch](#) promises to deliver not only much needed insight, but also boldly promises to reveal the most elusive goals of any journalist: “the truth.” That’s what may have impelled an experimental psychologist, professor emeritus at the United States Air Force Academy, by the name of George Mastroianni, to take the trouble to watch and then critique this epitome of CNN’s investigative journalism. He published his review in an [article](#) in *The Times of Israel*.

Mastroianni begins by reminding his audience that “CNN has been an energetic booster of the

hypothesis that Havana Syndrome is caused by a Russian-produced and -employed directed-energy weapon.” He quite legitimately finds this shocking, given that earlier this year, in a rare act of truth-telling, the CIA officially concluded that the vast majority cases of the “Havana Syndrome” could be explained by purely psychological factors.

CNN clearly isn’t about to let the truth distract it from its mission to entertain, especially if the entertainment involves a horror story the blame for which can be attributed to Russia. To make the most scientifically credible case, the network mobilized its celebrity medical expert, Dr Sanjay Gupta, who apparently sees no need to agree with – or even acknowledge – the CIA’s negative assessment of his network’s preferred thesis. “Perhaps Dr. Gupta and the researchers at CNN missed all this,” Mastroianni speculates. Aware of the CIA’s own conclusions, he expresses his astonishment that over the entire program the word “psychogenic” is evoked only twice, and in both cases dismissively.

Psychogenic phenomena are far from rare and have been well documented in multiple contexts. No expert would dispute their existence, whereas most of the technical experts asked to weigh in on the Havana Syndrome have disputed the very existence of the type of weapon that would have been required to produce the effects associated with the Havana Syndrome. Mastroianni notes that Dr. Gupta “has chosen to ignore this plausible alternative explanation because it is, he says, ‘a controversial conclusion.’”

Our diabolical definition:

Controversial conclusion

Any reasoned and probably truthful judgment that contradicts an official orthodoxy or embarrasses those who proclaim that orthodoxy.

Contextual Note

Readers of Fair Observer's Devil's Dictionary will recognize a theme we have been following for more than three years. Without neglecting other media, including CNN, we have focused on the sedulous attempts of *The New York Times* (NYT) to instill in its readers' minds a fear-inspiring belief in Russia's capacity to directly attack their brains. The message we highlighted [here](#) in 2019, and [here](#) in 2020, was perfectly consistent with much of NYT's reporting during the Trump years. It is a well-documented truth that the "newspaper of record" had adopted an editorial policy dedicated to promoting the idea of a sinister cabal linking President Donald Trump to Russia's President Vladimir Putin. The public needed to understand that the diabolical pair of presidents were united in a mission to undermine the unimpeachably virtuous Democratic party of Hillary Clinton.

The New York Times finally abandoned its crusade after the CIA's announcement in January that neither Russia nor any foreign government was the culprit. In contrast, CNN never gives up. A year ago the network put on public display what was perhaps the most convincing demonstration of its incapacity to understand the very news it reports. In an interview with one of the victims, CNN's journalist framed her [question](#) in these terms: "You hear other accounts in other

countries, in adversarial countries where this is taking place and then you have the FBI's behavioral analysis unit initially saying this was mass psychological illness. Others say it's groupthink. I even read an account suggesting it could be crickets that's calling all of this. Why was it so hard to take these allegations and these claims seriously?"

The journalist takes "these claims" to be the truth, especially because they were situated in "adversarial countries." She even seems to be unaware of the surprisingly objective [reporting](#) of *The New York Times* back in January 2019 on the scientific explanation of crickets as the source of the initial "sonic attack" in Cuba. She disdainfully dismisses the psychogenic argument, which had been well [established](#) by 2020.

Instead, interviewing her carefully chosen victim, she goes to the core of her thesis. "We still don't have the exact culprit, right, but given your expertise in the CIA, your background and those that you have spoken with and your colleagues that have experienced this as well, do you think that Russia is behind this?" Of course, he believes that Russia is the "most likely" suspect. No reasonable person could consider that a "controversial conclusion." Case closed.

Historical Note

In January 2022 the CIA dared to announce – and *The New York Times* dared to [print](#) – the news that no evidence exists of an attack by Russia or any other foreign government. This put an end to NYT's repeated accusations of Russian malfeasance. Since that date, the Gray Lady has limited its coverage to simply objective reporting on the CIA's policy of monetary compensation for the victims.

In contrast, CNN wasn't about to abandon a theme its audience had become addicted to. In its pitch for the program in September featuring Dr Gupta, CNN asked this question: "But what causes the mysterious illness?" Instead of following the CIA's and NYT's lead, it answered its own question: "Dr. David Relman, who co-authored the influential American Academy of Sciences report, concluded that microwave energy is a plausible explanation." "Plausible" is among the most abused words in politics. So long

as something dismissed as unlikely may have even marginal plausibility, CNN will milk it until the udder goes dry.

Anyone who has followed the 6 year-old narrative that has literally played out as a collective psychodrama will understand that everything about the Havana Syndrome, apart from the actual suffering of the victims, belongs to manufactured world of Cold War style propaganda. The CIA played its role for as long as it could. Some in the media have persisted. But the Havana Syndrome, which the CIA two years ago had already reclassified as an "Anomalous Health Incident," has now been radically eclipsed by the war in Ukraine. Who needs this phony tale of "electromagnetic energy?" The much more spectacular war in Ukraine has turned the legacy media into a well-oiled permanent propaganda machine worthy of George Orwell's Oceania.

On January 20, 2022, *The New York Times* finally felt obliged to report the disappointing news from the CIA that Russia didn't do it. In an article with the title "Most 'Havana Syndrome' Cases Unlikely Caused by Foreign Power, C.I.A. Says," Julian E Barnes, who for the past two or three years has consistently pushed his readers to suspect Russia, changed course and revealed the CIA's assessment "that most cases of the mysterious ailments known as Havana syndrome are unlikely to have been caused by Russia or another foreign adversary," What CNN's Dr Gupta called a "controversial conclusion" could now be acknowledged as the probable (not just plausible) truth.

In August of this year, Barnes returned to the theme, this time echoing the realistic conclusions of the CIA: "Many of the 1,000 cases examined by the agency were explained by previously undiagnosed health issues or environmental factors, officials said. Some were possibly psychosomatic or so-called functional illness."

So at least one tediously repeated bit of fake news has disappeared from the *NYT*. This leaves CNN with a virtual monopoly on a story that no longer hangs together with any credibility. Given everything else that's going on at [CNN](#), it probably makes some sense.

CHAPTER 31

Is Thinking Now Forbidden in the Media?

Journalism has developed a serious allergy to critical thinking. Why reflect on anything when facts with no evidence to back them up become the media’s shared orthodoxy?

October 27, 2022

A Daily Devil’s Dictionary entry from June 2018 proposed its revised definition of one of the most common verbs in the English language: [think](#). Because many observers have noticed a growing deficit of thinking in the legacy media, it may be time to revisit that definition. A second look tells

us that the definition of four years ago still stands today. It has perhaps acquired supplementary meaning. Why? Because the act of thinking appears not only to have disappeared from most forms of public discourse, in the world of journalism it has become anathema.

Our diabolical definition:

Think

Think

What people say they are doing when they have no means of knowing but are asked to speak their mind

Contextual Note

After Covid-19, the withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Ukraine war, how many of us remember those halcyon days of 2018? It was a highly entertaining 24/7 hyperreality show presented by President Donald Trump. The president’s every utterance spawned ironic commentaries on traditional and social media alike. Late night comics relaxed as the White House provided them with the bulk of their material already in comic form. Trump talked, bragged, blustered, opined, disparaged, mocked, repeated himself endlessly and dutifully mangled anything intended to sound logical. His followers applauded. His opponents relished the opportunity to either despise him or laugh at him, usually both at the same time.

Trump taught the world of journalism a lesson they have since taken to heart. It doesn’t matter what you say, so long as it makes no attempt to take the form of coherent thought. Provoke, slander, upset, undermine, cancel and complain. It is no longer “say what you think,” but rather “demonstrate clearly that you don’t need to think.” The easiest way to do that is to endlessly repeat your group’s talking points and fill your discourse with the same clichés over and over again.

How does this work? This past Sunday on *Meet the Press* Liz Cheney and journalist Chuck Todd gave a full demonstration. Cheney accused House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy of being “the leader of the pro-Putin wing of my party.” She complained he was sending the message that “America no longer stands for freedom.” McCarthy’s sin? Daring to question the Biden administration’s policy of unlimited military aid to Ukraine. Cheney’s interviewer, Chuck Todd, immediately agreed. No need to debate the issue. It’s all about freedom.

Cheney’s “standing for freedom” trope has been used to justify every brutal war and act of subterfuge conducted by the US military and its intelligence services over the past century, at least ever since President Woodrow Wilson launched his slogan, “Make the world safe for democracy.” Actually, Wilson didn’t invent the slogan. He paid the father of public relations, Edward [Bernays](#), to think up the cliché for him.

Since Trump’s replacement by Joe Biden, a politician who generally prefers plagiarism to original thought, Trump’s template for public discourse has prevailed. The noble act known as “speaking one’s mind” has literally become mindless, devoid of thinking. That has obviously become the norm for social media, where most

discourse takes the form of either provocative assertions or assertive provocations.

The culture of social media has now infected popular journalism. Facts are routinely dislocated from their context and turned into slogans. A convenient suspicion or accusation, however unfounded, when endlessly repeated becomes a fact. In democracies, consumers of the news traditionally expected journalists not just to report facts but to offer a modicum of thinking. No fact makes sense outside of the context that spawns it. Facts without context easily become shared lies.

The video creator Matt Orfalea put together a compelling [compilation](#) that demonstrates how quickly the refusal to put facts in perspective leads to misinformation. His video brings together countless examples of reporting on the

mystery of who sabotaged the Nord Stream pipelines in the Baltic Sea in September. Though some admit that they have reached their conclusions “with no evidence,” the thesis they unanimously assert — that Russia did it — is most likely false. The preponderance of [evidence](#) points in a different direction. That’s what happens when journalists refuse to ask questions but eagerly provide pre-crafted answers. No thinking required.

It isn’t difficult to understand why. Journalists are attached to two things far more important than thought itself: a career and a boss. Their boss almost always has a boss, who goes by the name of either sponsor or corporate master (the owner of the media company). He who pays the piper calls the tune. Careers in journalism are hard to come by. Once you have one, your basic duty — to yourself and your family — is to hold onto it.

Historical Note

This is a moment of history unlike any other. The closest comparison may be with the outbreak of World War I. In 1914 a series of ambiguous alliances turned a local incident in Sarajevo into a four-year global conflagration that shattered the comfortable ideals of civilization and progress elaborated by Europeans in the 19th century.

Wars spawn propaganda. Global wars spread it further. That is why Woodrow Wilson appealed to Bernays, the future author of the book, [Propaganda](#), to devise his all-purpose slogan designed to implant the belief that the unique goal of US foreign policy is the promotion of democracy.

The Ukraine war has spawned a pandemic of propaganda. The profoundly ambiguous situation of a complex nation is presented as a showdown between democracy and authoritarianism. Almost all “respectable” journalism has bought into that simplistic contrast. One [article](#) in *The Street*, by Luc Olinga, bearing the title, “Elon Musk Takes a Stand on a Leadership Change in Russia.” takes the exercise to particularly absurd lengths.

Although the title invites the reader to expect some kind of serious debate involving Musk, the first fourteen paragraphs serve up a potted history of the Ukraine conflict before even mentioning Elon’s name. Those paragraphs accumulate all the standard banalities and brainless clichés of today’s unthinking journalistic culture. “Western democracies,” one paragraph

begins, “portray it as a fight for freedom against authoritarianism. Ukraine represents democracy and Russia represents tyranny.” If he were alive to read it, Edward Bernays would recognize that the fruit of his labors a century ago is still ripening on the vine.

The article includes other banalities that are technically false, such as this: “The Russian president Vladimir Putin had promised to the Russians a rapid war which would result in a quick victory.” Putin made no promises. But the idea that he had “promised” a quick victory is now part of the litany of “truths” shared by Western media.

A little later we read, “the recapture of certain towns from the Russians has galvanized the morale of the [Ukrainian] troops.” Has it? Or has it simply galvanized journalists working 7,000 miles away from the battlefield? And so it goes on. Nothing new, nothing examined critically, nothing but repeated ideas.

When Olinga finally gets to Elon Musk, he attempts to explain away the heretical position the world’s wealthiest man seems to be taking. Musk dared to suggest that a negotiated settlement of the war might be a reasonable course of action, in the interest of avoiding a nuclear holocaust. Blasphemy, the Ukraine government and its allies cried as soon as Musk tweeted his idea.

At this point, the journalist doesn't know where to turn. As thinking is no longer a feature of his job profile, Olinga focuses on Musk's contention that it would be illusory to believe that eliminating Putin would solve the problem. Musk jokes that "the Kremlin is not the Nice Guy Olympics."

Olinga then absurdly concludes the article by pointing out that the Olympic Games serve as an opportunity for marketing a nation's brand. After all, *The Street* is focused on markets, so what

better way to conclude than register Musk's comments on marketing? But that isn't what Musk is saying. Musk's point is that there are no nice guys you can count on in the Kremlin. Putin may be one of the nicer ones. In other words, "better the devil you know than the devil you don't know."

That's the kind of mistake that can occur when a journalist has been programmed not to think but to repeat accepted banalities.

CHAPTER 32

A Tragic and a Comic Withdrawal in the News

After the withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan last year, a trivial case of withdrawal rocked the Beltway establishment last week.

November 2, 2022

Withdrawal is once again in the headlines. The very idea of withdrawal has become so significant Noam Chomsky and Vijay Prashad recently released a book with *The Withdrawal* as its title. The pretext for their book was the shocking end in the summer of 2021 to what had become known as a “forever war,” the result of Joe Biden’s decision to withdraw all remaining American troops and personnel from Afghanistan following 20 years of occupation.

The idea of withdrawal, in a different sense, returned to the news last week when the Progressive Caucus committed to recommending engaging in a process that would permit withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukraine. Their party, the Democrats, called foul, accusing

them of the crime of propagating Russian propaganda and compromising the noble march to an American victory in Ukraine to which the Biden administration was committed. Ashamed of their evident impudence, the same progressives decided on withdrawal. Barely 20 hours (and not 20 years) after releasing their letter, they decided to withdraw the recommendation.

In a [statement](#) to the press Congresswoman Pramila Jayapal retracted the contents of the letter issued the previous day. It began with this sentence: “The Congressional Progressive Caucus hereby withdraws its recent letter to the White House regarding Ukraine,””



Our diabolical definition:

Withdraw

Attempt to erase an embarrassing event from history, a common temptation of politicians in cultures that have every reason to be embarrassed by their history

Contextual Note

The word withdrawal has always had a special place in US culture. The two examples cited above already provide a radical contrast. The Biden administration’s act of withdrawal referred to removing troops committed to a military operation. Such withdrawals usually occur in foreign lands, where the case for being there is often contestable. Congresswoman Jayapal’s

version of withdrawal belongs to the domain of law, specifically contract law. It concerns a proposal that suggests a formal commitment. Because proposals have not become acts, they can be withdrawn with no legal consequences. That does not, however, mean there will not be other consequences, both political and moral.

The word withdrawal figures prominently in two other important areas of interest in contemporary US culture: banking and drug addiction. In banking withdrawal signifies recovering money that one has deposited. This is a legitimate, voluntary act of management of one's private property, nothing to be ashamed of. In the case of drug addiction, withdrawal is the opposite of a voluntary act. It refers to the painful process of deprivation when something one formerly depended on disappears.

In all these cases withdrawal signifies a radical change in the status quo. It often contains an association with pain. In the cases of military withdrawal or withdrawal of a proposition, shame may attach to it. The shame may be such that the best thing to hope for after the withdrawal is to stop thinking about why it took place, to erase it from memory, eliminate it from public discourse.

The problem is that not everyone forgets. History has a way of making its claims and coming back to bite the forgetful. By the end of 2021 US media had stopped wondering or worrying about the fiasco of the summer in Afghanistan. But it was still a visible part of his legacy. What could be done? Strategists know that the best way to get the media and the people to forget about a shameful past war would be to engage in a new one defined by its moral purpose. The Biden administration then realized that with a little prodding, Russia's President Vladimir Putin – the man Americans other than Donald Trump love to hate – might provide the perfect pretext as he was massing troops along the Ukrainian border. Situations like that can be routinely avoided

through a traditional device called diplomacy. The Russians even proposed a plan in December. But playing polite with Russia will always be bad for electoral politics at home.

The strategy worked. Afghanistan disappeared into the shadows of poorly digested history. Ukraine emerged to mobilize Americans' sense of global purpose. And the media complied. In response to Putin's initiative in December, ABC news called the plan "sweeping" as a means of dismissing it. But the point of diplomacy is not to accept or reject a plan, but to negotiate its terms so they appear less sweeping.

During a recent trip to India, I discovered that Biden's chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan remains fresh in the memory of the average informed citizen. That fiasco has come to symbolize American indifference to the people it claims to assist. In contrast, for Americans that memory has been superseded and in effect canceled by this year's engagement in a new war that conveniently restores the image of a nation always focused on other people's needs.

The great songwriter Cole Porter acknowledged this aspect of US culture in the lyrics of his song, "It's all right with me." In the refrain of a song about a man seducing a woman he included these two [lines](#): "There's someone I'm trying so hard to forget/ Don't you want to forget someone, too?" Whether it's love or war, forgetting is always an efficient way out. That may help explain why Americans have no time for history. They're always looking forward to the next affair and seeking ways to forget the last one.

Historical Note

Ever since the first day of Russia's invasion on February 24, history has been absent from the media's accounts. Not because no one has been keeping track of events in Ukraine over the past 30 years. Rather because the media has been, as Cole Porter said, "trying so hard to forget" the same stories it had actually covered over the past eight years.

During that period from 2014 to 2021, there were no romantic illusions about Ukraine's pristine democratic virtues and its commitment to the vaunted "rule of law" by which Western governments swear, even when invading other sovereign states, as President George W Bush did in 2003. The illusions about Ukraine's political purity and unimpeachable benevolence have only emerged since the Russian invasion.

In the days following the 2014 coup, the BBC [documented](#) what it called the "sinister" trends accompanying the Maidan revolution. These included "troops with dubious iconography" described as "the most organized and the most effective" actors in the coup. In August 2014 an [article](#) in *Foreign Policy*, a publication hardly given to echoing Putin's propaganda, noted that "Pro-Russian forces have said they are fighting against Ukrainian nationalists and 'fascists' in the conflict, and in the case of Azov and other battalions, these claims are essentially true."

In 2018, a Reuters [article](#) by Josh Cohen began with this sentence: "As Ukraine's struggle against Russia and its proxies continues, Kiev must also contend with a growing problem behind the front

lines: far-right vigilantes who are willing to use intimidation and even violence to advance their agendas, and who often do so with the tacit approval of law enforcement agencies.”

Forgetting these and other examples of recent history reported frankly and honestly by Western media suddenly became a duty of the very media that once proudly produced and broadcast them. The Western governments now involved in promoting Ukraine's resistance and the media themselves began trying hard to forget. And they succeeded. They could count on the ingrained indifference of the citizens of a consumer society to anything that resembles historical truth.

We will shortly be [reviewing](#) *War in Ukraine, Making Sense of a Senseless Conflict* by Medea Benjamin and Nicolas Davies. The authors have

helpfully presented a thorough and in-depth account of all the essential background the average citizen will need to understand, first, that there is a history behind the Ukraine war and, second, what that history includes. Chomsky's and Prashad's book looks through the history of US policy since the Cold War that provides further insight.

Acknowledging that history is real may be the hardest task for Americans. A history that includes slavery and genocide of the native population is better forgotten than remembered. When reminded of it, Americans prefer to just call that the irrelevant past. What is relevant is the noble causes we embrace today, such as deploying our weapons to inflict as much damage as possible on Russians.

CHAPTER 33

The Tyranny of Mainstream Media’s Optimized Audiences

Matt Taibbi teaches us about the failure of mainstream media to defend or even represent the truth. Does the truth even have a leg to stand on when social media remains its only partially reliable source?

December 07, 2022

The independent journalist Matt Taibbi, who has done some of the best investigative journalism of the past couple of decades as well as producing occasional satire and entertaining takes on the news in various media formats, participated last week in the prestigious Munk Debates in Toronto Canada. The announced theme of this debate – which we here at Fair Observer Devil’s Dictionary must heartily applaud – was: “Be it resolved, don’t trust mainstream media.”

Along with author Douglas Murray, Taibbi took on two redoubtable opponents: New Yorker contributor and best-selling author Malcolm

Gladwell and New York Times columnist Michelle Goldberg. In Taibbi’s opening remarks he complains of the dominant trend in the media today, the fact that they “feed the audience news you know they will like.” The trend is well known in the world of social media. The result is spaces that have been characterized variously as “digital silos,” “echo chambers” and “filter bubbles.” Taibbi notes that the effect has begun to resemble a pandemic and has infected the popular media. “Now everyone does it,” he complains. “Whether it’s Fox, or MSNBC, or CNN, or the Washington Post, nearly all Western media outlets are in the demographic-hunting business.”



Our diabolical definition:

Demographic-hunting

Demographic-hunting

A sport with fatal consequences for its victims (and secondarily for the mental health of its practitioners) that has replaced the outdated idea of responding to the interest of the entire community

Contextual Note

Any responsible citizen can understand why appealing to the interests of the public, even a restricted public, can be a good strategy and even a noble act. But things change when the effort turns to pandering or appealing to the lowest common denominator. Taibbi makes this explicit when he analyzes how this translates into editorial policy. “With editors now more concerned with retaining the audience than getting things right, the defining characteristic across the business —

from right to left — is inaccuracy,” he explains. Inaccuracy itself comes in many flavors, from inadvertent misinformation to casual lying and, increasingly, to provocative, strategic prevarication.

Taibbi even invents a convenient name for the practice: “Call it the ‘audience-optimization’ model,” he tells us. He then explains that “instead of starting with a story and following the facts,

you start with what pleases your audience, and work backward to the story.” In other words, this is a recipe not for reporting but for writing fiction. The news must literally entertain, which in this case means “entertain a belief” or maintain ideas that may be true or false. In the age of social media, the prevalence of ideas that are likely to be false tends to be greater than in the past, when echo chambers that reinforced false ideas were not so easily available.

The very idea of audience optimization thus conveys the idea that the story is optimized (i.e. distorted) to correlate with the predilections of the audience. In the best cases, the audience is interested in and demands truth. But the world we live in today is submitted to two sources of pressure that see the truth as secondary. The first is any structure of authority, which includes the

government, an entity that reflects the various influences that make politics and the exercise of power possible, as well as the “official” or “respectable” media who monopolize for their own benefit the voice of information and, implicitly, truth. The second source of pressure is social media, designed literally to create and define optimized audiences.

The problem clearly lies with what our society accepts as authority. And it boils down to a three-way competition between government, established media and social media. Truth will always tend to be the victim lost in the maelstrom.

Oh, and, by the way, Taibbi and Murray [won](#) the debate by a whopping 39%.

Historical Note

In the older traditions of storytelling, audiences were generally aware of the distinction between stories, on the one hand, meant to illustrate and teach, or simply to dramatize conflict and human psychology, and others meant to recount or report facts. Shakespeare’s audiences certainly understood that his history plays were plays rather than history.

No more than Rembrandt depicting Aristotle in the gown of a contemporary Dutch burger, did Shakespeare dress his Caesar, Antony or Cleopatra in Roman togas or Egyptian tunics when he staged his Roman plays at the Globe Theater. His actors wore the accouterments of their age. Like Rembrandt’s Aristotle, they wore costumes symbolizing their status in contemporary culture and highlighting aspects of character. This tradition of using costumes to draw attention to characters and their relationships dates at least back to the ancient Greeks, whose actors never showed their faces, constantly hidden behind masks.

These theatrical traditions were meant to create distance between representation and reality, to reinforce the distinction between what we feel and what we know. We may even suppose that the artists and storytellers of those pre-modern times understood the social and political danger of confusing what can be recounted with any kind of scientific notion of “the truth.” Perhaps the most regrettable innovation of the age of science — that began around Shakespeare’s time and became radically transformed by technology after the invention of photography in the 19th century — is the culture of illusion that we now live in. I

like to call it hyperreality. Whether intentional or not, it effectively erases the visible barrier that storytellers once consciously constructed between the stories we tell ourselves and the idea we have of reality. I would go further and suggest that today’s hyperreality makes it possible by the abuse of technology to interfere with our ability not only to perceive reality but to understand what perception is and how it works.

There can be no doubt that William Randolph Hearst’s “yellow journalism” played up sensation, willingly exaggerated dramas that need not be based on fact and demonstrated that it was possible to lead the US into a war with long-lasting global consequences. In that sense, Taibbi is describing a phenomenon perfectly rooted in the great American journalistic tradition, a phenomenon that is once again visible today in the coverage of the war in Ukraine.

Matthew McIntosh, who calls himself a “public historian,” on a [website](#) that offers a “blend of news and ideas,” describes Hearst as someone who in the 1890s became “a war hawk” with regard to Spain’s nearby colony, Cuba. He used his newspapers to incite the US to war. “Stories of Cuban virtue and Spanish brutality soon dominated his front page,” McIntosh recounts. The US of course did go to war after which it controlled Cuba for six decades.

McIntosh also reassuringly reports that “yellow journalism faded in the twentieth century, partly due to Pulitzer’s direction to return his paper to a higher quality of objectivity in reporting.” But looking at today’s reporting in what McIntosh may characterize as the very “unyellow” *The New*

York Times or *The Washington Post*, his sentence about Hearst's "front page" could be applied to our modern press. It only requires substituting "Ukrainian" for "Cuban" and "Russian" for "Spanish."

It is also worth noting that to avoid misrepresenting the truth, the yellow press in Hearst's and Pulitzer's day knew how to choose its verbs. In the headlines above we see the affirmation that Roosevelt was "convinced" of something that may or may not have been true and that "naval officers think" the Spanish blew up the Maine. As Shakespeare's Hamlet said, "There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so."

This technique of orienting the thinking (i.e. perception) of readers is used today even more boldly, particularly when we hear about what military experts or intelligence sources "think" or

"assess." After all, they have the kind of technology that distinguishes between what is true and false. Even in the past few days, the story concerning Hunter Biden's laptop that dates from the runup to the 2020 election is back in the news. No less than 51 intelligence experts claimed it was "Russian disinformation." Some of those same intelligence sources were on television using their expertise to tell what they certainly knew was a lie.

So the comforting moral to this story is that modern electronic technology is not to blame for the sins that were visible in yellow journalism more than a century ago. It's just that those sins are being carried out with a far more professional look. The costumes of those intelligence sources you see on TV – the John Brenners and James Clappers – look so realistic you might even believe they were real.

CHAPTER 34

Can Healthy Conflict Exist in an Unhealthy Society?

Polarization has become a way of life in the US, undermining the essential requirement of democracy: constructive dialogue. It has bred a culture that rewards individuals who cultivate the destructive art of high conflict.

December 14, 2022

Everyone believes in democracy, right? I mean, everyone in the West or in various other civilized places. Didn't Winston Churchill make that clear when he noted that "Democracy is the worst system, except all the others?" Actually, he didn't invent that [idea](#). He only repeated it. What he did say about democracy was slightly less flattering and somewhat elitist: "The best argument against Democracy is a five-minute conversation with the average voter."

Churchill's cynical remark illustrates how unstable the idea of democracy can be. People who live in democracies quite legitimately want to believe in its virtues. We are taught to believe that democracy has in some sense been chosen by the gods of history, who have been at work in recent centuries installing a process we like to call "progress."

The process began 400 years ago with the acceptance of the nation state as the unique template for political systems legitimately claiming to exercise authority over the territories within their recognized borders. Because the populations of modern states are far more diverse and mobile than in the past, the idea of democratic legitimacy became inevitable.

Some states not only make no pretension of believing in democracy but resolutely refuse to practice it or pay lip service to it. Politicians in the West brand them autocracies. Some of these non-democracies are run by a hereditary clan, in the mode of a traditional monarchy. Others may be governed by a ruling party, such as China or Vietnam. Then again, most Western democracies are also governed by a ruling party, the difference being that the identity of that party sometimes varies.

This historical reminder is meant to clarify what has become the most significant challenge to

democracy in today's political culture. It is neither the threat of democracy being hijacked by a democratically elected autocrat; even less, the fear of military domination by autocratic rivals. Democracy has its own much more inherent problems, the most significant of which is the growing inability of populations within our democracies to achieve a stable consensus on matters that affect the very fabric of society. In the US, the prime example of this is the phenomenon of "culture wars."

Democracy implies dialogue and compromise. Dialogue means open-ended discussion and collaborative exploration of the means to achieving commonly agreed ends. Compromise need not mean defeat or submission for any of the concerned parties. Dialogue permits the articulation and juxtaposition of interests: in musical terms, the integration of dissonance into the dynamics of social harmony. As the Elizabethan poet-musician Thomas Dowland [wrote](#): "These dull notes we sing discords need for helps to grace them." For serious musicians, dissonance is a necessary feature permitting melodic and harmonic resolution.

Today public dialogue, including the acceptance and embrace of dissonance, has degenerated into pure acrimony. It has become polarized along lines far more arbitrary and cruel than the politics of the worst autocracy.

Amanda Ripley is the author of the book of *High Conflict: Why We Get Trapped — and How We Get Out*. In an article for *The Washington Post*, she [focuses](#) on this very phenomenon. "Many of our disagreements are manufactured," Ripley explains. "We are being played by conflict entrepreneurs — people and companies who exploit conflict for their own dysfunctional ends, and it is getting harder and harder to avoid their phantom traps and have the right debate."



Our diabolical definition:
Conflict entrepreneurs

Conflict entrepreneurs

In an evolved capitalist society, anyone who takes the culture of competition seriously, turning business or even personal relations into something that fluctuates between the logic of team sports and total war.

Contextual Note

Ripley sums up a recent report on the trend towards polarization in these terms: “American parents, politicians and educators are having the wrong fights with the wrong people about the wrong things.” That sounds dire. Even parents have become conflict entrepreneurs.

In her book, Ripley examines multiple cases of conflict and highlights the difference between what she calls “high conflict” and “healthy conflict.” The latter contains something like Dowland’s discords. It stimulates dialogue and points in the direction of collaboration aimed at problem-solving. In an article for the *Harvard Business Review*, Ripley defines high conflict as “the kind that takes on a life of its own, and eventually, leaves almost everyone worse off.”

Now why, you might ask, would anyone want to do something that leaves everyone worse off? Ripley lays the blame on a category of personality she calls conflict entrepreneurs and defines as “people who inflame conflict for their own ends. Sometimes they do this for profit, but more often for attention or power.” They are guilty of “dividing the world cleanly (usually, too cleanly) into good versus evil.” They stoke “us-versus-them thinking.” They are binary thinkers.

In her article in *The Washington Post*, she proposes a remedy. “The immediate solution to this warped reality is for all of us to reject zero-sum thinking. Any journalist, politician or activist who neatly splices the world into good and evil represents a threat to our pluralistic way of life... A democracy cannot survive in the modern age alongside that kind of false fear.”

Historical Note

Ripley’s work as a consultant focuses on curing or eliminating the contamination caused by conflict entrepreneurs in organizations and smaller social units, including families. This is typically a case-by-case approach to what she nevertheless recognizes as a more general social problem. “Nearly all Americans,” she pertinently notes, “including the less politically engaged and more moderate among us, are seeing a distorted reality, and are worrying more than they ought to about a threat that is not really a threat.”

The “distorted reality” she highlights points to a wider historical reality that merits a macro analysis capable of going beyond her micro focus

on individual conflict entrepreneurs. The “distorted reality” she mentions is the systemic hyperreality our civilization has fabricated to put the majority to sleep in our evolved consumer society. In other words, the essential problem lies not in the personalities of these toxic individuals, but in the values of a society that consciously or unconsciously encourages this type of behavior.

Her vocabulary is revealing. An entrepreneur is someone who, to achieve particular economic goals, competes against the rest of the world, ideally to secure monopolistic control. The image our culture has created of the entrepreneur is unambiguously positive, reflecting one of our

core values. Entrepreneurship is a virtuous activity, even when we acknowledge that the motivation behind it is compatible with the impulses of greed and aggression.

In an [interview](#) with journalist Robert Scheer, Gabriel Maté, author of the book, *The Myth of Normal: Trauma, Illness and Healing in a Toxic Culture*, addresses the question from a broader point of view. He provides some complementary insight that may help to explain the growing numbers of conflict entrepreneurs Ripley hopes to cure one by one.

“Globalized neoliberal culture,” Maté explains, “has been exported to the rest of the world and is creating a worldwide crisis and as a result, health is suffering internationally. It’s systemic and it’s globalized.” Maté gives a specific historic context to the degradation that began some 40 years ago and accelerated during the 1990s and infected both parties in the US. “Clinton, for all his liberal rhetoric and his progressive and somewhat attractive image,” Maté explains “really was swept along by the same neoliberal wind that began under Reagan and Thatcher.”

Citing the documented link between experiencing racism and the pathology of asthma among American blacks, Maté claims that it would be wrong to separate “individual pathology in an isolated organ” and a broader phenomenon of “social malaise.” Quoting a 19th century German physician possibly inspired by military theorist, Carl Von Clausewitz, he affirms, “politics is only the continuation of medicine on a larger scale.”

For democracy to thrive or even survive, it will require more than Ripley’s micro approach. In his interview, Maté is asked whether the system can reform itself. He responds that it’s theoretically possible but “at a certain point, in its decline, almost every system comes to a kind of sclerotic relationship to itself.” He adds this thought: “I think in a system where people are so committed to power and profit, I don’t know that they still have the capacity to reform the system in order to save itself.”

Perhaps we need to create a generation of entrepreneurs who understand that there are other goals than “power and profit.”

PART VI

Ukraine War

CHAPTER 35

The Contradictory Musings of Biden’s Speculator of State

Antony Blinken expresses Washington’s confrontational attitude with no capacity to confront.

March 02, 2022

In the world of both journalism and diplomacy, words often take on a meaning that turns out to be close to the opposite of their official definition in the dictionary.

In an article published on the day of [Russia’s](#) invasion of [Ukraine](#), CBS

News [summed](#) up journalist Norah O’Donnell’s conversation with the top foreign policy official in the US in these words: “Secretary of State Antony Blinken said it is obvious Russian President Vladimir Putin has goals beyond Ukraine and may have other countries in his sights.”



Our diabolical definition:

Obvious

Obvious

Possibly true, maybe even unlikely, but what the speaker hopes people will believe is true

Contextual Note

With everyone in government and the media speculating about — rather than thinking through — the real reasons behind the Russian assault on Ukraine, CBS News, like most of US legacy media, wants its readers to focus on the most extreme hypothesis. That is the gift any war offers to the media: the possibility of not just imagining but supposing the worst.

It works because the idea that [Vladimir Putin](#) has designs that go beyond Ukraine is certainly credible. But it has no basis in fact. In wartime, the media, even more than politicians, will always do their damndest to damn beyond redemption the party designated as the enemy. One crime is never enough. The public must be encouraged to

believe that other, more serious crimes are in the offing. That will incite the audience to return for more.

The article is about [Antony Blinken’s](#) understanding of the conflict, but he never used the word “obvious.” Instead, he speculated out loud about what an evil dictator might be thinking. “He’s made clear,” Blinken asserted without citing evidence, “that he’d like to reconstitute the Soviet empire.” He then shifts to a less extreme interpretation. “Short of that,” Blinken continues, “he’d like to reassert a sphere of influence around neighboring countries that were once part of the Soviet bloc.” And he ends with what is a perfectly reasonable assumption:

“And short of that, he’d like to make sure that all of these countries are somehow neutral.”

Blinken’s contention that Putin’s “made clear” his intention to restore the Soviet empire undoubtedly prompted CBS’ choice of the word “obvious,” which is a bold exaggeration. But Blinken is exaggerating when he claims it’s “clear.” Something is clear if it is visible, with no obstacle that prevents us from seeing it. In this case, clarity would exist if Putin had ever expressed that intention. But that has never happened. So, what Blinken claims to be clear is mere suspicion.

Blinken cleverly evokes “the Soviet empire” that he is convinced Putin wants to restore. The Soviet Union was a communist dictatorship, the ideological enemy of the [United States](#). But Putin is an oligarchic capitalist who inherited a Russia whose economy was transformed by American consultants after the fall of the Soviet Union. Blinken knows that Americans are horrified by any association with communism and quasi-religiously “believe in” capitalism, even oligarchic capitalism, since the US has produced its own version of that. Blinken’s statement can therefore be read as clever State Department propaganda. He designed it to evoke emotions that are inappropriate to the actual context.

Things become linguistically more interesting when Blinken goes on to offer a softer reading of Putin’s intention, introduced by “short of that.” He descends the ladder of horror by moving from “empire” to “sphere of influence.” It is far less fear-inspiring, but he continues to evoke the communist threat by alluding to “countries that were once part of the Soviet bloc.”

The next step down the ladder, again introduced by “short of that,” reads like a puzzling anticlimax. “And short of that,” Blinken says, “he’d like to make sure that all of these countries are somehow neutral.” Is he suggesting that the neutrality of surrounding nations is the equivalent of reconstituting the Soviet Union? If they are truly neutral, like Switzerland or Finland, they belong to no bloc. Blinken apparently wants the undiscerning listener to assume that being neutral is just a lighter, perhaps less constraining version of being part of a new Soviet empire.

This kind of speculation based on mental reflexes acquired during the [Cold War](#) may seem odd for another reason. Blinken was speaking at the very moment when actual hostilities were breaking out. In the previous weeks, discussions between the two sides had taken place, which meant they could continue. Things changed, of course, at the beginning of last week when Putin [declared](#), “I deem it necessary to make a decision that should

have been made a long time ago — to immediately recognize the independence and sovereignty of the Donetsk People’s Republic and the Luhansk People’s Republic.”

That statement on February 21 should have created a new sense of urgency in Washington to prevent the worst from happening by precipitating new negotiations. The opposite happened. Russia’s overtures calling for a summit were refused and Blinken’s planned meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov was canceled.

The West and indeed the world were legitimately shocked by Putin’s move. It violated a basic principle of international law and contradicted the terms of the Minsk agreement that looked forward to defining the future autonomy of Donetsk and Luhansk. On that score, Putin was not wrong when he noted that the definition and application of that autonomy should have taken place much earlier, indeed, “a long time ago.”

What Blinken described corresponds to an imaginary negotiation with Putin, who may have adopted a strategy of beginning with an extreme position by demanding a return to a post-Yalta order in Eastern Europe. Negotiators typically exaggerate at the beginning, proposing what they never expect to achieve, to arrive at something that will be deemed acceptable. It’s called giving ground. Blinken’s first “short of that” anticipates what Putin might do once the extreme position is rejected. His second “short of that” tells us what Blinken imagines Putin’s next concession might be. That takes him to the neutrality hypothesis, which in fact, as everyone knows, was Putin’s red line.

If Blinken can imagine that kind of negotiating process, why didn’t he choose to engage in it? The answer lies in his implicit assessment of the idea of neutrality. Neutrality is not an option. It confirms what many suspect: the US adheres to a confrontational model of international relations. It is the George W. Bush doctrine: if you are not with us, you are against us. That applies even to neutral countries.

The CBS article contains some other interesting curiosities. After explaining exactly what Putin is secretly thinking, at one point, Blinken objects: “I can’t begin to get into his head.” When queried about what the intelligence community has provided to Blinken to justify what he says he thinks is in Putin’s head, he replies, “You don’t need intelligence to tell you that that’s exactly what President Putin wants.” Blinken wants us to believe that he understands everything but knows nothing.

Historical Note

Could it be that in this age of social media, where everyone lives comfortably in their silo, we have heard the death knell of even the idea of negotiation, a practice that has been respected in international relations throughout human history? Or is it an effect of historically informed cynicism due to the fact that, in many cases, negotiations have failed to prevent the unthinkable? Everyone remembers Neville Chamberlain's negotiation with Adolf Hitler in 1938 that seemed to succeed until it became clear that it had failed.

Or is it just a US phenomenon? Emmanuel Macron of France and Olaf Scholz of Germany made last-minute attempts to negotiate with Vladimir Putin, but they lacked the authority of the US.

In recent decades, US culture appears to have created a kind of reflex that consists of refusing to enter into dialogue whenever one has the feeling that the other party doesn't share the same ideas or opinions. This aversion to sitting down

and sorting out major problems may be an indirect consequence of the wokeness wars, which inevitably lead to the conclusion that the other side will always be unenlightened and incorrigible. Discussion serves no purpose, especially since those committed to a fixed position live in fear of hearing something that might modulate their enthusiasm.

Today's confrontational culture in the US reveals that Americans are now more interested in making a display of their moral indignation at people who look, think or act differently than they are in trying to understand, let alone iron out their differences. In the past, John F. Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev solved major problems through dialogue. Ronald Reagan and Leonid Brezhnev talked [constructively](#), as did Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev. And then there was the extraordinary case of Richard Nixon and Mao Zedong.

We are now in the age of [Karens](#). Even our political leaders have identified with that culture.

CHAPTER 36

When Will We Know the Bleeding Truth?

Some serious commentators are coming to grips with the tsunami of misinformation in the media..

March 30, 2022

In an article for Bloomberg, British historian Niall Ferguson expresses his strategic **insight** into the real motives of the Biden administration concerning the course of the war in **Ukraine**. Officially, the US claims to be acting in the interest of Ukraine’s defense in an effort to support democracy and reaffirm the principle of sovereignty that permits any country to join an antiquated military alliance directed by the **United States**, on the other side of a distant ocean.

Less officially, President **Joe Biden** has been emphasizing the emotional side of US motivation when he wants to turn **Russia** into a “pariah,” while branding its president as a “war criminal” and a “murderer.” Biden’s rhetoric indicates clearly that whatever purely legal and moral point the United States cites to justify its massive financial engagement in the war, its true motivation reflects a vigilante mindset focused on regime change.

The administration denies it has regime change on its mind. But Ferguson cites a senior administration official who privately confided that Biden’s “end game now ... is the end of Putin regime.” The historian concludes that rather than seek a negotiated end to the war, the US “intends to keep this war going.”

As usual in foreign policy matters, Ferguson notes a certain convergence of viewpoint from his own government. He quotes an anonymous source affirming that the United Kingdom’s “No. 1 option is for the conflict to be extended and thereby bleed Putin.” A little later in the article, Ferguson qualifies as “archetypal Realpolitik” the American intent “to allow the carnage in Ukraine to continue; to sit back and watch the heroic Ukrainians ‘bleed Russia dry.’”



Our diabolical definition:

Bleed (a country)

To encourage and prolong an unnecessary and unjustified conflict in the interest of sucking the life out of the political establishment of a declared enemy, a process that usually automatically implies sucking the life out of at least one other country, including eventually one’s own

Bleed (a country)

Contextual Note

Ferguson dares to question the dominant belief in the US that bleeding Russia is a recipe for success. “Prolonging the war runs the risk not just of leaving tens of thousands of Ukrainians dead and millions homeless, but

also of handing Putin something that he can plausibly present at home as victory,” he writes.

When the focus is both on bleeding and prolonging the combat, there is a strong

likelihood that the bleeding will be shared. If a boxer sees a cut over his opponent's eye, he may strategically focus all his punches on the opponent's face hoping for a technical knockout. But, by focusing on the loss of blood, he may drop his guard with the risk of getting knocked out or opening his own bleeding wound.

"I fail to see in current Western strategizing any real recognition of how badly this war could go for Ukraine in the coming weeks," Ferguson observes. The reason may simply be that the hyperreal moment the Western world is now living through is proving too enjoyable to critique, at least for the media. The more horror stories of assaults on innocent civilians make their way into the headlines, the more the media can play the morally satisfying game of: here's one more reason to hate [Vladimir Putin](#).

If the White House is focused, as it now appears, not on saving Ukrainian democracy but on bleeding Russia, all the stories of Russian abuse of brave civilians are designed with the purpose of prolonging the war, in the hope that, discredited by Putin's failure to break Ukraine's

resistance, Russians will revolt and depose the evil dictator. In the meantime, those Ukrainians who manage to survive are being asked to play the supporting role of watching their country reduced to ruins.

Ferguson speculates that US strategists have come to "think of the conflict as a mere sub-plot in Cold War II, a struggle in which China is our real opponent." That would be an ambitious plan, riddled with complexity. But the Biden administration has demonstrated its incapacity to deal effectively even with straightforward issues, from passing the Build Back Better framework in the US to managing a pandemic.

The Ukraine situation involves geopolitics, the global economy and, even more profoundly, the changing image of US power felt by populations and governments across the globe. At the end of his article, the historian describes this as an example of dangerous overreach, claiming that "the Biden administration is making a colossal mistake in thinking that it can protract the war in Ukraine, bleed Russia dry, topple Putin and signal to China to keep its hands off Taiwan."

Historical Note

One salient truth about Americans' perception of the Ukraine War should be evident to everyone. Today's media thoroughly understands the American public's insatiable appetite for the right kind of misinformation. Niall Ferguson makes the point that the US government may nevertheless be inept in providing it. The history of misinformation in times of war over the past century should provide some clues.

In 1935, Major General Smedley Butler wrote a book describing the logic behind his own service on several continents. Its title was "War Is a Racket." He described the American vision of war as a quest for corporate profit. He tried to warn the nation of the inhumanity of such an approach to the use of military force. He manifestly failed because he was late to the game. Back in 1917, Edward Bernays, the "father of Public Relations," seduced the American public into believing that the only motive for the nation's invasions and wars is the spreading of democracy. It was Bernays who provided Woodrow Wilson with the slogan "make the world safe for democracy."

For the rest of his life, Bernays not only helped private companies boost their brands, he also consulted on foreign policy to justify regime

change when it threatened a customer's racket. In 1953, working for United Fruit, he collaborated with President Dwight Eisenhower's secretary of state, John Foster Dulles, and his brother, CIA Director Allen Dulles, to overthrow Jacobo Arbenz, the elected president of Guatemala. Arbenz had a plan to redistribute to the country's impoverished peasants "unused land" monopolized by United Fruit. In a 2007 article for the Financial Times, Peter Chapman [recounted](#) that both Dulles brothers were "legal advisers" to United Fruit. Chapman notes that the company was also involved in the 1961 CIA-led Bay of Pigs invasion.

In other words, concerning their impact on the American psyche, Bernays the PR man defeated Butler, celebrated at the time as America's greatest living war hero. His fame was such that a group of powerful fascist-leaning businessmen tried to recruit him to overthrow President Franklin D. Roosevelt in the infamous 1933 "[Business Plot](#)."

Americans continue to rally around Bernays' genius for reducing a suspect ideology to a catchy slogan. American interventions abroad are framed as noble efforts to support democracy and promote American business (Butler called

them rackets). It's a population of avid consumers of the media's plentiful supply of misinformation.

There are nevertheless odd moments when real information breaks through, though it rarely leaves much lasting impact. Last week, the Pentagon leaked news [contradicting](#) the narrative the State Department, the intelligence community and US media have unanimously adopted and promoted. In the Defense Department's view, Russia's invasion is not an example of unrestrained sadism toward the Ukrainian people. "As destructive as the Ukraine war is," Newsweek reports, "Russia is causing less damage and killing fewer civilians than it could, U.S. intelligence experts say."

The US military establishment calls it the "Russian leader's strategic balancing act,"

observing that Russia has acted with restraint. It realistically assesses that, far from seeking to subdue and conquer Ukraine, Putin's "goal is to take enough territory on the ground to have something to negotiate with, while putting the government of Ukraine in a position where they have to negotiate."

Ferguson has gleaned his own evidence concerning US and UK strategy that "helps explain, among other things, the lack of any diplomatic effort by the U.S. to secure a cease-fire. It also explains the readiness of President Joe Biden to call Putin a war criminal." Peace is no objective. Punishment is. This is a case where the Pentagon has received the message of Smedley Butler and dares to contradict an administration guided by the logic of Edward Bernays.

CHAPTER 37

Is Ukraine about Weathering a Storm?

Smedley Butler called war a racket. It has become an addiction and the dealers are profiting handsomely.

May 18, 2022

The United States claims to be the exceptional nation. Perhaps what makes it particularly exceptional is not just its belief in but also its consistent commitment to two things that are only seemingly contradictory: democracy and war. Most people, after all, associate democracy with ideas such as justice, fairness, tolerance, peace and collective problem-solving.

The US constitution formalized the idea of democracy around the notion of “general welfare” and social peace by removing the privilege of a superior class that commands the destiny of ordinary citizens. History over the past two centuries shows that there are other ways of granting quasi-absolute social control to self-conscious elites, even when the existence of a ruling class is denied and the formal institutions defining that class abolished. Generations of politicians have put in place a looser system that nevertheless ends up duplicating the same class logic.

Democracies will always struggle with the preservation of democracy's promise of equality and justice. As for war, it came into existence thanks to a war of independence that Americans still refer to as “the revolutionary war.” To the extent that the war liberated a European population from the thralls of monarchy, it was revolutionary in its effect, if not in its intent. The colonists simply wanted to run their own affairs. They did not seek specifically to overturn monarchy itself. Congress even [debated](#) “as to whether the delegates should address the president as ‘His Majesty the President’ or ‘His Highness the President of the United States of America, and Protector of their Liberties.’” Oliver Cromwell, who beheaded a king, bore the title of Lord Protector of the Commonwealth.

Even if the founders of the nation were not revolutionaries, the idea of revolution became quickly woven into the core of American mythology. Revolution signifies a moment of instantaneous and irreversible progress. It became conflated with the religious tradition imported into North America by England's

Puritan settlers who framed human struggle as the battle by the forces of good to rid the world of evil. This idea underlies the constantly repeated — indeed obsessive — commitment of every State Department in modern times to the goal of “regime change” in nations across the surface of the globe that fail to bend to American will. And Americans continue to believe that the destruction they foment is “for their sake, not ours.”

Myths have great power over people's minds. But let's try to be honest. Whether it's Cuba, Vietnam, Iraq, Iran, Venezuela, Libya or Russia today, American officials have consistently engaged in subversion and war in their territories justified by the belief that these other people were itching for “our freedoms.” In every case, the authorities predict that once the source of evil infecting those foreign environments is surgically removed, an era of happiness and prosperity will follow, for which those they have liberated will be eternally grateful.

One advantage of turning every rivalry into a contest between good and evil, at least for the media, is that wars can appear to share the same logic as a sporting event. Everything hangs on the suspense concerning who will be the winner and who the loser. In sport, there is no sense of nuance or subtle reasoning about who deserves to win. It's only about fan loyalty. If wars that pit complex interests on both sides against one another can be reduced to events whose significance is reduced to winning or losing, governments prosecuting those wars and their media are spared the tedium of examining historical reality. We are currently living through such a moment in which the media have invited history to sit in the background and remain silent.

The New York Times offers a perfect example of the media's framing of war in the same terms as a sporting event. In the email announcing its daily [newsletter](#) titled *Morning Briefing*, Times journalist Natasha Frost announces “We're covering forecasts for the war in Ukraine.



Our diabolical definition:

Forecast

An attempt to avoid wasting time explaining background and complex considerations of cause and effect by focusing attention on a unique final, decisive outcome.

Contextual Note

The idea of forecasting is most often associated with either the weather, financial planning or the outcomes of sporting events. A “forecast for the war in Ukraine” could theoretically include the idea of negotiations that seek to define a compromise based on the multiple parameters of a complex geopolitical situation. But the Biden administration has avoided even invoking such a hypothesis. Its British lackey — the generally clueless British Prime Minister Boris Johnson — gave Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy his marching orders when he recently told the Ukrainian president not to [negotiate](#) and added, “if you are ready to sign any agreement with him, then we will not be part of it.” The “we” obviously included if not designated the US. In other words, you can be Putin’s puppet or — “like myself” Johnson might have added — accept to be the vassal of the US, for the mere cost of years of war and bloodshed.

Negotiations have become an officially forbidden topic, even to mention out loud. The American media understands that and has dutifully followed suit. “As the war in Ukraine settles into a prolonged conflict that may last years,” one sentence in NYT’s Morning Brief begins. The nation that brutally settled the Western frontier clearly feels comfortable with the idea of “settling” at the expense of other people’s lives.

Historical Note

More than two centuries ago, [Thomas Jefferson](#) feared the worst for his own nation. “Experience hath shewn,” he wrote, “that even under the best forms of government those

The Times either accepts the utter lack of agency of Ukraine to reach a settlement, or it is blindly repeating what the US government tells it. This is not what one usually expects from a “paper of record.” The consensus, now presented by the media devoid of analysis to support or even explain it, seems to be that the US is at [war](#) with Russia and Ukraine is simply the chosen battlefield.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, after pushing through a monumental \$40 billion aid package for Ukraine, offered this trite explanation, in a language usually reserved only for Israel. “With this aid package, America sends a resounding message to the world of our unwavering determination to stand with the courageous people of Ukraine until victory is won.” Alluding to the central tenet of US culture – “Time is money” — she explained why there is no need either to explain afterwards or even think before making a decision. “Time is of the essence — and we cannot afford to wait.” What she really means is that there’s a midterm election in November and the Democratic candidates are counting on two things: the generous funding provided by defense contractors and the voters’ taste for tough-talking administrations.

entrusted with power have, in time, and by slow operations, perverted it into tyranny.”

It may sound extreme to call the US in the 21st century a tyranny, but the system of decision-

making clearly has little to do with implementing the will of the people. There is a ruling class of political decision-makers — a combination of economic influence and politicians playing scripted parts — that will always prevail. Even the decisions to promote a state of war designed to be indefinitely prolonged will never be reported as a decision. Instead the media treats it as a quasi inevitable fact. In his book *Propaganda*, Edward Bernays, the father of public relations and counselor of CEOs and presidents, admiringly described the phenomenon in these terms: “We are dominated by the relatively small number of persons who understand the mental processes and social patterns of the masses. It is they who pull the wires which control the public mind.”

The Second World War taught the US a lesson that it never fails to apply. For all its innovative concern for social justice, Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal never managed to put a failing capitalist economy back on the rails. The war effort that the US began in 1941 miraculously cured the cancer of the Depression. At the end of the war, the US was the world's creditor. Investing in more war, sometimes hot (Korea and Vietnam), sometimes Cold — and using the almighty dollar to the full extent of its coercive

power — the US permanently structured its economy around not just the military sector, but the military mindset. The traditional isolationism of a majority of the political class melted away as the American empire spread, first to aggressively counter communism and then to crush any form of resistance to its model of technology-fueled consumerism.

But all is not well. With the latest exaggeration in these policies, embodied in the \$40 billion contribution to a distant war, the public is beginning to notice Washington's addiction to military adventure, even if it focuses on producing a war economy without putting boots on the ground. People are still dying, property is being destroyed and valuable resources are being diverted from addressing the true issues to invented ones, in this case, invented precisely for the sake of reinforcing a military economy and mindset.

In such circumstances, Jefferson invoked a weather forecast to predict the political future when he [wrote](#), “I hold it that a little rebellion now and then is a good thing, & as necessary in the political world as storms in the physical.”

CHAPTER 38

Assessing the True Meaning of US Generosity in Ukraine

Evaluating the effects of the first Lend-Lease law passed 82 years ago can help to make sense of the 2022 version.

June 08, 2022

The US Congress recently voted to authorize \$40 billion to the war effort in Ukraine. The resulting [legislation](#) that provides the framework for this allocation bears the title, “Ukraine Democracy Defense Lend-Lease Act of 2022.” On its website, the Department of Defense explains that the law “authorizes the administration, through fiscal year 2023 to lend or lease military equipment to Ukraine and other Eastern European countries.”

Most commentators have focused on the enormity of the sums of money involved. Along with the \$13 billion already pledged to Ukraine’s military effort, this means that in just a few months the US [contribution](#) (\$54 billion and counting) to Ukraine’s war effort rivals Russia’s entire annual military [budget](#) (\$66 billion). But there is another less talked-about historical facet of this question: the 82 year-old precedent for this new Lend-Lease law.

During his 2020 campaign, candidate Joe Biden promised, if elected, to become the new Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR). He assigned himself

the mission of transforming a nation still confused by the hyperreal presidency of billionaire president Donald Trump. Biden promised to promote FDR scale reforms designed to focus on the real needs of the people. Ironically, this new Lend-Lease law, responding to the needs, not of the American people, but of the Ukrainian military, may turn out to be the only reminder Biden is capable of summoning up that reflects FDR’s legacy. Biden has failed to push through any of the supposedly ambitious social policies he promised to promote as his updated “New Deal.”

Instead, Biden has revived a policy dating from the period in which the dominant mood of isolationism in Washington had positioned the US as a bystander in Europe’s raging war that began in September, 1939. In December 1940, a year before the attack on Pearl Harbor, Roosevelt’s government cleverly invented what would be called the Lend-Lease policy, designed to make the growing American military arsenal available to already impoverished Britain and its allies.



Our diabolical definition:

Lend-Lease

A concept that plays on the ambiguity that exists between the notion of generosity associated with lending to the needy and the hard-nosed commercial practice of making someone pay for the use of a piece of property that already exists without being currently exploited

Contextual Note

Biden offered this [justification](#) of the new Lend-Lease bill: “The cost of the fight is not cheap, but caving to aggression is even more costly.” He certainly meant this to sound like a banal statement of a principle so abstract, so divorced from any real context and so self-evident that most people reading it would pay little attention to its meaning. It leaves the impression of an attitude of limitless generosity by agreeing to assume the cost of Ukraine’s struggle. The world’s wealthiest and most powerful nation will make the financial sacrifice of supporting a valiant people in distress.

But a closer reading tells a different story. For once, Biden has carefully chosen his words. It is not the US that will assume “the cost of the fight” but Ukraine itself. The US has agreed to be the creditor, which means that so long as the accounts are current, Ukraine will be the debtor expected to assume the cost, even if lacking the capacity to do so.

Biden leaves the impression that Ukraine has made the decision to pay the price, but it has done no more than demand assistance in its desperation. It is Washington that has determined the price the Ukrainians will pay to avoid “caving to aggression,” which will be invoiced by the United States. And it’s a running tab. In commercial terms, Ukraine is literally a captive customer. The Ukrainians will be expected to pay the bill at some point in the future.

Biden’s remarks unintentionally reveal two important facets of the operation. The first is that the reasoning behind the decision was most certainly crafted unilaterally by the United States. Ukraine requested the massive supply of arms needed to counter the Russians, and as the proverb says, “beggars can’t be choosers.” The form of the operation was defined by the US with

little or no input from Ukraine. To paraphrase another proverbial phrase, this time borrowed from *The Godfather*, Lend-lease is an offer Ukraine could not refuse.

By putting the emphasis on the noble act of not caving to aggression, Biden spares himself the further calculation that should be on everyone’s mind. The cost is not limited to the \$53 billion Ukraine will owe the US. Beyond the literal value of the material and services provided, so long as the war continues, Ukraine will continue enduring the costs in lives and property damage associated with a war that, thanks to this massive transfer of technology, is likely to last for many months if not years. Biden himself has conveyed his belief that the war will continue for a long time to come.

That means Ukraine’s debt to the US is likely to grow exponentially. Given the precedent of wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, that could be a very long time. In an important [article](#) in Foreign Policy, Michael Hirsch makes a pertinent point that Biden and the media have studiously avoided. Hirsch notes that Biden’s Ukraine policy “raises the prospect for a drawn-out global cold war with not only Russia but China as well.” He adds that it inevitably augments the risk of a nuclear conflagration.

In the short term, however, American generosity can be seen as the programmed impoverishment of Ukraine. This helps to clarify Biden’s deeper strategy that has little to do with the noble struggle of the Ukrainians seeking to respond to aggression. It has everything to do with the avowed intent of weakening Russia as well as the (as yet unavowed) intent of using NATO expansion and the inevitable weakening of Europe’s economy to consolidate American hegemonic domination of the West.

Historical Note

The precedent that put Lend-Lease on the historical landscape was passed in 1940, specifically to help Great Britain defend itself against the Axis powers a year after the outbreak of World War II. England’s gold reserves had dwindled dangerously, and its industrial capacity could no longer meet the needs of a war that had already spread across the whole of Europe and North Africa. But in December 1940, the US was

still outside looking in and would remain so for the following year. The idea behind the law was to find a way to support Britain’s war effort at arm’s length, without appearing to act as a coldly calculating creditor. “Payment for the supplies,” the history.com website [explains](#), “would be deferred, and could come in any form Roosevelt deemed satisfactory.” The noble cause with which the nation sympathized justified an

exceptional measure that would appear to be a generous, disinterested offer of assistance.

The great British economist, John Maynard Keynes, was his nation's chief negotiator with the United States. In volume III of his biography of Keynes, Robert Skidelsky described Keynes's private take on the significance of Lend-Lease. "While exempting the President from ill-intent," Skidelsky wrote, "Keynes never forgave the US Treasury – and later the State Department – for taking advantage of Britain's weakness, incurred in a joint cause."

In his book *Super Imperialism*, economist Michael Hudson explained one of the more authentically generous features of the law: "Lend-Lease goods used up or destroyed in the war would be written off but payment for remaining assets and war-surplus materials would be made on the agreed postwar value of civilian goods." He notes that at the end of the war the US made Britain pay a heavy price.

In his statement explaining the importance of the 2022 law in favor of Ukraine, Biden, as expected, stressed the perennial theme of the defense of the Ukrainian people and their commitment to democracy, a democracy avidly assisted by a well-armed and significant neo-Nazi minority that over the past eight years the US has never found in the slightest embarrassing. "I'm signing a bill," Biden [declared](#), "that provides another important tool that directly supports the government of Ukraine and the Ukrainian people and their fight

to defend their country and their democracy against Putin's brutal war."

As everyone knows, with US assistance, Britain won the war. But as Hudson points out, "Britain once again became a war debtor through victory." Hudson makes the case that the strategy of the US included the dismantling of the British Empire. At the end of the war, Americans saw the UK, not the Soviet Union, as their most dangerous rival.

Similar hindsight five or ten years from now may reveal something similar. The entire Ukraine drama, prepared for decades by the US, with a notable acceleration in 2014 that forced a change of government, may well be more about humiliating the European Union and undermining its geopolitical influence than about "weakening Russia." If Ukraine survives intact as a democratic nation, its debt to the US alone will make it a province of Washington.

The worst thing about this scenario is that the Russians and undoubtedly the Chinese – and indeed other nations, such as those like India that were part of the British Empire – are aware of the history of American assistance and understand its implications. In contrast, Americans' studied indifference to the lessons of history – even to history itself – means that the risks of a less favorable outcome for the US are very real. And for the world, that includes the risk of a nuclear conflagration.

CHAPTER 39

Who Can Put a Price on the Ukraine War?

NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg may be guilty of heresy as Boris Johnson leads the new inquisition.

June 29, 2022

When inflation dominates headlines day after day, the public's psyche focuses on tracking prices. In today's consumer society, every upward variation can become trauma-inducing. Sri Lanka, Peru, Ecuador, and Argentina are now rattled by the protests of their citizens blaming their governments for inflation. In the recent history of developed nations, such as the US or France, rising gas prices alone have become signals that the social fabric may be on the verge of being torn apart.

Governments in the West have begun using the war in Ukraine to explain away inflation as a consequence of Russia's invasion, but, as Fed Chairman Jerome Powell admitted during last week's Senate hearings, the aggravating effect of the war on inflation has been marginal. Inflation was already endemic before the war.

The Ukraine war has produced effects far worse than the inflation of consumer prices. It has disrupted the global economy to the point of threatening famine in Africa, the Middle East and Asia and making businesses across the globe unprofitable. But prices are not the only example of inflation. The inflation of propaganda and particularly the rhetoric of politicians concerning the war may produce consequences far worse than consumer price inflation. Every day, political rhetoric brings us closer to accidental nuclear conflagration.

This aggravation appears to have begun influencing at least some political and military leaders to think beyond the dogmas of official rhetoric. Recently the first hints have appeared that the propaganda war may be loosening up to the point of permitting thought, if not action,

evoking a possible negotiated settlement of the war.

Jens Stoltenberg has provided one of those hints. Most people would expect the Secretary General of NATO should have significant influence on decision-making in NATO affairs, even while admitting that, like any good secretary, he knows how to take dictation from his bosses in Washington DC and Arlington, Virginia. Speaking in Finland earlier this month, he appeared to acknowledge a divergent view pointing towards resolution rather than indefinite prolongation of the war. "Peace is possible," he [proclaimed](#). "The only question is what price are you willing to pay for peace? How much territory, how much independence, how much sovereignty... are you willing to sacrifice for peace?"

He hints that Ukraine's price for peace – just like gas, wheat or fertilizer – is also subject to inflation. As even some Ukrainians close to the government are beginning to recognize, Russia has overpowered them and things are not likely to get better, let alone evolve towards the kind of fantasized Ukrainian victory Western media has evoked as inevitable. The Washington Post [quotes](#) Oleksandr V. Danylyuk, an adviser to the Ukrainian government on defense and intelligence issues: "There's much less space for optimism right now."

Stoltenberg clearly understands that real decisions are made not in Ukraine, but on the other side of the Atlantic. But he acknowledged a basic moral truth when he said that "it's for those who are paying the highest price to make that judgment." Alas, a judgment is not always a decision.

Our diabolical definition:

Pay the highest price

What consumers are expected to do in the consumer society, especially when the model for industrial and now geopolitical organization is a monopoly in the marketplace and a monopoly on global power.

Contextual Note

The United States Institute of Peace [explained](#) earlier this month the mood in Washington. “Skeptics of any near-term negotiation fear that a cease-fire and talks would represent appeasement of Russia, letting it keep the 20 percent of Ukraine that it has seized militarily. This view holds that talks should be postponed until Russia is weakened or ideally defeated.”

From the beginning of the conflict, the Biden administration announced its expectation that the massive sanctions it imposed on Russia, and especially cutting it off from the global payments system based on the dollar, would rapidly weaken Russia and thus strengthen Ukraine’s negotiating position. That hasn’t happened. The ruble –

which Biden claimed last March would be transformed into “rubble” – has grown stronger. More significantly, outside of Europe, Japan, South Korea and Australia, the other countries of the world have refused to join Biden’s attempt at a remake of George Bush’s ultimately futile, disastrous and technically [illegal](#) “coalition of the willing.”

This is downright embarrassing for the US, a nation still committed to affirming a unipolar world under its leadership, but suddenly discovering that its hitherto captive vassals across the globe – the other nations that have over the past half century integrated the globalized economy dominated by the dollar – are no longer taking the master’s requests to be orders.

Historical Note

The leaders of the West find themselves at one of those “inflection points” Joe Biden [evoked](#) on various occasions last year in his [quest](#) to be seen as a “transformative president.” That was a time when Americans could be both troubled and impressed by Biden’s bold move to end a war in Afghanistan that had endured for nearly 20 years. Against the protests of many of his own domestic and foreign allies, he calculated that the price of continuing the US presence in Afghanistan was too high to continue. He dared to end a forever war and usher in a new golden age of peace.

Biden could have prevented the Russian invasion by negotiating and acknowledging the seriousness of Russia’s security concerns. But his administration preferred to engage in the game of predicting the exact date of the invasion rather than preventing it. His administration was busy calculating the high price Russia would have to pay for its mistake as it was destined to become a “pariah” of the international community.

Now that the war is raging, Jens Stoltenberg has dared to take a different look at war-related prices. He acknowledges that if it’s the Ukrainians who are paying the price, they should be the ones to assess whether they can afford it. With Russia’s continuing success in the east, not only is the price of an eventual peace rising, but the cumulative costs of war keep piling up. There is little indication, however, that the true decision-makers in the West are encouraging the

Ukrainians to make that call. They prefer to remain indifferent to the stiff price Ukrainians are paying.

What could better illustrate this fact that the limpid reflections British Prime Minister Boris Johnson [shared](#) with the press on Sunday, Reuters from Bavaria at the G7 summit in Bavaria? “World leaders,” Johnson asserted, “must recognise the price of supporting Ukraine, including the surge in energy and food costs, but must also acknowledge that the price of allowing Russia to win would be far higher.”

The price the always jovial Boris is referring to is not the price the Ukrainians are paying as they watch their nation’s cities ravaged, their soldiers dying and much the population displaced. No, the British PM is referring to the price of Western politicians’ pride, a far more consequent inflationary factor and the one that ultimately determines which decisions will finally be made.

Boris merits our attention as he is known for his clairvoyance on political issues. Though currently abroad, in the past few days he has [inspired](#) record-breaking decibels of commentary at home thanks to his admission that he is now “thinking actively about the third term.” This means that, much like Vladimir Putin, he clearly sees himself as the anointed leader ready to assume the arduous task of ruling Britannia for decades.

From his perch in Bavaria, Boris droned on about prices, insisting that "the price of backing down, the price of allowing Putin to succeed, to hack off huge parts of Ukraine, to continue with his programme of conquest, that price will be far, far higher. Everybody here understands that." Stoltenberg clearly spoke out of order when he designated the Ukrainians as those having "the highest price to pay."

If Johnson's wisdom is followed, the even higher price that all of humanity may have to pay could well be nuclear holocaust. But for Johnson, that's OK. For a committed rhetorical inflationist like Johnson, who speaks for "everybody" present at the G7 summit, the highest price to pay would be

electoral defeat at home, a fate far worse for such enlightened leaders than the annihilation of humanity.

The ideology of the West's capitalism relies on the belief that everything has a price, followed by its corollary, that there's no such thing as a free lunch. The Ukraine crisis has demonstrated that politicians excel at putting an arbitrary price tag on everything – including their next election – but rarely seek to understand the value of anything... especially when there's always a lobbyist to hand to pay for their free lunch.

CHAPTER 40

Business Insider Makes the Case for Nuclear War

Now that we are on the brink of nuclear war, some think it is time to sit back and enjoy the speculative thrill it offers.

October 22, 2022

Nobody wants to see a nuclear war. But some in the media appear to relish, not war itself, but the prospect of nuclear war. It isn't as if the media needs something to talk about. There's plenty of celebrity news to go around, much of it supplied single-handedly by the Kardashians family and Kanye West. Economic chaos, linked in part to the war in Ukraine, has provided some real news, with stories of penury, inflation and the ever-present fear of recession, if not economic collapse. And, of course, there's a steady stream of sometimes reliable but more commonly unreliable but titillating reporting on war-related events, most often designed to serve Western governments' hunger for a daily fix of propaganda.

US President Joe Biden has boldly claimed that the war in Ukraine will last "as long as it takes," clearly meaning that the US will do everything in its power to make it last. For the media, that means months, if not years of sensational war stories as well as continuous coverage of a talented Ukrainian actor in the role of president. But the idea of another forever war stretching out for years to come risks turning off a population weary of being told that growing domestic problems are less important than the sacred duty of fueling a conflict in Eastern Europe.

Fortunately, Vladimir Putin's sometimes heated rhetoric has allowed Joe Biden to feed the media with some authentic fear by evoking the risk of Armageddon, a term that should certainly resonate with Christian fundamentalists. It also

revives for those who are old enough to remember memories of the golden years of the real Cold War, when people were investing in bomb shelters. It was a time when, at any random moment, Americans might be spontaneously visited by the vision of a mushroom-shaped cloud suddenly appearing at the end of the road stretching out before them as they drove back home from work. By the mid-1960s, they could begin wondering whether the hippies hadn't made the right decision of tuning in, turning on and dropping out. That was truly a period of nuclear optimism. Thanks to the hippies, American consumers felt they still had a choice. Even [Stanley Kubrick](#) learned "to stop worrying and love the bomb."

The hyperreal ocean of electronic media we bathe in today has changed our perception of the very real risks that surround us. No one under the age of 50 today can truly appreciate the deeper anguish that characterized the nuclear age during the original Cold War. A [headline](#) in Business Insider from last Saturday epitomizes the change of atmosphere: "Putin's nuclear threats are pushing people like Trump and Elon Musk to press for a Ukraine peace deal. A nuclear expert warns that's 'dangerous.'"

Yes, peace has become dangerous. The first paragraph makes its case: "An understandable desire to avoid a nuclear war could actually make the world more dangerous if it means rushing to implement a 'peace' in Ukraine that serves Russian interests, an expert told Insider."



Our diabolical definition:

Understandable
desire

Understandable
desire

A temptation whose attraction appears legitimate while recognizing that no virtuous person should succumb to it

Contextual Note

The journal provides the author, Charles R. Davis, with the title, “Senior Reporter at Insider.” Senior clearly means experienced and well-paid. It does not mean over 50. Like many younger journalists, Davis believes his job starts with communicating his (and his journal’s) values to his readers even before reporting the news. He effectively does so by expressing his condescending judgment of weak-minded people who succumb to their “understandable” desires. The value he adheres to is the hallowed American ideal of assertiveness, or in this case, extreme assertiveness. The enemy of assertiveness is humility and a culpable preference for “peace” over war. It is usually referred to as appeasement.

Davis takes the astonishing step of accusing Donald Trump and Elon Musk of failing to be adequately assertive. But that is not all. They have failed in their civic duty for a specific reason: their unreasoned fear of nuclear war. They fail to understand that nuclear war is not something to fear. It is a useful concept real Americans must learn to enthusiastically embrace, not as a desired outcome of their actions, but as the trump card Americans play in the favorite game practiced by the daring minds on Wall Street: [Liar’s Poker](#).

The reasoning of people like Davis – and the same may paradoxically be said of Joe Biden, though he is clearly over 50 – reposes on the belief that nuclear war is too surreal to ever become real. Davis clearly agrees with the man he interviewed, Pavel Podvig, “an expert on Russia’s nuclear doctrine and capabilities at the UN Institute for Disarmament Research.” As is common in today’s journalism, instead of challenging the “expert,” Davis prefers to record

uncritically his assertions and denigrate the reasoning of his critics.

Davis begins subtly, by attempting to sound objective when describing what he holds to be the position of Trump, Musk and other Kremlin apologists and spineless appeasers. “Some observers, in good or bad faith,” Davis writes, “have cited the possibility of the unthinkable as all the more reason to negotiate a ceasefire and have at times criticized the US administration they see as leading the world to the precipice of nuclear conflict with its steady stream of aid to Ukraine.”

By inserting “in good or bad faith” in the opening clause, Davis calls into question the sincerity of the critics. More significantly, by focusing on the fear of a nuclear holocaust, he consciously omits another complementary and more substantial argument: that extended wars spreading massive suffering locally and across the globe are in no one’s interest. They merit being resolved rather than prolonged “as long as it takes.”

The recent forever wars in Afghanistan and Iraq should offer convincing evidence of the validity of a futile course of action that has nothing to do with a nuclear threat. But Davis clearly assumes his mission of using the nuclear pretext to justify the White House’s adamant position that negotiations are out of the question. Davis dismisses that position as “capitulation, dressed up in a universal desire for peace.”

This is clearly not reporting. It is the language of bellicose propaganda.

Historical Note

According to MSNBC’s Joe Scarborough, Trump, as president, asked a foreign policy expert the [question](#), “if we have nuclear weapons, why can’t we use them?” Any moral philosopher would consider the question legitimate and probably necessary. Anyone with access to nuclear devices should seek to answer that question. But the anecdote served the virulently anti-Trump media agenda of mocking what they viewed as Trump’s failure to comprehend what everyone in Washington understands without ever having to ask or answer the question.

It’s not, after all, as if no ambiguity exists. Fifty years ago, in November 1962, during the Cuban

missile crisis in a meeting with President John F Kennedy, General Curtis LeMay, a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, advocated nuking Cuba. He had obviously framed his own answer to Trump’s future question. Historian David Coleman [described](#) the scene. “LeMay had told Kennedy that the course the President had settled on – a naval blockade of Cuba – was a bad idea and was ‘almost as bad as the appeasement at Munich.’ And at another point of this November 16 meeting, he advocated “solving” the problem, by which he meant implementing CINCLANT OPLAN 312-62, the air attack plan for Cuba.”

It was only decades later that the world learned about Kennedy's choice of negotiating directly with Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev rather than risking nuclear war. What had to remain hidden from the public and even the Chiefs of Staff was the major concession Kennedy made to remove the nuclear arsenal the US had installed in Turkey targeting Russia.

Davis somewhat comically believes that by pursuing its belligerent goal of weakening Russia "the US and its allies could hold onto the moral high ground." Does he really believe the global community perceives the US as being a moral actor? Countries representing the overwhelming majority of the world's population have, alas, evinced what Davis should acknowledge as an "understandable desire" for peace and avoiding nuclear war.

CHAPTER 41

The Great Missile Mystery: A Ukrainian Whodunnit

A missile strike on a Polish village near the Ukrainian border demonstrated how surrealism can unexpectedly upset the comfortable hyperreality of a proxy war.

November 23, 2022

For many people the news of a missile strike on Poland had a *Dr Strangelove* feel to it. Suddenly the launch of World War III might be only moments away, and with it the inevitable nuclear holocaust. In the world of hyperreality so carefully constructed for many decades through the diligent work of our political institutions and our media in the context of our consumerist way of life, this was truly a moment of unwanted surrealism.

Fortunately, the masters of our official hyperreality stepped in to calm things down. Without any solid evidence but plenty of noble intentions, they found the most palatable explanation for this dramatic incident. As *The Eurasian Times* [reported](#): “Polish President Andrzej Duda said it was ‘highly probable’ that the missile was launched by Ukrainian anti-aircraft defense.” He added that “there is no evidence that the Russian side launched it.”

The Ukrainians have been following a well-constructed hyperreal script. It contains a

hallowed principle inherited from [Russiagate](#). Its central dogma bluntly states that if something bad happens anywhere in the world, it’s Putin’s fault. Dutifully following this script, Ukraine’s President Volodymyr Zelenskyy immediately accused Russia of the attack on Poland. He clearly hoped this would at last push NATO into fully engaging in the war against Russia. But US President Joe Biden, who can be thought of as the executive producer of the film with the hyperreal script, was quick to explain that the missile was not fired by Russia. Jan Stoltenberg, NATO’s secretary general, quickly followed suit. Outside of Ukraine everyone agreed that the two Polish farmers were killed by a Ukrainian anti-aircraft missile that had presumably gone astray.

Zelenskyy denied it. “I have no doubt that it was not our missile.” According to [Reuters](#), he “believed Tuesday’s explosion was caused by a Russian missile,” based on reports from Ukraine’s military which he ‘cannot but trust.’”



Our diabolical definition:

No doubt
A handy expression to affirm what a person possessing real or imaginary authority would like to be true, whether or not it is true.

Contextual Note

According to Ukraine’s news service, Interfax-Ukraine, Zelenskyy also had this to say: “Today, something that we have been warning for a long time has also happened. Terror is not limited to

our state borders. Russian missiles hit Poland ... Missiles hit NATO territory. This is a Russian missile attack on collective security! This is a very significant escalation.” The article described

Zelenskyy as “urging Poland to take decisive action.”

About one thing at least there is literally “no doubt:” that Zelenskyy was hoping to Poland and NATO to declare war on Russia. The Ukrainian president saw this as a game-changer. He simply failed to realize that those who write the rules of the game aren’t quite ready for a change in the state of play.

This war has produced an interesting tug-of-war within it. Zelenskyy is pushing for a shift in the meaning of a proxy war Joe Biden’s team has designed and managed [explicitly](#) to “weaken Russia.” But Biden remains prudent, as executive producers tend to be. He doesn’t hesitate to tell Ukraine’s clone of Winston Churchill when he’s off script. Hyperreality must be respected. Zelensky may think otherwise, but for the US, it isn’t about Ukraine’s victory but about Russia’s defeat. The US is ready to accept the total destruction of Ukraine and the decimation of its people if that’s what’s required to serve the goal of taking Russia out of the European equation. How else can one understand the [idea](#) that the US and the EU will keep fueling the war “as long as it takes?”

Western media was flummoxed by this unexpected moment of surrealism. Up to this point, Western media presented the war as a heroic combat between a brave people and an evil invader. They treated it like an sporting match or, more accurately, like a playoff series taking place within an arena on the far side of Europe. So long as the two teams remained within the confines of the arena, the media could cheer for the home team, applaud its clever attacks and successful feints, and hiss at the opponent, whose every gesture was described as a war crime.

In the past week, Western officials and the media have provided no updates. An investigation is

presumably ongoing, just as in the case of the sabotage of the Nord Stream pipelines. In both cases, this may mean that the results of the investigations will be eternally hidden from public view, a pattern well established since the John F Kennedy assassination, from which crucial evidence is still being withheld 59 years later.

This incident highlights a problem that no one in the media wants to mention. Since that critical moment earlier this year when the Western media began to turn Zelenskyy into a bearded superhero clothed in a green t-shirt, the former actor and current war president assumes that anything he says will be dutifully echoed in the Western media and treated as gospel truth. For the media, the rule has been that any expression of doubt about the truth of any of his statements falls into the category of either heresy or Russian propaganda.

This time, in what’s turning out to be a “he said/she said” case, the media must decide whom to believe or to assume that all are lying, which is possible when the evidence is not on the table. For the moment the media appear to be going with the interpretation supported by Duda, Biden and Stoltenberg. It seems safe and requires no further comment.

Or does it? Zelenskyy’s insistent denial could be interpreted in three ways. First, he simply doesn’t want people to believe his army could make a mistake. Second, he doesn’t want the Polish people to hold Ukraine responsible for the death of their countrymen. After all, a traditional enmity between Ukrainian nationalists and Poles exists that could once again come to the fore. That enmity played out in murderous, sometimes genocidal ways in the past. The third option, left unmentioned by the media, is that it was a false flag operation specifically designed to produce the effect Zelenskyy called for: the engagement of NATO against Russia.

Historical Note

Our civilization built around the principle of hyperreality – what Guy Debord [called](#) “la société du spectacle” – is a direct outgrowth of the industrial revolution and its evolved technology. In the early 20th century surrealism became a major movement in the world of art and literature. At the same time, Sigmund Freud’s nephew, Edward Bernays, working with both commercial corporations and American presidents, was working to turn the US economy into a powerful machine driven by public

relations and advertising. It aimed at transforming the worldview and mindscape of a docile public. Advertising’s imagery and messaging became the breeding ground for an elaborately sophisticated culture combining politics and commerce, governed by hyperreality.

Surrealism and hyperreality differed in one important way: surrealism used illusion to both entertain the public and challenge its thinking. The culture of hyperreality aims at conditioning

the public's thinking, replacing perceived reality, in people's minds, with a simulacrum.

But another factor distinguishes the two concepts. Hyperreality reflects a rational, structured strategy engaged by a group of people who collectively exercise some generally invisible political or cultural influence. Working together, they produce a different idea of the world, better constructed, simplified and more attractive than everyday reality, which tragically suffers from its multiple contradictions.

Surrealism seeks to trouble its public's thinking. Hyperreality is designed to reassure and put questioning to sleep. A "surreal" painting, film or novel contains elements from the real world combined with something unusual, deviant or simply weird. It violates our accepted laws of perception. In the [film](#), *Un Chien Andalou* by the surrealist pair Luis Bunuel and In a scene and Salvador Dali, a closeup reveals a colony of ants emerging from a hole in the hero's palm. The hand is absolutely realistic. So are the ants. But

the spectator sees this fantasized construction as something created by an author and achieved thanks to technology. No one could confuse this with reality.

Hyperreality, on the other hand, exists for the specific purpose of confusing the public, distorting its perception. Propaganda is one form of hyperreality, a heavy-handed one, but if enough of the institutions are complicit, especially the media, it functions efficiently. It produces on an industrial scale something intended to replace visible reality in people's minds.

The confusion over the story of who fired the missile that hit Poland is an example of hyperreality inadvertently showing its seams. The event itself was real but the reactions have been surreal. When Stoltenberg affirms that the missile was Ukrainian but the fault lies with the Russians, it is like watching Bunuel's film. It simply makes no sense. The difference is that it isn't art. It pretends to be the truth.

CHAPTER 42

Ukrainian Oligarchs Go to Acting Class

December 24, 2022

As the world awaits the glorious moment forecast by Western media of a total Ukrainian victory over Russia, the final act of a war that has been raging for the past 10 months, *The Washington Post* reassures its loyal readers that a Slavic neoliberal Utopia is just around the corner. Hyper-billionaire Jeff Bezos’s newspaper is not alone in its optimism, but it has consistently been at the forefront of institutions that have contributed — short of supplying arms — to feeding the propaganda mill to make sure the belief in the ultimate success of a noble cause never falters.

Having suffered an egregious and unjust assault from its powerful eastern neighbor, Ukraine is not only standing up to defend its territorial integrity, it has embarked on a process of change that will transform a theater of war into what already resembles a theater of the absurd. Theatrical it will be, just as President Volodymyr Zelenskyy’s visit to the US Congress turned out to be an example of choreographed performance art. *The Washington Post* and US media are doing their damndest to present the current tragedy as the prelude to a joyous comedy.

The script for what sounds like a double bill goes something like this. As a Ukrainian victory approaches, the reigning oligarchs who have dominated public life in Ukraine for three decades will gracefully leave the stage and return to their dressing rooms. After a quick wardrobe change, they will reappear as modern business executives dedicated — not to greed, as in the previous script — but to the efficient running of a modern European economy functioning inside a shining democracy from which political corruption has been banished and public service enshrined for the benefit of the entire population.

The Washington Post’s writing team, consisting of Kevin Sullivan, David L. Stern and Kostiantyn Khudov, appears to be working on the second script. Earlier this month, they penned an [article](#) whose subtitle announces the theme of the drama: “Ukraine may have the opportunity to rebuild a post-war society that is more democratic, less corrupt and more economically diversified.”

As creative fiction this reads well. But apparently the writers see themselves not as creative writers but as earnest analysts of future reality. They want us to believe in the likelihood of the scenario they delineate. This is where readers of the news expecting to gain some serious perspective on how the future will play out should remember a simple rule: to be wary of sentences that insert “may” before the verbs they use to define a political or economic future. “May” is a very convenient auxiliary when predicting the future. It’s the perfect tool for hedging one’s bets. Their forecast that there “may” be a democratic, corruption-free future is equally as truthful as saying “Ukraine may not even exist in two years time.” Both are possible. Neither can be classified misinformation.

The news that founds the state of affairs that “may” exist is based on a theme that has been discussed since the adoption last year of a law passed by the Ukrainian government. The law’s title bore the word “de-oliharkhizatsia.” *The Washington Post* journalists explain: “The word of the moment in Ukrainian politics is ‘de-oliharkhizatsia’ or de-oligarchization: a renewal of the long-held goal — and sometimes only faint hope — to free the country’s political system of domination by the ultrarich.”

Our diabolical definition:

De-oligarchization

1. *The voluntary transformation of a regime built on personal greed into one guided by the notion of excellence, efficiency and public service.*
2. *The title of a contemporary Ukrainian fictional drama written for the theater of neoliberal hyperreality.*

Contextual Note

In an earlier [article](#) for *The Washington Post*, David Stern quoted the assessment of an official who admitted that the system of corruption was “so strong and well institutionalized that it was quite difficult to break” while promising to “do everything we can to make sure it never recovers.” Stern describes the official, Rostyslav Shurma, as “a close economic aide to Zelensky who previously worked for many years as a top executive in Akhmetov’s steel company, Metinvest.” Who could doubt that the same team that has so successfully resisted Putin’s army will do an equally good job making sure Ukraine’s corrupt oligarchy “never recovers”?

In one of the articles, the authors cite another official, Viktor Andrusiv, who appreciates the difficulty of the task that consists of removing or at least seriously diminishing the power of oligarchs. “They are not disappearing,” he asserts. “The key thing is to end their monopolies, which were produced by their political connections. Now they will have to act more like big businessmen.”

The language here gives the game away. This is the world not of business but of political theater.

Historical Note

Readers should note that the authors call the effort at de-oligarchization “a renewal of the long-held goal — and sometimes only faint hope — to free the country’s political system of domination by the ultrarich.” Why has the goal been held for so long with no result? And how long has it been held? Why should we believe this time around that the hope is no longer faint?

Perhaps they want us to believe that the popular uprising in 2014 that resulted in a successful coup — ably assisted by the likes of Victoria Nuland, John Kerry and Joe Biden — entertained the goal of rooting out corruption? Apparently not, if we are to judge by the performance of the new president, Petro Poroshenko. Mike Eckel writing for Radio Free Europe [complained](#), days before the Russian invasion, that “Poroshenko was seen by critics as being slow to make fundamental changes, or go after powerful officials seen as corrupt.” Most people classify Poroshenko himself as an oligarch.

It’s all about “acting” a role one is not used to. The oligarchs, unlike the proverbial leopard, will change their spots. It may not be as far-fetched as it sounds. After all, Ukraine’s Actor-in-Chief, Volodymyr Zelenskyy — who also happens to be the nation’s president — learned to act like a president as the star of the TV series, *Servant of the People*. Following his lead and perhaps thanks to his coaching, the oligarchs, who will neither be exiled nor dismissed, will learn “to act more like big businessmen.”

The two articles in *The Washington Post* demonstrate the nature of this ambitious project: recasting the old troupe of oligarchs — literally bad guys — in the role of modern executives. In other words, good guys. They are expected to leave behind them the costumes they donned and the manners they cultivated while playing the oligarch. Their histrionics that were more appropriate to tragedy — or rather bad melodrama — will give way to sophisticated comedic banter aimed at promoting the general welfare. That supposes, of course, that yesterday’s oligarchs can equal in performance the part played by their obviously talented president.

Eckel recalled that “Zelenskiy won the presidency by a landslide over Poroshenko after campaigning on pledges to end the conflict with Russia and to tackle the corruption and bureaucracy that has hamstrung the economy and hurt living standards.” Like Obama in the US in 2008, for the people, the new president represented hope and change. And as with Obama, hope waned as change faltered. “Results have been mixed at best,” Eckel recounts, “and there is growing suspicion that Zelenskiy administration officials may be undermining those efforts themselves.”

Decades after achieving independence from the Soviet Union, the long-held hope of fighting corruption has gone nowhere. Corruption has become a way of life. Zelenskyy himself was propelled forward in his acting and political career by a prominent oligarch, Ihor Kolomoisky, a man Anthony Blinken’s State Department banned from entry to the US last March. Four months later Zelenskyy stripped his former promoter of Ukrainian nationality. Some have suggested that this might have been designed to

shield the oligarch from the wrath of the de-oligarchization law. Kolomoisky is for the moment safe in Israel, whose nationality he holds.

Now that Ukraine is enduring a glorious war that “may” lead to a triumphant outcome for the

valorous regime – incidentally supported by its oligarchs – hope appears reborn. When the dust settles, and corruption is definitively uprooted, Ukrainians in the postwar years may have to end up thanking Vladimir Putin for provoking what none of their own presidents was capable of accomplishing.

PART VII

US Culture

CHAPTER 43

It’s an Ill Wind... that Blows Kisses to the Wealthy

The climate crisis is one thing, the economic climate crisis another, founded on dysfunction. The psychology around managing crises is deeply embedded in the system.

September 07, 2022

The proverbs of yore offered consolation to generations of poor souls who had to deal with the whims of Dame Fortune. That was before modern technologically-defined environmental bubbles – from air conditioned homes, offices and cars to online discussion groups and Facebook pages – defined the norms of the consumer society, designed to avert various forms of discomfort and inconvenience.

One of the most poignant of the old proverbs belongs to the family of expressions crafted to encourage hope in the face of adversity. “Every cloud has its silver lining” still resonates even if, thanks to AC, we rarely find ourselves directly exposed to the inconvenience of bad weather. Most people no longer remember the old standby, “It’s an ill wind that blows no one any good.” The difference between the two proverbs is that the latter focuses the attention on the potential illness of a wind. Rather than simply reassuring, it admits that the wind may indeed be something to be concerned about.

Moneywise, a journal dedicated to investment advice, offers a [glimpse](#) of why the second proverb merits our consideration today. It is not only the increasingly visible violence of our weather that makes it harder and harder to deny the phenomenon of climate change. From the investment magazine’s point of view, the only weather capable of raising true concern is the kind of impending tempest the media call a stock market crash. Alarms now appear to be ringing, so for the wise and wealthy, it is rapidly becoming time to act. But how?

With a wry smile on his face in the picture just below the title of the article, author and investment expert Robert Kiyosaki provides this succinct weather report: “Millions will be wiped out.” Moreover, he believes that the crash is already underway. The title of the article concludes with these words: “But now could also be the perfect time to ‘get richer’ — here’s how.



Our diabolical definition:

Get richer

The opposite of get poorer, which is what happens to most people in times of crisis, often threatening their survival. Only the already wealthy, whose survival is never in question, can “get richer.”

Get richer

Contextual Note

The article offers the reader the silver lining everyone might expect from a journal dedicated to investment advice. Kiyosaki looks beyond what’s required for weathering the storm. He wants to tell the reader how to profit from it. “While it might be tempting to hide out in cash,” the article explains, “Rich Dad Poor Dad author

Robert Kiyosaki believes that it could be the ideal time to ‘get richer.’”

The rich have no fear of crises. They are occasions to increase one’s wealth. Kiyosaki explains what should be obvious to anyone who has followed the history of markets over the past

two decades, even if the media traditionally hesitated to trumpet it to the general public. “2008 was a great time to get rich,” Kiyosaki reminds those who have the means to play the market on a major scale. “Everything went on sale. Borrowed millions of dollars buying real estate bargains.”

The message is clear. If you didn't get rich then, you probably have yourself to blame. But, if we follow Kiyosaki's advice, now is the time to act before it's too late. Because this time around, the crash is bound to be a real doozy. The author considers himself an oracle, claiming that in 2013

he published *Rich Dads Prophecy* predicting a bigger crash to come. “THAT CRASH is HERE. Millions will be wiped out.” So, as another proverb instructs us, it's time to “make hay while the sun is shining,” even if the sun is forecast to shortly disappear behind a menacing dark cloud and generate a particularly ill solar wind.

With studied understatement, the article offers “a look at two assets that might help you survive this storm.” But for the wealthy it's never about survival. Instead it's exactly as Kiyosaki says: it's about “getting richer.”

Historical Note

Skeptical readers may not be inclined to believe the predictions of Robert Kiyosaki, who not only failed to predict the 2008 crash, he promoted investment in real estate right up until the subprime crisis that gutted the market. They are more likely to listen to the testimony of Michael Burry, the hero of *The Big Short* (book and film) who anticipated and profited from that crash. *Business Insider* [reports](#) that last summer Burry “sounded the alarm on the ‘greatest speculative bubble of all time in all things’” calling the event to come the “mother of all crashes.” Like Kiyosaki, he claimed that “‘Doomsday is finally here’ in a since-deleted tweet” sent last week. If that isn't enough, the *New York Post* [featured](#) the forecast of “famed investor Jeremy Grantham, evoking a “tragedy” and a “superbubble,” characterized by a situation in which “all three major asset classes – housing, stocks, and bonds – were critically historically overvalued at the end of last year.”

Many commentators less interested in investment than the health of the global economy and the

culturally destabilizing effects of growing inequality didn't have to wait till 2022 to understand that things have been going in the wrong direction since the bailout in 2009. They saw the writing on the wall as Quantitative Easing (QE) morphed from the response to a crisis into a way of life. In 2016, *The Economic Times of India* [wrote](#): “Permanent monetisation may be inevitable, given the risks and difficulties entailed in undoing the asset accretion that happened under QE. It can prove beneficial, too.” To write it “can prove beneficial” acknowledges that it might not be in the long term. Yesterday's short term solution becomes today's long-term catastrophe.

Nobody really knows what drives or sustains global markets. But everyone is free to speculate. *Moneymise* is an organ of the media, like many others, designed to guide the speculation of the wealthy. So long as the wealthy remain focused on how to exploit a crisis for themselves in the interest of getting richer, society itself is assured of getting poorer.

CHAPTER 44

Amy Wax and the Breakdown of America's Intellectual Culture

After four years of daily appearances, Fair Observer's Devil's Dictionary moves to a weekly format.

January 12, 2022

Since October 2017, we have featured [The Daily Devil's Dictionary](#) that appeared five times a week. In 2022, it will appear on a weekly basis on Wednesdays. We will shortly be announcing a new collaborative feature that extends our approach to deconstructing the language of the media.

Besides the Eiffel Tower and foie gras, France is known for having produced an intellectual class that, over the centuries, from Diderot's Encyclopédie to Derrida's critical theory, has successfully exported its products to the rest of the world.

France's intellectual history demonstrates that alongside traditional social classes, a nation may cultivate something called the intellectual class, a loose network of people who collectively produce ideas about society that are no longer restricted to the traditional categories of philosophy, science and literature. Prominent intellectuals merge all three in their quest to interpret the complexity of the world and human history.

French intellectuals are perceived as floating freely in the media landscape. American intellectuals, in contrast, tend to be tethered to universities or think tanks. They publish and sometimes appear in the media, but with a serious disadvantage, having to compete in shaping public discourse with far more influential media personalities such as Joe Rogan, Jordan Peterson or even Tucker Carlson.

A stale historical cliché compares Europe with ancient Greece and the US with the Roman Empire. Rome and the US both produced a vibrant and distinct popular culture, with a taste for gaudy spectacle and superficial entertainment.

But in Roman times, plebeian culture co-existed with a patrician culture cultivated by Rome's ruling class. Modern democracy roundly rejects the very idea of a ruling class. Commercialism has turned out to be the great equalizer. Everyone in America is expected to share the same culture of movies, TV and popular music. The same applies to popular ideas, whether political, scientific or economic.

Amy Wax is a law professor at the University of Pennsylvania who is not shy about expressing her ideas, notably her updated version of class differences. She is convinced that what she calls "bourgeois culture" replaced Rome's patrician culture in the US but is in danger of extinction. Wax believes everyone in the US, including recent immigrants, should share that culture. Anyone who resists should be excluded. She also thinks that race and ethnicity are reliable indicators of the capacity of immigrants to conform.

As a young woman, Wax paced the halls and absorbed the wisdom spouted in lectures at Yale, Oxford, Harvard and Columbia University. Along the way, she amassed the kind of elite educational experience that identifies her as a distinguished exemplar of the modern intellectual class. With such impeccable credentials, it is fair to assume that she is not only well-informed but has learned the fine art of responsible thinking, a quality the media attributes to such luminaries.

So could it have come about that such a distinguished thinker and ranking member of the intellectual class should now be accused of sharing the kind of white supremacist attitude Hillary Clinton (Wellesley, Yale) famously attributed to the "basket of deplorables"? The intellectual class in the US uniformly and loudly rejects all forms of racism. If Wax expresses ideas that echo racist theses, it would indicate that she is betraying her own intellectual class. Appropriately, her university acknowledged her betrayal when it [condemned](#) her "xenophobic and white supremacist" discourse.

In a podcast in late December, Wax went beyond her previously expressed belief that the US would “be better off with more whites and fewer nonwhites.” On that earlier occasion, she specifically targeted blacks, whom she categorizes as intellectually inferior. This time, she took aim at Asians, whose reputation for academic excellence and scientific achievement most people admire. She justified her attack in these terms: “As long as most Asians support Democrats and help to advance their positions, I think the United States is better off with fewer Asians and less Asian immigration.”

When the host of the podcast, Professor Glenn Loury, questioned her logic, she evoked “the danger of the dominance of an Asian elite in this country” who may “change the culture.” Wax’s fear of domination by a foreign race and her defense of white civilization could hardly convince Loury, who is black. Loury countered that the Asians Wax wants to exclude are “creating value” and “enlivening the society.”

“How do we lose from that?” he asks. In response, Wax offered her own rhetorical question: “Does the spirit of liberty beat in their breast?”

Our diabolical definition:



Spirit of liberty

America’s supreme civic virtue that consists of pursuing self-interested goals and conducting aggressive assaults against whatever one finds annoying

Spirit of liberty

Contextual Note

Wax offered her own definition of the spirit of liberty, which she identified as the virtue associated with “people who are mistrustful of centralized concentrations of authority who have a kind of ‘don’t tread on me’ attitude, who are focused ... on our freedoms, on our liberties, on sort of small- scale personal responsibility who are non-conformist in good ways.”

Apart from the fact that Wax is attributing a cultural attitude to “Asians” (more than half of humanity), her idea of liberty reflects feelings associated with aggressive, nationalistic historical memes (for example, “don’t tread on me”) rather than the kind of political concept we might expect from a serious intellectual. In his 1859 essay “On Liberty,” John Stuart Mill defined it as the “protection against the tyranny of political

rulers,” analyzing it in terms of the individual’s relationship with authority, not as a “spirit” or attitude. But Mill was English and, unlike Americans, the English are disinclined to celebrate attitude.

Wax, who is Jewish, paradoxically complained that Jews “have a lot to answer for ... numerically through their predominance.” She derides their “susceptibility to the idealistic, pie-in-the-sky socialist ideas.” When Loury accuses her of appealing to a stereotype, she objects that there’s nothing wrong with stereotyping when it is used correctly.” Just as Wax approves of non-conformity “in good ways” she condones “correct” stereotyping. She believes herself to be the arbiter of what’s good and correct.

Historical Note

Wax shares with Fox News host [Tucker Carlson](#) a sense of legitimate domination of what she calls “the tradition of the legacy population,” identified as the traditional white Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) majority. Wax aligns with cultural nationalists like Samuel Huntington, whose book “Who Are We: America’s Great Debate?” — following his famous “The Clash of Civilizations: And the Remaking of the World Order” — preached for the reaffirmation of the political and moral values transmitted by the WASP founders of American culture 400 years ago.

The Weatherhead Center for International Affairs of Harvard University [sums](#) up the components of the Puritans’ culture: “the English language, Protestant values, individualism, religious commitment, and respect for law.” The culture’s admirers routinely forget that their respect for law might mean disrespecting the law of the indigenous populations of the land they chose to occupy. Enforcing that respect sometimes translated as genocidal campaigns conducted in the name of that law. It also embraced slavery based on racial criteria.

Wax’s up-to-date WASP culture, which she prefers to call “bourgeois culture,” no longer requires genocide or slavery to prevail. Her defense of a largely imaginary legacy culture has nevertheless led her to embrace a racist view of humanity. While decrying the multicultural

“wokism” that she believes now dominates academic culture, she appears to believe 19th-century France rather than the Yankee Revolution sets the standard to live up to.

Wax is right to lament the very real breakdown in America’s intellectual culture. The trendy woke moralizing so prevalent in American academia deserves the criticism she levels at it. Both her attitude and that of woke scholars derive from the same puritanical tradition that insists on imposing its understanding of morality on everyone else.

Wax’s choice of “bourgeois culture” as the desirable alternative to wokism seems curious. Bourgeois culture is identified with the mores of a dominating urban upper-middle class that emerged in 19th century France that projected the image of a vulgar version of the aristocracy. It produced a culture specific to France, very different from the democratic culture of the United States at the time.

This highlights another difference. Whereas the French intellectual class, even when indulging in its traditional disputes, tends to agree on the meaning of the terms it fabricates, American intellectuals routinely bandy about terms they never seek to define or understand and use them to punish their enemies. That is what Wax has done with bourgeois culture and, in so doing, she has declared multiple races and ethnicities her enemies.

CHAPTER 45

Shedding a Tear for the Demise of Music

If for Shakespeare music was “the food of love,” today it has become a narrowly defined commodity.

February 16, 2022

This past weekend, The Guardian featured a [column](#) by Barbara Ellen with the title, “What Does Your Music Taste Say About You? Nothing Actually.” The answer to the title’s question made it easier for readers to decide whether or not to plunge into the article itself. And it was an extremely honest answer. For any reader seriously interested in the vast universe known as [music](#), “nothing” sums up the substance of the article. For anyone whose associations with the idea of music go beyond the knowledge of today’s popular songs, there isn’t much to learn here.

Ellen develops a perfectly justified critique of an incredibly trivial study from the University of Cambridge that had the pretension of being comprehensive because it involved “350,000 participants, from 50 countries, across six continents.” (Oxford, this alumnus does not mind telling you, would never have conducted anything so misguided and brainless.) The study sought to analyze the personality traits of people who, according to its self-description, “are drawn to similar music genres.” Among the traits it studied were descriptors such as “extrovert,” “open,” “agreeable” and “neurotic.”

Our diabolical definition:

Music

1. Up until late in the 20th century: A form of individual and collective expression, the most refined of the arts, that uses diverse technologies, including the human voice, which are combined in ways that permit the production of complex combinations of sound employed for the widest variety of social, ritual, religious and artistic purposes
2. Since the later part of the 20th century: commercially available recorded songs

Contextual Note

Ellen feigns being unaware of the first definition above. She seems to accept the idea that music has been definitively redefined sometime in the recent past by Napster and Spotify. Musical creators no longer have to toil within their communities marked by evolving traditions with ancient roots, relying on the range of objects bequeathed to them for collective musical expression. They have been liberated, first by recording technologies that enabled wide distribution across the globe, then by the miracle of digital instantaneity. But also by the marketing geniuses who now decide what music must sound like.

Modern musicians no longer need to think about the music of the past, except when their producers point out the occasional value of nostalgia. Even then, nostalgia at best covers

decades, not centuries. To thrive or even survive, musicians must simply focus on the music that sells today, the one their agents, publishers and marketers guide them to produce.

Ellen’s ability to write off the entire history of humanity’s music is mind-boggling. I’m even left wondering whether she has ever even heard of the famous medieval English song whose title is nearly a homophone with her name: “The Ballad of Barbara Allen.” That can’t of course be true because artists as modern as Joan Baez and Art Garfunkel have recorded it. Ellen undoubtedly knows a lot about the musical traditions she pretends to ignore. She clearly believes she is writing for an audience blithely unaware of music’s past. She leaves the distinct impression that anything that isn’t a commercial song is not music.

Ellen quite correctly objects to the premise of the Cambridge study that assumes the existence of a correlation between the preference for certain popular artists and personality traits. She is also correct when she notes that music “taste, like the humans who possess it, seems built from a dizzying array of variables.” Why is it then that she refuses to acknowledge the very real scope of that “dizzying array” as she reduces music to one narrowly defined type of musical genre: the professionally recorded popular song invented for monetization through radio and jukeboxes in the United States in the mid-20th century?

Perhaps the most revealing observation she makes concerns the circumstances in which people listen to music. “When you select a song,” she wonders, “are you happy, miserable, in love, heartbroken, angry? Or none of the above — just trying to chill while you make dinner, thanks. That’s pertinent, actually: where you are when you listen to music, what you’re doing. Working out. Driving. Strolling. Reading. Work. Leisure. In a pub or at a club. Lying in a darkened room, with AirPods in.”

What Ellen describes is the behavior of a music consumer, not a music lover. Music is reduced to the role of sound to correspond to a mood for an individual in an atomized world. The modern commercial song has systematically removed all the salient features of music as it has existed in every tradition, notably its harmonic

structure, melodic freedom and rhythmic contrasts. But most glaringly of all, it stifles the creative relationships between the musicians who produce the music. When songs are efficiently packaged, the relationship between musicians becomes purely an industrial one. Even live performances become artificial shows.

Ellen makes a very valid point when, contradicting the authors of the study, she writes that music “can also take you out of yourself. It is an escape chute, a liberator, as much as it is a mirror.” It is certainly true for musicians. But for them, unlike consumers, the sense of liberation is tied to the idea of mastering the constraints that musical creation imposes. The musician lives the experience as something vibrant and real. For the music consumer, it is prepackaged and therefore hyperreal. There may be escape but it won’t be liberation.

Ellen has a curious idea of what the function of music is in modern society. “Some people don’t even like music,” she notes. “They don’t yearn for a soundtrack to their life.” What better illustration of the degree to which the average person’s musical experience has become hyperreal? Movies are constructed with soundtracks, not human lives. Yet that appears to be how people are invited to think about their own lives, as a movie of which they are presumably the star.

Historical Note

Archeologists date the first musical instruments as far back as 18,000 years. Of course, animals and especially birds may have instilled in the earliest humans the idea that music could have an important role to play in their individual and collective lives.

Religions across the globe have associated music with the kinds of social rituals and spiritual quests they encourage. In other words, music has for many thousands of years functioned as a link between people and the natural world, societies and the universe. In traditional European cosmology before the 17th century’s scientific revolution, astronomers and philosophers posited the existence of mathematically perfect, heavenly harmonies called the “music of the spheres.”

Barbara Ellen is writing at a curious point in human history, as society begins to anticipate an as yet undefined cultural world order that will inevitably be imposed by the metaverse and artificial intelligence. For all we know, this may

simply be the final stage of the commercial revolution that we call the consumer society. If Mark Zuckerberg’s and Elon Musk’s forecasts have any validity, we are headed for a hyper-commercial revolution in which we will end up being nothing more than the product Facebook and Google have already turned us into.

There are some natural and valid reasons to think that music itself may refuse to be sucked into the vortex of the metaverse. Music is too close to the core of human life to be absorbed by Big Data. All past and present civilizations have been built from their evolving traditions. These include language, cooking, architecture, graphic arts and music. These traditions combine to produce scientific and religious beliefs, urban organization, poetry, pottery, jewelry, social hierarchies, public institutions and much else.

Although everything people produce has the potential of being reduced to a commodity with a price tag, the cultural output of any civilization emerges from a wide range of spontaneously

produced social activities. It is nevertheless true that the production and evolution of culture changed radically with the advent of the Industrial Revolution. This inevitably led to what we tend to think of as the ultimate avatar of civilization: the consumer society.

Ellen herself recognizes that “we have completely and irrevocably changed the way we consume and interact with music.” It’s all about money. She then shares with us a curious musing, that “perhaps there should be a global ‘cheapskate’ personality-category for those who don’t pay for music?” By making this suggestion, she clearly doubts that separating music from money will ever happen again. Sadly, she may be right.

CHAPTER 46

Kanye West Makes Gut Instinct Great Again

After his canceling for anti-Semitism, he seemed to flounder in an orgy of shame, but Kanye's fortune remains at \$400 million and his empire is intact. Hyperreality always wins, even when it loses.

November 16, 2022

This is an age of hyperreal personalities. They successfully impose an alternate version of the real world. Society comes to depend on it for its survival. It has become a necessary feature of today's consumer society, a 20th century concept minted in the US and exported to the rest of the world. Hyperreal personalities become symbols of the freedom from constraint that citizens of democracies hanker after without ever being able to achieve it for themselves.

In moral terms, hyperreal personalities can be good or bad. It doesn't really matter which. They are perceived as being beyond good and evil, in a Nietzschean sense. This is consistent with the principle that "there is no such thing as bad publicity." Their categorization as good or bad simply means they will be good in the eyes of some and bad for others. But once hyperreality is attained, they remain hyperreal for everyone.

Hyperreal personalities reflect two related phenomena in an advanced consumer culture. The first is the society's ability to provoke in the average citizen an obsession with fame, directly connected to success and wealth. Such an obsession demonstrates the validity of one of the most prized personality traits among ordinary Americans: assertiveness. If a hyperreal image and behavior are keys to cultural domination for a select few, assertiveness is everyone's key to survival.

Our Devil's Dictionary has often featured two hyperreal heroes: Donald Trump and Elon Musk. They stand as more than paragons of self-reliance and super-assertiveness. They have surged beyond the glory of self-affirmation. They have crossed over into a zone of moral impunity. They literally inhabit what Nietzsche imagined as a realm "beyond good and evil."

Although Trump has been officially "retired" for two years, he and Musk still dominate headlines.

Both cannot function without producing a continuous stream of hyperreal acts. In politics, Trump has no rivals. Despite a visible waning of his influence following the disappointing results of his less hyperreal acolytes in this month's midterm elections, Trump remains the powerful hyperreal magnet of politics on the American right. In the world of business and technology, Musk stands alone as the ultimate paragon of hyperreality. None of Musk's hyperwealthy rivals – Gates, Bezos, Zuckerberg – could imagine committing the kind of outrageous public antics he is known for. Like the Donald, Elon doesn't just occupy the public stage, he owns it.

So who stands next in the hierarchy of today's hyperreal personalities? In the light of recent events, the answer can only be Kanye West, or Ye, as he prefers to be called. He has long been in the media spotlight, but in recent weeks he has risen to new heights of public attention by descending to new lows of public behavior. The latest and worst of his sins is his vocal anti-Semitism. For a long time his status as a hyperreal hero protected him, that is, until he claimed to be immune to reproach, including the threat that Adidas might [cancel](#) the lucrative contract with his clothing line.

In the end, Adidas had no choice. Other commercial partners followed suit, leading to the breathless announcement that the Yeezy empire was in [ruins](#). Nevertheless, the ever confident hyperreal hero announced: "I lost 2 billion dollars in one day and I'm still alive." And now we learn that Adidas has [restored](#) the contract while simply suppressing the branding. Ye is indeed alive.

In the midst of this hypermelodrama, Ye [explained](#) how he manages to thrive: "I do certain things from a feeling, I just channel the energy. It just feels right. It's using a gut instinct, a connection with God and just brilliance."



Our diabolical definition:

Gut instinct

Gut instinct

The criterion that can always be appealed to when one is sure there is no convincing rational explanation for what one has decided

Contextual Note

Ye is not the only hyperreal hero with infinite trust in his gut instincts. Attacking the “half-baked ideas” of another equally famous hyperreal personality, Siva Vaidhyanathan, [writing](#) for the Guardian described “everything that [Elon] Musk expresses” as “a series of hunches and feelings, devoid of learning, analysis, rigor or consideration of consequences.” Vaidhyanathan goes further when he identifies the class of people that respond most enthusiastically to Musk’s oracular pronouncements, conspiratorial suspicions and spectacular insults. Musk’s “goofy collection of dorm-room-bong-hit-level ideas,” he writes, “is taken deeply seriously among the rich boys of Silicon Valley.” Musk just happens to be the richest to have emerged from the Valley.

Clearly hyperreal personalities have a talent for upsetting a lot of people and provoking serious backlash. Their stock may, in a trice, rise or plunge dramatically on the slightest occasion. Musk’s notorious tweet about taking Tesla private in July, 2018 landed him in an ocean of trouble with Wall Street’s Securities Exchange Commission (SEC). To many it seemed proof of his severe incapacity to manage companies, money and people. Musk was only worth about \$20 billion at the time. Now it’s around \$200 after [topping](#) \$300 billion in January. This year’s drop was largely due to Musk following his gut instinct – first forward, then backward, then forward again – on the purchase of Twitter. But being left with only \$200 billion to play with after so much grief doesn’t sound like the equivalent of the Gulag.

Historical Note

US culture now apparently requires a small number of hyperreal heroes. Not too many, just enough to reinforce the idea that Madison Avenue-Hollywood-Las Vegas style hyperreality will continue to dominate over the drab and worrisome reality of our dog-eat-dog world. Some dogs must have the right to become top dogs, barking freely in everyone’s direction and stealing their sirloin when the public’s eyes are focused on the hyperreal stage.

Business and entertainment seem perfectly adapted to hyperreality. Some might think that in

the politics of a modern democracy, hyperreality has no place. Politics is focused on making rational decisions, not following gut instincts. But such is the prestige of hyperreality that politics inevitably falls into the same pattern. Donald Trump’s career is living proof of that, but the storm has been brewing for a long time.

We tend to categorize hyperreal personalities as either dominantly bad or good. Bad ones threaten to undermine everything that’s good about the status quo. That’s what Trump did in 2016 and

continues to this day. Kanye West, the former rapper, was perfectly suited to that kind of role.

But good hyperreal personalities also exist. One could argue that Barack Obama is the archetype of a good hyperreal personality. He famously fabricated and projected his persuasive hyperreal persona into the public sphere with his speech at the 2004 Democratic convention. Sitting here in France trying to follow political news from the US, I confess that, at the time, I had no idea who he was. But after watching his speech I called my wife over to my PC. gave her a glimpse of his speech and told her: "This is the next president of the US." Maybe my earlier reading of Jean Baudrillard and Umberto Eco tipped me off.

Decades before Obama, two presidents, first John F Kennedy and then Ronald Reagan, showed that hyperreality deserved a place on the presidential map. They both rose to prominence and conquered the White House during what many see as the apex of consumer society culture.

The TV series *Mad Men* (2007-2015) celebrated the diabolically persuasive artificiality of Madison Avenue's advertising culture. Its narrative began in the year Kennedy was elected (1960) and ended as its hero, Don Draper, a decade later melted into the mindset of a group of New Age hippies in California. That was the year Ronald Reagan was elected to his second term as governor of the Golden State.

Political campaigns are, of course, never launched and run on the basis of gut instinct. Politics is an expensive business that requires a form of scientific marketing. It works best with candidates who can stick to the script. Part of the science is understanding that the voters generally follow their gut instinct rather than any form of critical thinking. Voters generally end up with the short end of the stick, whereas the most talented politicians can hope to become one of those rare hyperreal personalities allowed simply to follow their gut.

CHAPTER 47

How to Find the Best Superposition for Your Quantum Computer

Science is a serious business, as everyone knows. Which clearly means it is both serious and a business, except that thanks to a quantum effect it can also become entertainment.

November 30, 2022

The quantum revolution in physics is changing not only our understanding of the world we live in but also the way we’re likely to be living in the future. After Albert Einstein’s theory of general relativity, the quantum revolution was the second major game-changing physical theory of the 20th century. Albert’s theory gave us the atomic bomb and nuclear power, two factors that have indelibly marked human history. Quantum mechanics has so far had less impact. But the media keep telling us that a revolution is in the offing. We must get ready for the age of quantum computing.

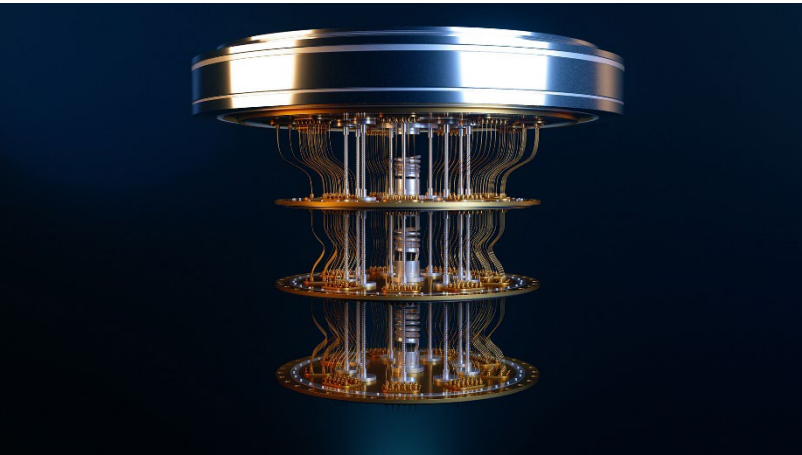
So, what is a quantum computer? In a *Wall Street Journal Magazine* [interview](#) back in 2017, Bill Gates famously admitted that quantum computing is “the one part of Microsoft where they put up slides that I truly do not understand.” In the same interview, Microsoft’s CEO, Satya Nadella (who replaced Gates) described quantum computing as “the next breakthrough that will allow us to keep up this exponential growth in computing power and to solve problems.” That’s one way to dodge the question. Focus on the promise of future earnings.

Some believe that quantum computing may never happen, at least not in the way and especially on the scale that its promoters expect. Sankar Das Sarma, [writing](#) for the *MIT Technology Review* says he loves the idea, but points to one obstacle. “The

only problem? Actually making a quantum computer that could do it.” He isn’t alone in thinking that theoretical and physical obstacles are too many to count on it happening any time soon.

Sabine Hossenfelder, a German theoretical physicist who popularizes scientific knowledge on YouTube is even more severe. She [cites](#) numerous colleagues who agree with her conviction that there will never be a quantum computer. She also cites Oxford physicist Nikita Goulianov who in a recent [article](#) in the Financial Times offers a potted history of the last decade of quantum computing as a business proposition:

“By the 2010s capital had become cheap, and investors started taking notice, even if they had no real understand of the technology (beyond the “a qubit can simultaneously be both one and zero” cliché). As more money flowed in, the field grew, and it became progressively more tempting for scientists to oversell their results. With time, salesman-type figures, typically without any understanding of quantum physics, entered the field, taking senior positions in companies and focusing solely on generating fanfare. After a few years of this, a highly exaggerated perspective on the promise of quantum computing reached the mainstream, leading to a greed and misunderstanding taking hold and the formation of a classical bubble. ““



Our diabolical definition:

Oversell (results)

Oversell (results)

A verb describing a fundamental skill without which modern capitalism, especially in the technology sector, could not work.

Contextual Note

A famous English proverb tells us that “a good wine needs no bush.” This is generally understood to mean that a worthwhile product doesn’t need to be advertised or actively promoted. It sells itself. Its inherent qualities are its only sales pitch.

The expression is puzzling today because of the word “bush.” It refers to a practice dating back to Roman times, when inns would display a bundle of greenery to announce the sale of local wine or beer, presumably made from the “bush” on display. In [England](#), as recently as the 19th century, pubs suspended the greenery from the end of a pole called the “Ale Stake.” People familiar with the quality of the brew didn’t need to see the bush to know where to go.

The popularity of the proverb demonstrates a bit of traditional wisdom that all cultures like to celebrate. Quality sells, and more effectively than the smoothest salesperson. Authenticity rules. Perhaps it was true once upon a time and in some places, especially when communities functioned more or less as organic wholes. There were times in the past when markets and communities were largely co-synonymous.

The 20th century became the age of mass production and advertising. Madison Avenue crafted what some thought of as the “[science of persuasion](#).” It cultivated the supreme skill of

overselling. It focused on industrialized consumer products, from tobacco and chewing gum to house appliances and cars, from typewriters to home computers.

But quantum computing is anything but a consumer product. It isn’t even a product, since it doesn’t yet exist in any viable form. Gourianov isn’t thinking of [Don Draper](#) or any of the other Mad Men of Madison Avenue. He isn’t referring to high-powered marketing executives or to Arthur Miller’s poor, hapless [Willy Loman](#). He makes it clear that the people who “oversell their results” are not specialists of marketing and sales, but, in this case, scientists.

The process Gourianov describes ends up in the hands of two classes of people with an inordinate degree of influence over the modern world. The first class is “salesman-type figures” who take “senior positions in companies and [focus] solely on generating fanfare.” The second is the kind of people whose job is to describe what Gourianov refers to at the beginning of his article, those who can create financial bubbles which “occur when large groups of investors repeatedly make poor investment decisions, often due to greed, misunderstanding and easy money.”

Whether you’re a scientist, a journalist, an investor or a financial director, in today’s world you must learn the art of overselling.

Historical Note

Science has moved into a new dimension. The late [Rod Serling](#), the pioneer of television science fiction six decades ago, would undoubtedly place the science we see today smack in the middle of his “Twilight Zone.” The 21st century has not yet closed the gap between Western civilization’s pragmatic idea of science as it existed in the 19th century and the abstraction it has become thanks to relativity and quantum mechanics in the 20th century.

Relativity and quantum mechanics have become established features of our scientific landscape. Both are accepted as true, but there are serious problems of compatibility that haven’t been resolved. The debate over theory has led to a variety of imagined ways of resolving the contradictions.

One of the most talked-about ideas imagined as a means of closing the gap between the macro theory of relativity and the micro theory of quantum physics is the [multiverse](#). Britannica [describes](#) the concept as “a hypothetical collection of potentially diverse observable universes, each of which would comprise everything that is experimentally accessible by a connected community of observers.” Some very serious scientists have in recent years posited the existence of such parallel universes in which multiple versions of each of our selves may exist, each time living through slightly different scenarios.

Another hypothesis that has appealed to both scientist-philosophers, like [Nick Bolstrum](#), and scientist-entertainers like TV celebrity [Neil de Grasse Tyson](#), is that what we are living in is somebody’s else’s computer simulation. These

and other scientists and philosophers go so far as to claim that it is at least as probable as any other hypothesis. And of course, we mustn't forget [Elon Musk](#), who famously said there is only a "one in billions" chance that we're not living in a computer simulation. He now claims that the mother of one (or perhaps two) of his children, Grimes, is a [simulation](#) "created in his brain." She agrees. We expect the same may be true of [Nole Skum](#), the hero of one of our "Fly on the Wall" columns.

In one of her YouTube [videos](#), Sabine Hossenfelder calls the simulation hypothesis "pseudoscience" and "intellectual entertainment." She categorizes it not as a

scientific theory but as an act of faith and explains why.

Those non-scientists among us who are curious enough to try to keep up with the big issues that the physical sciences are grappling with today – whether it's the multiverse, dark matter, quantum entanglement, simulated consciousness, or the speed of light as the universe's speed limit – should realize one thing after examining these arguments. All the names mentioned above have mastered a skill that has nothing directly to do with their scientific or philosophical knowledge and expertise. In conformity with the iron-clad laws of our current stage of civilized hyperreality, they have all learned the art and science of overselling.

CHAPTER 48

The Trump Dynasty is as Dysfunctional as the Windsors

When Donald Trump’s niece keeps spilling the beans, the mess left on the kitchen floor creates a stench that not only affects the whole household, but reveals a lot about the evolution of America’s political and media culture.

December 28, 2022

Mary Trump is the exception in a family famously focused on personal ambition, the accumulation of wealth and the exercise of power. Unlike the flamboyant members of the family perpetually in the news, Donald Trump’s niece is an ordinary working person, a psychologist and author, neither a real estate mogul, White House adviser, owner of a brand of jewelry or world-beating politician. Her net worth is [estimated](#) at a mere \$1 million.

In 2020 Mary sued her uncle, alleging “that she was defrauded of millions of dollars in a 2001 family settlement.” Alas, as [CNN reported](#) in November, a “New York judge threw out Mary Trump’s lawsuit against former President Donald Trump, saying her claims are barred by an earlier settlement she reached more than 20 years ago.” She has, of course, filed an appeal.

In an interview with MSNBC, Mary dropped her latest bombshell about her increasingly disgraced uncle. *Business Insider* titled its [article](#) on this event: “Ivanka and Jared Kushner cut ties with Trump because he is ‘losing value’ and they don’t need him anymore, Mary Trump says”

As a professional psychologist, Mary understands what drives members of the Trump clan. As an American millionaire she also fully understands the concept of “losing value.” And, as a member of the Trump tribe, she knows how her people reason, as this quote from the interview reveals: “It’s the same with most of Donald’s inner circle — there is always a transactional calculation being made and a lot of people are making the calculation that it just isn’t worth it for them anymore.”



Our diabolical definition:

Transactional calculation

Transactional calculation
For anyone circulating in the highest spheres of US culture, the ultimate skill applied to all decision-making, whether in the context of business, family, the arts or even romance.

Contextual Note

The Donald should have known that cheating a member of one’s own enterprising family might entail a risk. Then again, someone like Trump – who possesses wealth that he refuses to share with others—

understands that the savings refusing represents serves to pay the lawyers who will step in to neutralize that risk.

Transactional calculation is the core skill mastered by anyone who belongs to the elite in the US. The Trump clan's version of it may represent an extreme, but the skill set it reflects can be found deep in the commonly shared competitive value system that makes up the core of US culture. Even among the elite, most Americans, most of the time, focus on their combat with the outside world and exclude their families from the assertive rat race that defines their lives and personalities. In US culture, families and the home symbolize a safe space in which the relentless pressure of social, professional, economic and psychological competition remains mercifully absent.

The first thing a good competitor and an elite businessperson does is assess the promised gains and known risks of any new project. Mary Trump tells us that Donald's daughter, Ivanka and his son-in-law, Jared Kushner, have come to a belated realization and "grasped that their association with the former president 'damaged them, at least socially.'" Accordingly, they are distancing themselves from Trump's third presidential campaign. It is a simple calculation, thanks to which they "finally realized that they gain more by staying away from Donald than they do by staying aligned with him." Always ask yourself the essential question: Where do you expect to gain more?

Historical Note

As the January 6, 2021 insurrection revealed, elections in a modern democracy can be traumatizing. Many people, including Trump, saw the democratic transition, normally a banal process, as the equivalent of regime change. The troubling effect of that contested election is proving far-reaching. Most of the media and much of the political class have been mobilizing their resources to prevent an impending catastrophe in 2024, were Trump to repeat his come-from-behind victory in 2016.

It is no accident that *MSNBC* – existentially committed to the monoculture of Trump hatred – chose to interview Mary Trump. Her role for the media is similar to that of a defecting Russian military officer, ready to reveal the madness of Putin and predicting his inevitable downfall. (Trump hatred and Russia hatred have become the two faces of a single obsession that colors the reporting of most of the "liberal" media and which may, incidentally, be bringing humanity to the brink of nuclear annihilation).

Mary Trump apparently sees this less as a betrayal of loyalty and more as proof that her uncle Donald has lost all credibility. While it lasted, Ivanka's and Jared's tight nepotistic relationship with President Trump was financially profitable for them. The ultimate proof of that came when, six months after the Trump clan forfeited the keys to the White House, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) invested \$2 billion in Jared's private equity venture, Affinity Partners. This was a much deserved windfall for the man who whispered to the reigning US president MBS's most pressing needs and desires.

Things may nevertheless be becoming a bit more complicated. Earlier this year, *The New York Times* [revealed](#) that "[b]efore committing \$2 billion to Mr. Kushner's fledgling firm, officials at a fund led by the Saudi crown prince questioned taking such a big risk." Now that Donald Trump's ship seems to have hit an iceberg, MBS may end up regretting his commitment.

Jared and Ivanka appear to be sticking to their new Middle Eastern game plan. *Business Insider* tells us that "the couple appears to be prioritizing their personal life, traveling to Egypt with their three children and attending the World Cup in Qatar." MBS's billions may be working like a magnet to draw them permanently towards the Arabian desert and distancing them from Mar-a-Lago.

That same media is right to highlight the case of Ivanka and Jared. On their own, they exemplify some of the core trends in US culture. *Business Insider* delves even more deeply than Mary Trump herself into the psychology of what once appeared to be the American equivalent of a royal couple. It appears "that Trump's eldest daughter 'hated all the criticism and the threats' that came with politics, and was 'unhappy about how a lot of their friends turned their back on them.'"

Even if Trump turns around his current stretch of bad luck, manages to secure the Republican nomination and beats the Democratic candidate in 2024, Ivanka and Jared, thanks to their friendship with MBS, are convinced they have already achieved their principal goal. As Mary noted, "Ivanka and Jared are legitimately wealthy people apart from whatever Donald is doing, so they don't need him to the same degree they might have."

In Mary's eyes, Trump is a falling stock who is "losing value." No wise investor – and Jared definitely wants to be thought of as a wise investor – bets on a stock that is losing value, even when that same stock was the key to producing all the worth he now possesses. Jared doesn't need Trump because he has a new spiritual father-in-law, MBS, a man who will never have to face the humiliation of losing a "stolen election." Now that The Donald's fortunes have taken a deep dive, being associated with him is risky. In comparison, Ivanka and Jared have no reason to fear that being associated with the man who ordered the murder of Jamal Khashoggi could socially damage them. After all, MBS has already given them \$2 billion to play with, which is a much better deal than anything

they could hope for from a new term of Donald Trump in the White House.

Unless, of course, the damage to Trump in his Humpty-Dumpty decline produces a knock-on effect to the business reputation of Jared himself. We might then imagine that MBS – skilled in his own Middle Eastern way in the art of transactional calculation – would seek a devious way of getting his \$2 billion back. That amount may represent chump change for the crown prince, but he could see it as a matter of principle. He once [claimed](#) to have Jared in his pocket. If his Saudi brethren think that the son-in-law has bilked him of billions, MBS might want revenge. That, after all, is one of the well-established principles of transactional calculation.

PART VIII

US Foreign Policy

CHAPTER 49

Can Anything About US Foreign Policy Be Normal?

The Biden administration is doing its best to conform to a norm defined by Jared Kushner.

June 01, 2022

In his 2020 presidential campaign Joe Biden allowed himself the luxury of breaking with a long tradition of intimate friendship with Saudi Arabia when he promised to turn Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman (MBS) into a “pariah” on the international stage. It was the future president’s way of advertising his moral fiber by condemning the man the CIA accused of murdering journalist Jamal Khashoggi. It also enabled him to differentiate himself from his clearly immoral predecessor, Donald Trump, whose policies and most dubious friendships he promised to overturn.

Though actively encouraged – or at least enthusiastically predicted – by Biden’s State Department, the Russian invasion of Ukraine had the inevitable, embarrassing effect of upsetting the global oil market. Prices at the pump in the US began climbing vertiginously upwards. MBS, the best friend of Trump’s corrupt son-in-law Jared Kushner, proved deaf to Washington’s entreaties to increase production to relieve the pressure on prices.

Biden’s dilemma with rising prices at the pump was compounded by his intention, displeasing to the Saudis, to return to the Iran nuclear deal from which Trump had withdrawn. His latest response to the crisis or degraded relations with the traditional Saudi ally appears to be as surprising as many other turnarounds: a return to the totally discredited Trump-Kushner “deal of the century” touted to solve the perennial Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

“The Biden administration,” [Axios](#) reported last week, “has been quietly mediating among Saudi Arabia, Israel and Egypt on negotiations that, if successful, could be a first step on the road to the normalization of relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel.”

In diplomatic parlance, *quietly* means conducted in a way that, even if leaked, the public may not take notice. *Normalization* is a little trickier, providing the Devil’s Dictionary entry of this week.



Our diabolical definition:

Normalization

In diplomacy, an arrangement ensuring that the interests of the most powerful and influential will be defined as a norm that everyone – including the victims of such arrangements – must respect, if not honor.

Contextual Note

[Quoted](#) by The Intercept, Sarah Leah Whitson, executive director of Democracy in the Arab World Now, clarifies the meaning of normalization in this context. “Normalization? What’s that looking like? An apartheid

government signing a deal with unelected tyrants in the region? What kind of normal is that?”

This raises a series of other questions for President Joe Biden and the Democrats. How

“normalized” can things get in the Middle East under Biden before voters at home accuse him of betraying his own “moral stance” regarding the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi? How will this affect whatever progress Biden’s team hopes to make with the Iran deal, which is ongoing but appears seriously stalled? Finally, what effect will the knowledge of the expected normalization have on the Palestinian question itself? There seem to be a few contradictions that will someday have to be resolved.

Trita Parsi, executive vice president of the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, explained to *The Intercept* that America’s role as a security partner in the process will have the effect of incentivizing America’s partners “to pursue reckless policies with the impression that the United States will fix it for them at the end of the day.” This has become a recognizable pattern with increasingly disastrous direct or indirect consequences, from Vietnam to Ukraine.

All this highlights a serious turning point in geopolitics. For decades the “Pax Americana” was considered an inviolable norm, the key to normality across much of the face of the globe. The implicit role of the US as the benevolent overseer of the security – not just of its allies but of entire regions – has increasingly become the

object of explicit critique. The interests and actions of the US were long considered synonymous with the famous “rule of law” that held the world together financially, commercially and militarily.

It could be that the strongest sign of a declining empire – and a calling into question of the meaning of a particular “rule of law” – is precisely the shift from implicit, automatic acceptance to explicit critique and indistinct rumblings of discontent. Anything that is implicitly accepted by a majority of nations becomes the standard by which normalization of relationships will be achieved.

When implicit acceptance becomes fragile, the norms themselves may shift. Norms, after all, are fundamentally pragmatic and have no inherently positive moral status. They are defined statistically as practices that are so common they become features of the behavioral landscape. Once a practice is accepted, it may be disapproved by significant minorities, but it cannot be seriously contested. That is why diplomacy more often than not results in a fait accompli. That is also why private gun ownership in the US is considered an inviolable right. It’s a right that produces multiple and increasingly frequent wrongs.

Historical Note

The idea behind normalization has always been semantically related to the reduction of tensions. In some people’s minds it is associated with the obtention of peace. But normalization describes a process of moving towards a goal, whereas peace describes a stable status, or the goal itself. As Trita Parsi explains, the eventual normalization now being negotiated “reduces tensions between Saudi and Israel while cementing enmity with Iran. That is not a peace agreement.”

The history of the word *normalization* reveals something about the role the idea has taken on in the modern world. It is a distinctly modern term. At the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 that ended Europe’s horrific Thirty Years’ War pitting Protestant and Catholic polities against one another, no one would have thought of the solution as normalization. At the time, no ideal existed that people might be tempted to call “normal.” Westphalia nevertheless marks the moment the idea of the nation state began to emerge as the norm for political organization.

The word *normalization* first appeared in written English in the middle of the 19th century as a scientific term. According to [Merriam-Webster](#) it was only following the First World War “that the words *normalize* and *normalization* were used to refer to the act of achieving political stability between two nations.” It is also the moment, in 1920, when the future president Warren G Harding produced his campaign slogan – “Return to Normalcy” – coining a word many still considered barbaric.

For all its faults, Harding’s idea of normalcy expresses a truly modern concept, an unstated ideal associated with the emerging consumer society. Normal life consists not of soldiers going to war, but of average Joes competing for a job that enables them to work for a corporation where they produce and, even more importantly, consume. Normal human beings shouldn’t even think about politics – though they should be prepared for war if their nation decides to go to war. In other words, between wars, there really should be something called normalcy.

The contrast between normalcy and war thus became a binary constant in Americans' thinking. This was a moment in history in which people began to think that war might not be a "normal" occurrence, whereas in the European tradition dating from feudal times, war was the usual form of competition. It is hardly coincidental that World War I was the first major war in which a wide variety of powerfully efficient technologies became the "norm" for weaponry and in which civilian populations were suddenly affected in novel ways and on more massive scales than in the past.

The First World War was quickly given the misnomer of "the war to end all wars" by its survivors. Two decades later, a bigger war to end all wars occurred. And though we are still awaiting the possibility of a third world war, all kinds of wars have been conducted since the last

world war. Normalizing has become a lost art to the extent that peace between ideological or cultural adversaries now depends largely on trade relations that are too costly to call into question rather than the existence of a peace-enforcing authority.

But perhaps fond memories of how the original Cold War correlated with a phase of unrivaled prosperity for the consumer society have left their imprint on decision-makers inside the Beltway. Despite nearly provoking a nuclear conflagration on at least two occasions the first time around, they appear tempted to have a go at a 21st century Cold War, convinced as they seem to be that what made the American empire then can save it from its precipitous decline today. They may see that as just another attempt at normalization.

CHAPTER 50

A Crisis of Willingness for Joe Biden?

Biden the good cop? Pelosi the bad cop? Asia is literally left scratching its head over US foreign policy.

August 18, 2022

The US has long understood that it can't rule the world alone. That would seem to be the logical position of any nation committed to the idea of democracy. Isn't democracy about preventing a monopoly on power? In the background is an ethical principle generally recognized as appropriate to democratic societies: respect for diversity. And as Machiavelli accurately pointed out long ago, princes who earn the respect of the people they rule over find it easier to rule.

Democratic decision-making and respect would therefore appear to be essential assets of any nation seeking to rule the world order. The US has been managing what it likes to call the "rules-based order" pretty much unencumbered for the past 30 years. But neither the notion of democratic power-sharing nor the ethics of respect have played a significant role in the foreign policy of recent American administrations. Instead, a much simpler reasoning has prevailed. It derives from the one principle of the American capitalist credo no honest citizen is allowed to doubt, summed up in three letters: ROI, return on investment.

At some point in the recent past, American presidents began to understand that the investment required to rule the world would be simply too expensive for a single nation to bear. It would be beyond even the permanently extensible means of a nation whose money every other nation in the world is required to hold and cherish, indirectly and involuntarily underwriting the American economy. Just as the wealthiest business people borrow other people's money rather than risking their own when making the colossal investments that allow them to control powerful corporations, the US leads the global economy by finding ways of getting the allies in its coalitions to invest.

The hegemonic strategy that consists of using coalitions to structure one's empire, leaving them with the major burden, is a lesson Americans gleaned from observing the fate of recent empires. Napoleon's spectacularly successful but short-lived European empire discredited the idea of a centrally controlled empire. Britain's far more enduring and expansive global empire proved too cumbersome to manage in the face of

competition. Going it alone will always be a costly business. Moreover, centrally-managed empires easily become the target of resentment by the oppressed and neglected across the entire globe.

Following 9/11, George W Bush decided unilaterally to punish the Afghan nation, not for organizing the attack on New York and Washington DC, but for the crime of insisting on defining an appropriate legal framework for effectively bringing Osama Bin Laden to justice rather than simply apprehending the man the US had identified as the perpetrator. Invading Afghanistan alone would have been awkward. Claiming a terrorist's crime was an act of war, Bush invoked the artificial solidarity of NATO to drag the designated allies into a war they had no right to refuse.

When in early 2003, Bush decided to launch a new war he described as "preemptive" – meaning he could not mobilize NATO, because the US had not been attacked – he called for the creation of a "coalition of the willing." The name alone ironically pointed to the fragility and potential criminality of the endeavor. It also reflected a consistent American appetite to divide humanity into two, in this case, the willing and the unwilling.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February produced a similar logic. It was also about NATO, even though no NATO nation had been attacked. Like Bush, Biden required a boost of literal "willingness" on the part of potentially refractory partners.

The strategy worked to apparent perfection. Europe now awaits, with growing trepidation, a winter of discontent on the part of its own population. In the meantime, the US is clearly calling all the shots. The first [shot](#) to be called – which the now discredited Boris Johnson [delivered](#) personally to superhero Volodymyr Zelenskyy – was the order given to keep the shooting going for as long as possible. The US and its defense industry are particularly fond of wars that, like a good TV series, last for numerous seasons.

The Joe Biden administration has been attempting a similar move to assemble a coalition

in East Asia, though this time with a change of emphasis. As described by Sarah Zheng and Philip Heijmans in an [article](#) on Bloomberg, the Biden doctrine in the Pacific appeared to be resolutely non-confrontational. At the same time, the president and leader of his party did nothing to prevent House Speaker Nancy Pelosi from

reminding the world that the true character of the US is to be boldly confrontational. “Since taking office,” they explain, “President Joe Biden has sought to build a broad coalition in Asia to push back against Chinese overreach, in part by telling smaller economies they don’t need to pick sides.”



Our diabolical definition:

Pick sides

Pick sides

The choice the United States typically offers to other countries as soon as it has committed to conflict against another state, a policy that can be summed up as “picking a fight always precedes picking a side.”

Contextual Note

Since taking office in January 2021, Biden has repeatedly promoted a new Manichean worldview that divides the nations of the world into two opposed camps: democracy vs. authoritarian regimes. At the same time, Bloomberg’s reporters describe a policy aimed at establishing “a more robust US leadership presence in Asia to counter China in a way that was palatable to nations that need strong trade ties with Beijing to boost their economies.” They point to “a stark contrast with the Trump administration” who pressured other nations to take “steps that would effectively force them to choose between the world’s biggest economies.”

Pelosi’s provocation clearly moved the Asian perception of American policy back to its fundamental Manichean position. The Speaker made it [clear](#) that it is always about picking one’s side, “as the world faces a choice between autocracy and democracy.” It is true that Trump’s

“picking a side” focused only on economic choices whereas the Biden-Pelosi administration frames the battle in quasi-Apocalyptic terms, to counter the equivalent of Gog (Russia) and Magog (China). ““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,” Henry Kissinger recently [explained](#) to the Wall Street Journal.

The Bloomberg writers note the shift felt across Asia. “Yet all of a sudden, after months of trying to make it comfortable for countries to align with the US, Pelosi’s visit forced Asia to take a stand on China’s most sensitive issue of all. And many governments just put their heads down.” Putting their heads down strongly suggests losing face, an effect that Asians will never simply dismiss and forget. If it does come down to picking a side, the US finds itself in a decidedly weaker position.

Historical Note

When George Bush put together his “coalition of the willing” in March 2003, he had already decided to go to war. Instead of consulting Britain, Spain and any of the other “willing” nations, he simply invited them to follow his will. This followed a similar logic to his ruse 18 months earlier when he coerced NATO to

assume the consequences of his refusal to consider working with the Taliban to bring Bin Laden to justice and thereby neutralize Al Qaeda’s presence in Afghanistan. In October 2001, *The Guardian* [reported](#) that “US officials appear to have dismissed the proposal and are instead hoping to engineer a split within the

Taliban leadership.” They quickly stopped hoping. Instead, NATO obediently followed the US into a war that would last for two disastrous and fruitless decades.

Bush did exactly what a “leader of the free world” is expected to do. He led so that the others could follow. In April 1999 NATO published a [document](#) announcing its fundamental principle: “Our Alliance is and must remain a Euro-Atlantic institution that acts by consensus. But we must be prepared to prevent, deter, and respond to the full spectrum of threats to Alliance interests and values.” Given the consistency of events in both 2001 and 2022, it should now be clear that “consensus” means automatic consent

by all members with the unilaterally decided intentions of the US.

No one knows today whether the Biden administration’s strategy in Ukraine – with no NATO troops present but weapons galore – will produce the intended results. If Afghanistan is anything to go by, the hope could drag on for another 20 years. Now a parallel logic is developing in Asia. The Bloomberg article concludes by quoting Harvard scholar, Seong-hyon Lee. “What the US lacks is coherence and clarity in its China policy. It makes allies scratch their heads.” In Ukraine, they have stopped scratching their heads and are more focused on cauterizing their wounds.

CHAPTER 51

The Biden Administration Makes a Show Of Being Open

While refusing peace negotiations in Ukraine and punishing Democrats who call for it, the White House wants people to think it's open to do what it categorically refuses to do.

November 09, 2022

The world is getting wearier by the day of a war in Ukraine that the Biden administration has promised to fuel “as long as it lasts.” That appears to mean at least until Vladimir Putin accepts early retirement and the Kremlin unconditionally surrenders. Not many bookies in Las Vegas are willing to bet on either of those things happening any time soon. All of which means that “as long as it lasts” could translate as “forever,” an epithet that ends up being attached to most of the wars the US gets involved in.

Even the nations of Europe most loyal to NATO have begun to understand the danger of committing to a war that they perceive as having less and less to do with Ukraine and everything to do with Washington’s belief in its capacity to control the global economy, even at the cost of undermining the economy of its allies.

Wars are expensive and produce a wide range of annoying effects. They end up taking a toll on people’s psyche. And though most of the time what the people think and want generally has little effect on policy, when elections roll around, their psyche might end up mattering. And even if the US manages to control the message at home, it counts on its allies, whose media are much harder to control from Washington.

The grief attached to the Ukraine war has begun to rattle some people in Washington. *The Washington Post* featured an [article](#) this week with

the title: “U.S. privately asks Ukraine to show it’s open to negotiate with Russia.” The three journalists who authored the article describe the delicate task the US government is faced with today, as many leaders in Europe are beginning to worry precisely about the state of their populations’ psyche.

As the article’s title indicates, it isn’t a question of making decisions or revising policy. The point is “to show” something, not to make it happen. Politics will also produce a particular version of hyperreality, in which things need not be real. They must simply appear to be real.

The article claims to share with its readers the true motives of the White House, “according to people familiar with the discussions.” It takes the trouble to clarify what this “show” of being open does not mean. “The request by American officials is not aimed at pushing Ukraine to the negotiating table, these people said. Rather, they called it a calculated attempt to ensure the government in Kyiv maintains the support of other nations facing constituencies wary of fueling a war for many years to come.”

Americans can thus be reassured. The “show” isn’t: an attempt to provoke the unimaginable: actual negotiations with the diabolical Vladimir Putin. It’s nothing more than a “calculated attempt” to show something that isn’t true.



Our diabolical definition:

Calculated attempt

Calculated attempt

Carefully fabricated lie designed to create an impression opposite to visible reality

Contextual Note

The trio of *The Washington Post* journalists articulate with precision what's behind this need for a calculated attempt. "US officials," they report, "acknowledge that President Volodymyr Zelensky's ban on talks with [Putin] has generated concern in parts of Europe, Africa and Latin America, where the war's disruptive effects on the availability and cost of food and fuel are felt most sharply." In other words, this is neither a diplomatic nor a political problem. It certainly isn't inviting a debate about the morality of war or promoting the advantages of peace. No, it's about the image of a policy that is beginning to fray some people's nerves in other parts of the world. In short, it's a PR problem. The task at hand is damage control.

One person cited in the report has even given it a name. "Ukraine fatigue is a real thing for some of our partners," according to one of their anonymous officials. Notice this official's emphasis on the idea of Ukraine fatigue being "a real thing." It's the fatigue that's real and worrying, not the horrors associated with the war or its consequences for humanity at large.

Historical Note

Most people are now aware of the fact that after a series of traumatic events we are living through a momentous period of history: four years of Donald Trump in the White House, three years of Covid and the dramas attached to it, the chaotic US withdrawal from the oldest of its "forever wars" in Afghanistan, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine followed by the apoplectic if not apocalyptic reaction of the nations associated in NATO, to say nothing of the increasingly visible effects of climate change. All these things have heightened everyone's uncertainty about the future and of the trajectory of human history.

Today's journalism has an uncomfortable relationship with history. Journalists have traditionally preferred highlighting the drama of simple oppositions, of contests that pit one side against the other. They prefer reducing questions to the level of black and white decision-making. But history will always be complex. At moments of radical transition or transformation, simple oppositions cannot do justice to reality. Believing they can make things even more desperately complex. In this case it raises the very real prospect of nuclear war.

One interesting and revealing remark in this article concerns *The Washington Post's* analysis of the state of opinion in the US, where "polls show eroding support among Republicans for continuing to finance Ukraine's military at current levels." The Biden administration and *The Washington Post's* want readers to believe that only Republicans are questioning the unlimited generosity of the White House in its commitment to prolonging the war. In fact, a significant minority of Democrats (19%) also [oppose](#) even supporting the Ukraine war effort, let alone signing a blank check.

American media and US politicians appear to be complicit in seeking to maintain the perception of an absolute contrast between the two dominant parties, even when, more often than not, they rarely disagree, especially on foreign policy. The insistent focus on a binary contrast and party rivalry conveniently serves to deviate attention from the more fundamental issues that neither of the parties seems eager to address.

The Washington Post's journalists acknowledge the growing complexity but decline to make sense of it. Here is how they describe the quandary the US is faced with. "The discussions illustrate how complex the Biden administration's position on Ukraine has become, as U.S. officials publicly vow to support Kyiv with massive sums of aid 'for as long as it takes' while hoping for a resolution to the conflict that over the past eight months has taken a punishing toll on the world economy and triggered fears of nuclear war."

The journalists even highlight what has become an embarrassing historical fact, adding to the complexity. "While Zelensky laid out proposals for a negotiated peace in the weeks following Putin's Feb. 24 invasion, including Ukrainian neutrality and a return of areas occupied by Russia since that date, Ukrainian officials have hardened their stance in recent months." But that is as far as they accept to go.

Unsurprisingly – because that would truly complicate things – they don't ask themselves the essential questions any journalist aware of these facts should focus on. Who are these "Ukrainian

officials?” What is their relationship with Zelenskyy or Zelenskyy’s with them? What avowable or unavowable logic is behind the “hardening” that took place? Do the hardliners represent average Ukrainians or, as some have suggested, groups of radical nationalists with strong neoNazi sympathies? Are there other identifiable interests inside or outside Ukraine that have produced this hardening?

All mainstream journalists in the US appear not to be curious about these questions. Or perhaps they are instructed not to be curious in public. As the kerfuffle within the Democratic party around progressives timidly recommending negotiations

showed, seeking peace is a forbidden topic of discussion. Policy, everywhere and always, is about power plays. So why shy away from tracking and analyzing them, especially when the stakes may be nuclear war?

For the media, the answer to that question is easy. Just as at the time of George W. Bush’s invasion of Iraq, journalists interested in keeping their jobs have been given a task to accomplish: make sure that the nation remains unified behind its leaders. It’s an argument that has some merit. But when things become this complex and downright dangerous, it may be time to reconsider its wisdom.

PART IX

US Politics

CHAPTER 52

The Pentagon’s Latest Glorious Failure

After failing in war, the Pentagon excels in failing to pass audits.

January 20, 2022

For centuries, the idea prevailed in our competitive civilization that when someone fails a fundamental qualifying test, it means they should return to their studies and keep a low profile until they felt ready to prove their capacity to pass the test. Someone who fails a driving test will be given a chance to come back a second or even third time. But most people who fail three or four times will simply give up trying to swallow their pride and accept their permanent dependence on public transport, family and friends. The same holds true for law school graduates seeking to pass the bar or indeed students in any school who repeatedly fails an examination.

In the world of Silicon Valley, an entrepreneur whose first startup fails gets up, dusts off and returns to the race. The venture capitalists will often look at a second effort after the first one fails as proof of courage and resilience. Three- or four-time losers, however, will usually get the message that it may not be worth trying again. In the meantime, the venture capitalist will have removed them from their files.

Some privileged people and institutions exist who appear to be spared the indignity of having to retreat after a pattern of failure. The Afghanistan

Papers revealed how the repeated [mistakes](#) of US military leaders over decades not only did not require them to return to their studies, but duly rewarded them for their service.

Then there is the US Department of Defense itself. In November 2021, Reuters offered [this](#) startling headline: “U.S. Pentagon fails fourth audit but sees steady progress.” Since 1990, Congress has obliged all government institutions to conduct a thorough audit. The Pentagon got a late start but they are already at their fourth audit. And they have consistently failed. But like a backward pupil in an elementary school class, the authorities note that despite consistent failure, they should be encouraged for making progress. Will they prove to be better at failing the next time?

The Reuters article reveals the source of the government’s hope. It isn’t about performance. Like everything else in our society of spectacle, it’s all about favorability ratings. Our civilization has elevated the notion of ratings to the ultimate measure of virtue. Mike McCord, the Pentagon’s CFO, explains why, despite the failure, there is no need to worry. “The department continues to make steady progress toward achieving a favorable audit opinion.”



Our diabolical definition:

Audit opinion

Audit opinion

The rigorous standard by which the most sacred part of the US government, the only one that has achieved the status of an object of worship, will be judged by

Contextual Note

Opinion is famously fickle, never more so than in the hyperreal world of politics. Like the wind, it can change direction at a moment's notice. Political professionals have become adept at forcing it to change. That is what political marketers are paid to do. And they measure their success by shifts in the largely unstable numbers that appear in the ratings. Everything becomes focused on the numbers produced by surveys of opinion.

Concerning the Pentagon's audit, McCord did mention some impressive numbers that went beyond registering opinion alone. The results of the failed audit revealed "more than \$3.2 trillion in assets and \$3 trillion in liabilities." Learning that the Pentagon's balance sheet is \$200 billion in the black can only be encouraging. Any entrepreneur knows what that means. In case of forced liquidation, there would be a valuable stockpile of usable weapons to be sold to the highest bidder and still money left over to pay off all the debts. Or, more likely, the whole operation could be profitably sold to a competitor, say, Canada, Mexico, France or Israel at an even higher valuation. China would be excluded from consideration because of the feat, perhaps at the UN, that such a merger would produce a global monopoly.

Reuters reassures us that optimism is in the air: "As the audits mature and testing expands, Department of Defense leaders expect findings to increase in number and complexity." They underline the encouraging thought that "successive sweeps could expose more profound problems." Even the idea of exposing "more profound problems" is promising. It means we may one day understand what's behind the discovery that the DoD — [according](#) to a

previous audit — left \$21 trillion of expenditure unaccounted for over the past two decades.

The commentator Jonathan Cohn [highlighted](#) an obvious fact that should resonate with the public in light of recent haggling in Congress over President Joe Biden's agenda. "None of the 'centrist' Democrats or Republicans who complained about the cost of the Build Back Better Act," Cohn notes, "have said a peep about the ever-growing Pentagon budget — and the fact that it is somehow still growing even despite the Afghanistan pullout. It has grown about 25% in size over the past five years, even though the Pentagon just failed its fourth audit last month."

In his book, "War is a Racket," the most decorated senior military officer of his time, Smedley Butler, [explained](#) the underlying logic that still holds true nearly a century later. "The normal profits of a business concern in the United States," Butler wrote, "are six, eight, ten, and sometimes twelve percent. But war-time profits — ah! that is another matter — twenty, sixty, one hundred, three hundred, and even eighteen hundred per cent — the sky is the limit. All that traffic will bear. Uncle Sam has the money. Let's get it."

A lot of corporations — with names like, Lockheed Martin, Raytheon, Halliburton and Northrup — have managed to "get it." Those corporations are very careful with their own audits because they know that failing an audit, even once, let alone four times, would cancel their ability to keep milking the Pentagon's cash cow. Luckily, the Pentagon doesn't have to worry about losing its relationship with those corporations simply on the grounds that it failed yet another audit.

Historical Note

Ratings, and more particularly favorability ratings, are numbers with no stable meaning. Instead of reflecting reality, they merely register the state of shifting opinions about reality. And yet, ratings have become a dominant force in 21st-century US culture. This is perhaps the most significant sign of a fatal decline of democracy itself.

The idea of democracy first launched in Athens nearly three millennia ago aimed at spreading the

responsibility for government among the population at large. Inspired by the Athenian example, the founders of the United States and drafters of the US Constitution realized that what worked reasonably well for the governance of a city-state could not be directly applied to a nation composed of 13 disparate British colonies. Drawing on England's parliamentary tradition, the founders substituted representative democracy for Athenian direct democracy.

Instead of sharing the responsibility of governance with the general population, the new republic offered the people a simple tool: the vote. It was accompanied by the idea that any (male) citizen could seek to stand for election. The founders hadn't fully appreciated the fact that this might lead to the constitution of a separate ruling class, an elite group of people who could compete amongst themselves to use the tools of governance to their partisan ends.

Nor did they anticipate the consequences of industrialization of the Western world that was about to unfold over the next two centuries. It would not only consolidate the notion of political organization focused on partisan ends, it would ultimately spawn the "science" of electoral marketing. With the birth of technology-based mass media in the 20th century, that science would focus exclusively on opinion, branding and ratings, leaving governance as an afterthought.

By the 21st century, politics became totally dominated by the race for popularity and the cultivation of strategies to that end. The emergence of television in the second half of the 20th century, coupled with the presence of telephones in every home, sealed the deal. The science of polling was born. Once that occurred, everything in public life became subject to ratings. In the world of politics, the needs of "we the people" were fatally subordinated to a focus on the shifting and increasingly manipulable opinions of those same people. The science of electoral marketing definitively replaced the idea of public service and the quality of governance as the dominant force in political culture.

The only trace of uncertainty left is the famous "margin of error" attributed to polls, usually estimated at around 3%. In contrast, the Pentagon's margin of error is measured in multiple trillions of dollars.

CHAPTER 53

Biden’s Hyperbolic Fawning Before the CIA

In his public speaking, Joe Biden has been functioning on autopilot for some time. His rhetorical tics have allowed him to craft his own inimitable version of hyperreality, in which exaggeration has become his core value.

July 13, 2022

Thanks to more than half a century of public speaking and numerous presidential campaigns, US President Joe Biden has had time to hone his skills at essential tasks, such as pushing essential legislation through Congress and turning objective reality upside down. As president, he may be underperforming in his execution of the first task, but he still manages to turn reality on its head. In a [speech](#) celebrating the 75th anniversary of the CIA—that sterling institution known for its ability to present the unvarnished truth—Biden trotted out not just once, but three times one of his favorite [tropes](#): denying that the hyperbole he has just produced is what it clearly is – a hyperbole.

Unlike President Harry Truman, who in December 1963 expressed his [exasperation](#) with the CIA’s acquired taste for skulduggery, Biden sees all virtue and no vice in the history of an

agency created under Truman’s watch. Weeks after the assassination of President John F Kennedy, Truman had the temerity to pen an op-ed column for *The Washington Post* decrying the CIA’s betrayal of the mission with which he had endowed it: to gather facts and inform the president as transparently as possible. That presumably also implied refraining from acts such as fabricating facts or assassinating a sitting president.

Biden wants today’s CIA to understand that he feels none of Truman’s exasperation. He asserted to the faces of a new generation of operatives that for three quarters of a century “our nation’s intelligence professionals have worked unceasingly and sacrificed willingly to make our country safer. And that’s not hyperbole. That’s a simple, straightforward fact.”



Our diabolical definition:

Hyperbole
A deliberate exaggeration of the truth, the preferred figure of speech of politicians who depend on it to put to sleep the public’s capacity for critical thinking and reduce every issue to a binary opposition.

Contextual Note

One thing it would be fair to say about Joe Biden is that he never gives up. His persistence in supporting the war in Ukraine to the last Ukrainian is a testament to his perseverance. As are the rhetorical devices Biden uses and abuses,

over and over again. In last week’s speech to the CIA, the president insisted on three occasions that hyperbole is not hyperbole. “And again, not hyperbole, you are clearly the best in the whole world,” he insisted. Later in the speech, he

offered a second example of non-hyperbole: “We’re the most unique nation in the history of the world. That’s not hyperbole.” Whether it is or isn’t, some people would complain that there is no such thing as degrees of uniqueness. One can be unique but not the “most unique.” Which is one indication that what Biden claims is simply hyperbole!

At another point in the speech, after praising “the quiet bravery of the women and men of this agency” that has resulted “in lives saved, in crises averted, in truths revealed, in decisions of the 75 years of American presidents made better because of the insights you’ve provided,” he asserts “that’s not exaggeration.” Truman might have responded: “Of course it isn’t exaggeration, it’s a downright lie.”

On his trip to Poland at the end of March to bolster NATO and congratulate himself on his courageous decision to impose US drastic sanctions on Russia, Biden did an equally convincing [demonstration](#) of his skill of using the word *hyperbole* three times in the same speech.

“The fact of the matter is that you are the finest — this is not hyperbole. You’re the finest fighting force in the history of the world.”

He later added:

“Thank you very, very much for all you do. And it’s not hyperbole to suggest you’re the finest fighting force, not in the world — in the world (*sic*). That’s not hyperbole.”

Any expression of value, formulated in absolute terms, such as “the finest fighting force in the history of the world,” is likely to be hyperbole. Biden’s formulation can be nothing other than a hyperbole, which means, it is not to be taken literally. So why take the trouble to deny it, and no less than three times?

Biden’s trope belongs to a category of rhetorical figures called apophasis. Like most tropes it can be used cleverly (comically) and produce a strong effect. When a politician asserts: “I refuse to discuss the rumor that my opponent is a drunk” or when the candidate Donald Trump said of his rival, Carly Fiorina, “I promised I would not say that she ran Hewlett-Packard into the ground,

that she laid off tens of thousands of people and she got viciously fired. I said I will not say it, so I will not say it.” Trump knew his audience would receive that self-contradiction as high comedy and an effective blow to his opponent.

Most masters of rhetoric style will point out that hyperbole should be used sparingly. It carries a serious risk of sounding phony. They also presume that a good politician will try to avoid sounding phony for fear of losing credibility with voters. So why does Biden constantly return to phony-sounding talk?

Biden’s addiction to hyperbole that he denies is hyperbole highlights a feature of linguistic practice that lies at the core of US culture. Most professional rhetoricians in the US understand that people recognize hyperbole and do not take it literally. It serves to make a strong point that can subsequently be nuanced.

Biden is different. In denying that his hyperboles are hyperboles, he is denying nuance. Like any carnival barker or conman, his rhetoric reflects a belief that Americans crave flattery, even hyperbolic flattery. When people feel flattered they are vulnerable to any other insincere message you propose, especially when convincing them to buy something. Perhaps he learned this from his father, who was a successful car salesman.

In US culture, so heavily influenced by the pragmatism of [PT Barnum](#), it is considered a form of primordial wisdom to “give people what they want to hear.” It is much easier and far more effective than bothering about establishing the truth. US culture uncritically celebrates success, rarely questioning how it was achieved. The ethically suspect idea of “anything that works” has achieved the status of “common sense” in US culture. It is a softer version of “the ends justify the means.”

The problem for society and politics is that such a success-oriented and salesman-defined culture upends the value of sincerity in human relations. It encourages lying. This culture is what guides most US media in crafting their reporting to the perceived desires—rather than the needs—of their target audiences. What “works” doesn’t have to be true.

Historical Note

Biden is known for tirelessly repeating the same formulation on multiple occasions. If it works

once, the logic is, it will work every time. He isn’t alone. It’s a trick skillful politicians have used

throughout history, from Cato's *Carthago delenda est* ("Carthage must be destroyed") to presidential candidate Kennedy's standard phrase to introduce any discussion of foreign policy: "We live in a world that is half-slave and half-free."

It would hardly be hyperbole, however, to suggest that Biden may be in a category of his own, so frequent is his practice. How many times have we heard Biden say, "we lead not by the example of our power, but by the power of our example" as if it was an original thought and a deeply moral realization that had just popped into his head? He pulls the rabbit out of his rhetorical hat once again in his speech to the CIA. Back in January 2021, we [commented](#) that when he included it in his inauguration speech with this friendly advice: "a witty rhetorical figure loses its quality of wit when parroted over and over again."

Biden has a litany of other examples, such as when he insists that "we can define America in one word: Possibilities." And then there's his [favorite](#), "there has never been anything we haven't been able to do when we've done it together," which, on occasion, he [mangles](#) to mean its opposite ("There's never been anything we've been able to accomplish when we've done it together," spoken at the Democratic convention that nominated him in 2020).

Critics may conclude that mindless repetition occurs when the rational content of discourse vanishes. In Biden's case one may wonder if it was ever there. At 79 going on 80, Biden, apparently seeking to run again in 2024, is already the "most unique" president, if age is the criterion. And that is most certainly not hyperbole.

PART X

Education

CHAPTER 54

India Looks to Finland for an Effective Educational Model

A tiny European country may provide the key to elevating the education of the world's biggest student population.

May 11, 2022

For some time, the world of education has become aware of the exceptional success of Finland's boldly innovative education system. The ideas that guided the Finnish government were not new or original. They have been debated, applied, experimented and validated by educational reformers in multiple contexts for more than a century. Finland is the only country to have put them into formal practice on a national scale.

The theoretical foundations were pioneered by philosophers and psychologists, with major contributions from Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky. They produced a philosophy of education generally referred to as "constructivism." Its fundamental premise is that knowledge is holistic, meaning it is constructed non-linearly through the accumulation of varied and interconnected learning experiences. It opposes the standard linear approach practiced everywhere that breaks the process of learning down into the mechanical presentation and assimilation of formally defined facts, rules and principles.

Being Guru sums up the major principles that underlie Finland's vision for educational efficacy.

- Cooperation trumps competition.
- Teaching is a profession respected in the community.
- Research on learning trumps political reasoning.
- Experimentation and diversity of teaching styles are encouraged.
- Playtime is a valuable and necessary part of the learning experience.
- Homework is banned to avoid distorting the emergence of knowledge.
- High-quality pre-school focuses on the preconditions for active, cooperative learning.

Finland is of course a small country of 5.5 million people on the northern edge of Europe. Recently, reformers in many nations have made desultory

attempts at applying Finland's success story to their own educational environments. The quest has been elusive, for a number of cultural and political reasons. One American commentator [explains](#), for example, that "Finland's educational system was driven by a culture that supports a strong social contract," something absent in US culture. An even stronger argument is that the educational systems of other nations, with much larger populations, are so entrenched politically and economically that reforming them is a challenge beyond the capacity of their governments.

[Al Jazeera](#) reports an initiative in India with the potential to presage a massive cultural revolution. "Schools offering activity-based learning over textbook-based education," the article affirms, "are emerging across India." The article describes a process that represents "a sharp break from the doctrinaire approach that has long dominated Indian education."

How is it then that India, with the largest student [population](#) in the world (an estimated 315 million), appears to be moving towards adopting the Finnish philosophy?

European education was once organized around the humanistic principle of "the liberal arts." With the advent of the industrial revolution that transformed European and ultimately the global economy, education moved its focus to the concept of mechanically acquired, compartmentalized knowledge definitively breaking with the more holistic notion of learning conceived as the mastery of multiple arts.

In 1835, Lord Thomas Babington Macaulay, an Englishman intent on establishing order in his nation's colony in South Asia, began his campaign to [format](#) the idea of education in India in a way that would be consistent with the goals of the colony's new masters. England's imperial industrial economy had evolved into a tool of global domination. It was time for "civilization" to displace India's culturally-rooted [tradition](#) of "gurus and their shishyas" who "lived together helping each other in day-to-day life."

Over the past two centuries, Indians have learned to accept and replicate an alien education system built by the British. The recent embrace of Finnish educational philosophy may signal a revolution for education but, paradoxically, also a return to at least the spirit of ancient Indian traditions.

All revolutions encounter resistance. Al Jazeera quotes Pia Jormanainen, a founder of the Finnish school now collaborating with the Indians: “We’ve had schools ask us to craft the syllabus for their teachers. That’s fundamentally against our approach.” Bad habits are always difficult to change.



Our diabolical definition:

Syllabus
A body of formalized knowledge presented as the sum of all useful information, specifically designed to impose a restricted view of the world consistent with the goals of a ruling elite

Contextual Note

Collaboration as opposed to competition plays out even at the level of the composition of teaching staff for the Indian schools adopting the Finnish approach. “At Finland International School, every class will have two trained teachers — one Finnish, the other Indian — and an assistant. The aim is “to deliver the best of the Finnish model in an Indian context.”

The article emphasizes the obvious fact that, for the moment, the adoption and experimentation of Finnish principles of education is limited to private schools. This has led to concern “that Indian private schools — mostly catering to children from privileged backgrounds — will not be able to ensure equal access to quality education and teaching, a foundational principle of Finland’s public school-based model.” But institutions such as the Jain Heritage School and Nordic High International have not only adopted and successfully applied the Finnish approach, they have been investing in the teacher training required to make the system work and spread. An Indian company, Finland Education Hub provides this definition of its [mission](#): “to create meaningful improvement in India’s school education system by embedding the best educational practices from Finland.”

The real question is whether a significant portion of the population, with no access to expensive private schools, can eventually benefit from the effort now being made. “The education minister of Kerala, arguably home to India’s best government-run schools,” Al Jazeera reports, “announced earlier this month that the state would partner with Finland on teacher training, curriculum reforms and classroom technology.” The population of Kerala is 35 million, seven times larger than Finland’s.

India’s educational needs are massive. Successful educational methods will be the key to India’s future geopolitical positioning, notably with regard to China. Kerala’s experimentation could provide a model for other states in India. The fact that many of the principles of Finnish education resonate with pre-colonial traditions of India provides some hope that India may finally break free from some of the remaining constraints imposed by a stultifying British administrative system that aimed at competitive domination and focused on stifling both personal and collective creativity as well as all forms of spontaneous collaboration (which the British tended to identify with “mutiny” and “revolt”).

Historical Note

In 1835, as a member of Parliament, Lord Macaulay, after a visit to India, set himself the task of restructuring Indian education to bring it up to modern civilized standards. In his famous "Minute" he [stated](#) clearly his vision of the role of education as restructured by the British. "We must do our best," he encouraged Parliament, "to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern, a class of persons Indian in blood and color, but English in taste, in opinions, words and intellect."

19th century India inherited a caste system that established rigid hierarchies within Indian society. Macaulay believed that, under the British Empire, India, like England, deserved a class system. The British colonists tended to be respectful of collaborating local elites, routinely mobilizing their authority for their own economic and military ends. Macaulay was proposing the creation of a class of cultural go-betweens, who would populate an administration destined to govern the mass of laborers producing wealth for the empire. This educated elite would have the benefit of understanding the culture of the illiterate masses but personally identify with the superior European culture that sought to educate them and reward them for their docility.

Most reasonable people today would critique this as an unhealthy, inhuman approach to both education and government. But it represented the deepest logic of an economic empire. Nearly 200 years later, it has left deep traces in Indian society, whose wealthier classes even today identify strongly with Western models of education, despite the fact that education in the West has become crassly commercial and superficial.

One might critique the fascination with the Finnish model as just another case of India's sense of inferiority that pushes it to seek solutions spawned in Europe. But in many ways this is just

the opposite. The Finns have no interest in creating an empire, even a merely educational empire. Finland has produced a model of education that boldly contradicts the dominant philosophy and practices of the industrial West. One Finnish professor quoted in Al Jazeera's article "worries that the commercialisation of his country's schooling approach 'can hurt the image of Finnish education.'" They appear to resemble Geoffrey Chaucer's "Clerk of Oxenford" in the *Canterbury Tales*, about whom we learn that "gladly wolde he lerne, and gladly teche" ("gladly would he learn and gladly teach"). Learning can after all be fun rather than painful.

The Finnish constructivist approach to education, at its core, has many things in common with the oldest traditions in India. It is holistic and draws its energy from human contact and the spirit of seeking to understand rather than being forcefully taught what others consider it convenient to know. In the West, education has become dominated by the rule of managerial efficiency explicitly promulgated by institutions such as the Gates Foundation that had a powerful influence over US education policy under the presidency of Barack Obama. Its goal, widely accepted by the political elite in the US, is standardized knowledge, standardized testing and homogenized but deeply competitive culture. It is a form of education designed to turn successful students into useful and malleable actors in the capitalist economy. It is Macaulay's system for India perfected thanks to the discovery and elaboration of the rules of scientific management.

The remaining question for India is a difficult one for a nation with a huge percentage of the population living in poverty. Can it afford to make the investment in something that truly bridges the best in both Indian and Western culture and may provide the ultimate key to general prosperity?

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