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ALEXANDER COCKBURN AND JEFFREY ST. CLAIR

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A Lot Harder Than They Should Have Illusions Die Hard By Jeffrey St. Clair

Alex, Mike, Alya, Nat and I are here, in Olympia, tonight thanks to the devoted work of two long-time supporters of *CounterPunch* and tireless advocates for peace, human liberty and economic justice: John Harvey and Tom Wright.

We come to town bearing with us a load of archaic objects – namely, books. Remark their structure. A sturdy yet pliant artifact of ancient cultures. How quaint it is – the book. Its existence is a kind of rebellion against the present order of things. Against the digitizing and commodification of words, of knowledge, of poetry, of the real goods – as my union friend says. Can you imagine a Kindle bookstore? Virtual people milling about in virtual lines like automaton, their spines arched in that familiar Kindle stoop. Moving from download station to download station. Handing their e-reader over to the avatar of clerk. Can you fill that up with some Peter Linebaugh, some David Price, some Kirkpatrick Sale, and please, while you're at it, can you charge the Chevy Volt?

Tonight we have brought you books. Books that you can hold. Books that you can sniff. Books that you roll joints on – if people still roll joints. Books that you mark up. Books you can dog ear. Books that you can sell to a used bookstore if there are any left. Real books are, in their very existence, a subversion of capitalist dogma. God knows that writers and editors assembled here are making a dime off them. The production of books on this tax day is, in fact, a charitable endeavor, which you can participate in by buying some tonight. Consider this: books can strike back at the system in other, more direct ways. Books are tangible. They're

ST. CLAIR CONT. P. 6, BOTTOM OF COL. 3

Where We're at in 2012 **Nero's Half Boar and Other Disclosures**

By Alexander Cockburn

On April 17, brilliantly organized by John Harvey, Tom Wright and Savvina Chowdhury, CounterPunch had a very successful public speaking event in the Community Center in Olympia. A good crowd – certainly more than Mitt Romney managed to lure to Detroit's biggest sports arena – listened to CounterPunch's ever popular Mike Whitney, and co-editors Jeffrey St. Clair and Alexander Cockburn. Here, with a few interpolations in Cockburn's speech, are the editors' remarks.

If you notice me walking with a slightly crab-like walk, I'd like you to know that only really stupid people decide to mow their lawn when it's just rained, ... and then pull the power mower backward to clean it out without looking at the ornamental rock back behind you. So, if you think we're really bright people running *CounterPunch*, you can subtract one of the co-editors.

The introducer was kind enough to mention one of my ancestors, Admiral Sir George Cockburn. He did, indeed, burn the White House in 1814. He made quite a job of it and then, with sound judgment, he proceeded to the offices of the *Naval Intelligencer* – which was the newspaper – and he said to his men, "Break up all the letters 'C,' so that the rascals cannot spell my name Smarter

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TSA Exemplifies how the Domestic War on Terror has Degenerated into a Series of Charades

The TSA's Decade of Tyranny

By James Bovard

I was traveling out to a conference in Las Vegas last summer, when I got accosted at Baltimore-Washington International Airport. The culprit had epaulets and more swagger than a second-term Arkansas congressman. All the women who had warned me for years that cigars would be my downfall were finally vindicated.

I was passing through a Transportation Security Administration (TSA) checkpoint. I was trying my damndest to be a good citizen. I had skipped going to the shooting range that morning so that my hands and shirt would not reek of cord-

ite. I had double-checked to confirm I had not left any ammo clips in my carry-on bag. And I was not even wearing my favorite "Government Sux!" t-shirt. And I even took off my boots and sent them down through the carry-on scanner.

I slipped through the magnetometer with nary a beep. But this tall prematurely balding TSA agent with bulging eyes stepped toward me, pointed, and bellowed: "WHAT'S THAT IN YOUR POCKET?!?"

I glanced down at my shirt pocket. "It's a cigar." He glared like he'd caught me smuggling a pipe bomb in my under-

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wear. “Let me see!!!” he barked as everyone with a 75-foot radius turned to look. I handed it to him and explained: “It’s a brand called ‘Factory Throwouts.’ First time I tried ‘em – 20 bucks for 20 cigars, and free shipping. I like cheap cigars, but they’re too cheap even for me.”

He snorted and thrust it back at me. Perhaps he was suspicious because the cigar didn’t have a band wrapper. If it had been a Macanudo, he might have changed his attitude. “WHAT ELSE YOU GOT IN THAT POCKET!?”

“A business card.” I retrieved it and showed it to him. He glanced at it the way an illiterate person looks at a map you hand him, when you’re lost and seeking directions in some woebegone backwoods crossroads.

He eventually snorted that I could pass, but probably only because he couldn’t figure out whether my Cheshire Cat grin was moronic or seditious. After I passed, I turned and watched this guy for a few minutes. He was acting like a prison guard browbeating a bunch of convicts lined up to take a shower.

Unfortunately, my experience is typical of the crap that scores of thousands of travelers catch every day. And though some people have only recently woken up

to the TSA’s abuses, the agency has been rampaging since the time it was born.

Less than a month after the 9/11 attacks, President George W. Bush promised Americans, “We will not surrender our freedom to travel.” Americans did not realize at the time that Bush was referring only to himself and other high-ranking government officials. For all other Americans, airline travel has become far more arduous and perilous in the past ten years.

Bush and Congress responded to the 9/11 hijackers with the usual Washington panacea – by creating a new federal agency. The Federal Aviation Administration was widely perceived as inept, if not incorrigible. Instead of razing the failed bureaucracy and remedying the profound flaws in the federal approach to aviation, Congress and Bush solved the problem of created a new federal agency and vesting it with sweeping power and near-zero responsibility.

The Transportation Security Administration has done wonders for the sale of latex gloves and 3-ounce plastic containers. However, tests by the Government Accountability Office and other organizations have found that the TSA’s “protection” against smuggled knives and guns is as porous as airport security systems that existed before 9/11. But Americans are at much greater risk of being arrested or fined in the airport for not kowtowing to federal agents. The TSA’s attitude toward Americans is best summarized by the motto posted early on at the headquarters of the TSA air marshal training center: “Dominate. Intimidate. Control.”

TSA agents act as if they are entitled to reverential treatment, regardless of how much damage they inflict. The TSA has slapped thousands of people with fines – despite the lack of any public notice of the perils people face. There were no warnings, and people who received a fine in the mail were never informed of their right to contest or appeal the fine. TSA created the penalty system in 2003 but waited until early 2004 to announce it, at which time the maximum fine was raised from \$1,100 to \$10,000.

Susan Brown Campbell, a California lawyer, had a small steak knife confiscated from her briefcase by TSA agents at Baltimore-Washington International Airport. After she received a \$150 fine in the mail, she called TSA seeking infor-

mation on how to challenge the fine. A TSA lawyer phoned Campbell and, as she later stated, was “very, very intimidating,” warning “that the penalty could be up to \$10,000.” Campbell was told she would have to travel back to Baltimore to contest the fine. TSA punished Campbell’s insolence by doubling her fine to \$300.

The fines are an extension of power the feds awarded themselves in a 2002 Federal Register notice, which announced that people could be arrested if they act in a way that “might distract or inhibit a screener from effectively performing his or her duties. ... A screener encountering such a situation must turn away from his or her normal duties to deal with the disruptive individual, which may affect the screening of other individuals.” Practically any comment or behavior that makes a TSA screener “turn away” from whatever he or she was doing can thus be a federal offense.

TSA agents can fine Americans up to \$1,500 for any alleged “nonphysical interference” at a TSA checkpoint. TSA does not have a formal definition for this offense. TSA spokeswoman Ann Davis said the offense included “any nonphysical situation that in any way would interfere with the screener and his or her ability to continue to work, or interfere with their ability to do their jobs.” This penalty seems to be limited solely by the imagination or the malice of TSA agents.

TSA agents can slap fines on Americans based on “attitude,” which TSA classifies as one of the “aggravating factors” in determining financial punishments. TSA has issued no guidance on the precise amount of obligatory groveling at airport checkpoints. People who question TSA commands are probably far more likely to be fined.

The TSA’s system of fines is a travesty of the Administrative Procedures Act, which purportedly guarantees Americans due process rights in dealings with federal agencies. Instead, TSA simply concocted a system of fines, failed to give people warning or notice, failed to define the key terms, failed to notify violators of their right to appeal.

The TSA has made little or no effort to control the attitude or arrogance of many of its own screeners. In March 2004, for instance, airline passengers filed almost 3,000 formal complaints with the federal government over the conduct of TSA screeners. Hundreds of people specifi-

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cally complained about the rudeness of TSA screeners. And yet, all of these complaints by taxpayers and citizens did not result in a single attitude fine for a TSA employee.

These fines have nothing to do with preventing terrorist attacks. The 9/11 hijackers intensely studied American airport security procedures. Once the system of attitude fines becomes known, savvy hijackers will simply work around it – the same way that the hijackers learned how to bypass obstacles at airport checkpoints prior to the 9/11 attacks.

Attitude fines exemplify how TSA aims to rule airports by fear. Anyone who is not sufficiently docile can be treated as a public enemy. The attitude fines illustrate how power has gone to the heads of TSA chiefs. Amid a surge of private and congressional complaints about TSA abuses, the TSA aspired to shut the American people up, once and for all.

But the agency has done plenty to travelers – like pilfering their luggage. The first major TSA looting scandal erupted in 2004. TSA screeners across the country were arrested for stealing items from checked baggage they were purportedly checking for explosives.

Congress requires the TSA to check all airline baggage with bomb-detection machinery or with hand-held bomb detectors. The inept machines gave false positives for almost one-third of all luggage – after which the bag was searched by hand, usually in closed areas, far from pesky witnesses.

By August 2004, the TSA had received over 38,000 claims of lost, stolen, or damaged luggage as a result of TSA “searches.” After more than 20 TSA screener-thieves were arrested, TSA spokeswoman Amy von Walter stressed in early August that TSA has “roughly 45,000 screeners – and certainly these are isolated instances.” TSA spokeswoman Ann Davis said that the agency is compensating in situations for which it was clear that “the TSA was responsible for the loss or damage, like a screener dropped someone’s laptop, something that’s pretty obvious.” But most looters do not make a point of loudly bouncing their pilfered prizes off the floor.

In one case, the agency let off the hook a TSA agent caught in the act. A videotape recorded a Miami TSA screener stealing CDs from checked luggage last year. But criminal charges were dropped

after the screener’s lawyer planned to ask a government official about TSA operations at the trial. The TSA was more interested in protecting its procedures than in preventing gross abuses by its employees. This scuttled prosecution gave a green light to other TSA would-be thieves.

In September 2004, TSA bowed to the weight of the evidence and announced that it would pay more than \$1.5 million to 15,000 passengers who had filed claims of pilfered or damaged baggage due to TSA abuses.

This scandal was barely cooling when the agency launched its first major bosom crackdown. After a Russian airliner may have been blown up by Chechen terrorists, the TSA decided that the culprits were female and had hid the bombs in the bras. TSA issued new rules, which empowered screeners to order a more

TSA agents can fine Americans up to \$1,500 for any alleged “non-physical interference” at a TSA checkpoint. TSA does not have a formal definition for this offense.

intensive search based solely on “visual observation” of a passenger – regardless of whether they had set off the metal detector. The agency decreed, “TSA policy is that screeners are to use the back of the hand when screening sensitive body areas, which include the breasts (females only), genitals and buttocks.”

The New York Times columnist Maureen Dowd, in an article entitled “Hiding Breast Bombs,” described her airport experience: “A beefy female security [TSA] agent runs her hands all the way around your breasts, in between, underneath – with guys standing around staring.” Some of the breast patdowns were done by male screeners. After hundreds of complaints and a tidal wave of bad PR, TSA relented, instructing screeners “not to touch women between their breasts unless they set off a hand-held metal detector in the chest area,” as the *Washington Post* reported.

Just before Christmas 2005, TSA screeners began taking far more travelers

aside to feel their thighs. The new policy is intended to insure that people are not smuggling explosives strapped to their legs: but it produced far more explosions than it prevents. It was an open question which body parts TSA screeners would decide were “close enough [to the thigh] for government work.”

After another round of uproars, the TSA again backed off. But it soon broke its own records for obnoxiousness with its Whole Body Image scanners. TSA claimed the photos of travelers were not that distinct, but they actually revealed so much that an agent could tell whether a man was circumcised or a woman had nipple piercings. And the agency is intentionally abusing travelers who prefer not to have their naked photo in their federal dossier.

TSA exemplifies how the domestic war on terrorism has degenerated into a series of charades. After 9/11, the federal government rushed to spend almost \$5 billion for new screening devices for airports and other locations. TSA eventually decided to ditch much of the equipment because it was “ineffective, unreliable, or too expensive to operate.” Rep. Chris Cox (R-Cal.), chairman of the Homeland Security Committee, justified the debacle in 2005: “After 9/11, we had to show how committed we were by spending hugely greater amounts of money than ever before, as rapidly as possible.” Cox and other congressmen assumed that Americans are foolish enough to believe that government spending alone makes them safe.

The TSA’s abuses provide a dispiriting gauge of how much crap the American people will tolerate. It takes more than browbeating average Americans to make air travel safe. The TSA has always been profoundly irresponsible and dishonest. Rather than making Americans safe from terrorists, the TSA has made them prey to federal agents. There is no reason to expect the agency to turn over a new leaf.

It is time to disband the armies of federal agents occupying American airports. The TSA offers proof after proof of the fraudulent nature of the federal security blanket. The follies of the TSA are a warning to Americans not to expect safety from mindless, arbitrary power. **CP**

James Bovard is the author of *Attention Deficit Democracy*, *The Bush Betrayal*, *Terrorism and Tyranny*, and other books.

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than the guy who had the lawn mower.

I'd just like to quote the best piece of journalistic advice I had from my father, who was a very well-known journalist. In the '30s, he was writing for the *Daily Worker*, and the *Worker* had no money and couldn't afford the fancy planes and trains to get the news quickly, so it had to go to press before most of the opposition. So, my father said, "I have developed certain rules, which was to think 'what is the vilest act that the British government is possibly capable of taking,' then write your story as if it had happened, and you will be right 100 per cent of the time." Good, sound advice.

Now, we have a presidential choice in 2012, but I don't think we should worry too much about it. In the state of Washington you vote for the democratic ticket. In 2008 you went for Obama and Joe Biden – 58 against 40 for McCain and Ms. Palin.

No one's mentioned Romney. I'm sure someone's is going to say, in a while, "I've not yet heard the name 'Romney.'" He's a very un-alluring human being – there's no question about it. I wear proudly on my lapel a picture of my dog

on a "Dogs against Romney" button. We, dog lovers, we know – a man who ties a dog to a roof of his car is not fit to be trusted to run a dog kennel, let alone what they they always call it the most important office on the entire planet.

I was a big fan of Gerald Ford, by the way. The ideal president. Sure, he had a teensy blot or two on his record. The invasion of East Timor, for example. Not good. But he wasn't in office for long – that's the first plus. I think American incomes topped out – people did pretty well under Ford. And then he was gone.

And it seemed a no brainer to vote for Jimmy Carter. I'm not going to bore you by going through the record of the Carter administration, which, plunged into covert action in Afghanistan – the largest covert action undertaken by the CIA in our history. You can read about that in a book by Jeffrey and me, *Whiteout: CIA, The Drugs and Press*. Three and a half billion dollars that cost, and he launched the onslaughts on the nascent revolutions in El Salvador and Nicaragua by importing a bunch of Argentinean torturers.

So, you can line up Ford against Carter, or Gore against Bush, or you can take a slightly longer view.

I like to read Roman history. And, you know, you get to somebody like Nero, not a bad administrator actually. A few little blots on the record. They thought about the budget a lot – the imperial budget was about half the overall budget – and they were always trying to cut back. In fact, Nero said that all public festivities previously – you know, they'd have a barbecue once in a while and they'd have a whole wild boar... and he says, "No one is finishing these boars." A little nibble of the haunch; a chop. So he says, "hence forward it's going to be half boars." Brilliant, it's in there, in the records – they kept very good bureaucratic records.

So, as you follow the Roman Empire through, of course there are very major changes. But they don't occur when so and so got to be emperor. Every now and again a fairly capable guy like Diocletian steps up to the plate, and he's pretty good. But by and large it rolls along, and you see the larger trends. A gradually increasing tax burden on ordinary Romans. The overextension of the empire. The expenditure on holding huge bits of territory they didn't

need to hold. And many historians, starting with Roman historians, have written many wonderful books, trying to explain all this and putting it in a larger pattern. It really would help if we try to think this year of what's really happening in America. And not arguing as to whether Obama will actually, miraculously, somehow turn out to be better than Romney, and Mitt Romney... It's an unprofitable exercise. You're all smart people. You're going to decide what you want to do. You can vote for the minority candidate. You can vote for one or the other.

But if you look at the condition of America, as everybody knows it's awful. It's a nightmare. This is the national scandal. Between 2000-2007, the income of the bottom 90 per cent went up four per cent. The income of the top 1 per cent went up 94 per cent. We've been hearing these stats from the Occupy Movement, but it's worth rehearsing them.

Non-dischargeable student debt is now over a trillion, with 25 per cent delinquent. We're starting people off in life as debt-slaves. Debt-slavery from the get-go. Might as well get used to it. With the IRS, if you're broke, you can do an offer in compromise – if you can prove you're broke. The IRS man will say, "We'll take a cut ... just half the leg." Not student debt – they want the whole lot.

Adjusted for inflation, median personal income hasn't moved in 50 years.

Nearly 25 per cent of Americans have zero to negative net worth. These are terrible statistics. We've gone from the high-wage economy of the '50s, when Big Business did a deal with the AFL-CIO. They said, "Don't rock the boat politically, and we'll bring home the bacon. Everybody can have second car in the garage and the boat and the tract home by the lake."

In 1914, Henry Ford raised the daily pay rate to \$5. All his fellow capitalists said, "Henry, you're completely insane. It will be inflationary. America will get used to it, and they'll want \$10 the day after tomorrow." And he said, "No, we're just creating customers for my cars." So, in those days you could buy – assuming you devote all your Henry Ford income to it – a model T in four months. Today, assuming you're on minimum wage, \$7.25 an hour – you're pulling in just under \$15,000 a year. Guess

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what? The cheapest Ford car now is the Fiesta, selling at \$14,000; so, now it will take you a year. It's kind of a little index of where the slide has been.

Words of comfort are spoken. Obama gives magnificent speeches about the knowledge economy, and you listen to him and you're transmuted into a world of people versed in higher math and learning, cutting-edge technicians and technocrats inventing machines we can't even think of, performing calculations too prodigious for Einstein. But it's an illusion. There's a little section of jobs that will go to people like that, but the basic jobs available in America are not knowledge jobs. They're shitty jobs paid very badly. The Bureau of Labor Statistics in 2010 said that 20 per cent of jobs require bachelor degrees; 43 per cent of jobs required a high-school diploma, and 26 per cent of jobs didn't even need a high-school diploma. They also said that, by 2020, three-fourths of all job openings will still only need a high-school diploma. This is not a knowledge economy. We keep talking about the knowledge economy, but we're only talking about 25 per cent of it. The major economy of America is people working too hard, too long, for too little money. You can't make anything go when people haven't got any money.

There was a very good piece by Jason deParle in the *NYT* following through on welfare "reform" inaugurated by Bill Clinton. He worked his way through it, showing it's launched a world for people who are caught in the "reform" at the bottom of a barrel of inconceivable misery, where they are trying to keep going on \$2 a day. Just \$2 a day for your kid! This is pretty horrifying stuff. This is the real situation we're facing. It's got something to do with Obama; something to do with Romney. It's got something to do with the whole contour of our society as it's evolved.

There's a book in the bookstores, these quaint repositories of learning that Jeffrey was invoking, called *Why Nations Fail*, by Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson. It's really a comparison of the Chinese and American economies, and it brings a message of comfort. It says the Chinese elites are extractive – parasitic and corrupt. So, China will soon falter and decline. America's "inclusive" institutions, on the other hand, will take us from strength to strength. Our inclusive-

ness, which I assume means our vibrant democracy, is the rising tide which will lift all boats, from the billionaires to the \$2 person – trying to maintain a family of four on a pittance being shoved around by bureaucrats; kicked off one list after another; life of desperation going through the bins. This inclusive society will take us from strength to strength. It's been widely reviewed. It's received the imprimatur of top economists.

Hmm. Let's see, "parasitic and corrupt." Do our minds really have to travel all the way to the Chinese People's Republic? We have an honor roll near at hand, a pretty good one: WorldCom; Enron; Tyco; Global Crossing; Adelphia;

After awhile a drone landed and killed al-Awlaki and his son, and I'm sure four or five or ten Yemenis, and that was without any judicial review, of the president of the United States. That's the ballgame. Bye, bye U.S. Constitution.

Bernie Madoff. There are plenty more. That is the operating pattern of American capitalism today. It is rife with scoundrels and crooks. The regulators on the take. Everybody knows that the major firms cheat on the numbers they put out publicly. That is what we have.

Then, there's the matter of our cherished freedoms. Mike Whitney brought up the NDAA, signed by President Obama. But months before NDAA we suddenly had the head of the CIA, I think it was ... apex bureaucrat of ... yes, we have to use the word "community," the torturing community. We have a feature we run every weekend in my diary where we guillotine words we don't like. Every week we load up the tumbrils. "Community" was the first to go. The other one is "conversation." We're no longer allowed to have debates, let alone acrimonious disputes. That was all kind of too noisy – people like throwing furniture around. Suddenly

it's "conversation." Join the national "conversation." Again, you get this image of people sitting around in a circle, like Peace Corps people did in the '60s – sitting on the ground with their legs crossed. And everybody is having this very civilized conversation... "Don't you think that the really rich people should have all the money?" And somebody else says, "I'd like to contribute to this conversation." They can't scream – and they say very quietly and conversationally, "I think that's not a very good idea."

Suddenly the CIA Honcho – he's the head of the umbrella of sixteen organizations – said ...he let it drop ... the American executive power reserved the right to kill any American that the executive power conceived to be a threat to the interests of America. It would be wrong to say people didn't notice. People said, "look at that – that's kind of put a little boldly ... couldn't it be, like, softened up a bit?"

No. Then, the next thing they said was that they would actually pass sentence on Anwar al-Awlaki – American born. He was under a sentence of death. Mr. al-Awlaki was in Yemen. After awhile a drone landed and killed Mr. al-Awlaki and Mr. al-Awlaki's son, and I'm sure four or five or ten Yemenis, and that was on the say so, without any form of judicial review, of the president of the United States. That's the ballgame. Bye, bye U.S. Constitution. The president of the United States says, "he must die" or "she must die," without any judicial review, let or hindrance, no impediment of constitutional provision. Nothing. It's all over.

But not content with that, they went ahead and passed the NDAA, which was the Pentagon Authorization Bill, on the last day of last year. It's one of those ones like watching the three-card trick on the street. They keep saying, "no, no, no! The bit which says American citizens cannot be arrested and stuck in the hole for 30 years without a lawyer and no recourse to appeal – that's actually stated clearly in paragraph three." Then you go back and look at the paragraph, and it's not. And so, in the end you realize that, yes, any American, and – not to mention somebody that I was for a long time – a green-card holder (God help the aliens!) could be dumped in the prisons, dumped in the hole and not come out.

Now, fascism, among other things, is a system of extreme, methodical state re-

pression. In the 1980s, America started locking up its poor people. Seven million adults were under correctional supervision in 2009. A fascist system uses constant harassment. Last year, there were more than 600,000 stop-and-frisks in New York City, overwhelmingly of blacks and Hispanics.

Historically, fascist regimes have been particularly cruel toward what is deemed to be sexual deviancy. U.S. sex offender registries doom three-quarters of a million people – many of them convicted on trumped-up charges – to pale simulacra of real life. Others endure chemical castration and open-ended incarceration.

Fascist regimes, ultimately the expression of corporate power, repress labor in all efforts to organize.

A fascist regime is the sworn foe of the right to assembly, “unauthorized” marches and encampments. America is a network of SWAT teams and kindred state-employed thugs on permanent red alert.

A fascist regime spies obsessively on its citizens. Study U.S. laws on secret surveillance since the Patriot Act, and you will find procedures that would have been the envy of the East Germans.

Ultimately, a fascist state claims the right, currently under judicial stay by 2nd Circuit Federal Judge Katherine Forrest, to imprison its victims without term or hope of redress or legal representation. In other words, rule by decree – which is what Hitler’s Enabling Act won him in March 1933.

We live in a fascist country. Now, how does it stack up against China? Well, of course, the Chinese, every now and again, they take someone out and shoot them, sometimes for things I actually think wouldn’t be such a bad thing to shoot a person for, like giving kids poison milk so that 5,000 of them die. I know, I know, I’m against the death penalty, but maybe just this once ... Why not a few exceptions?

We have a writer, just on our website, called John Quigley who started off in New Orleans and now is at the Center for Constitutional Rights. Last year, he listed 20 examples of the Obama administration’s assault on civil liberties. The Patriot Act, he reauthorized it. Wire taps – they’re at an all-time high. Pick up the phone – who knows – Mr. Eric Holder is probably on the other end of it. Domestic government is spying, particularly on Muslim communities. Most

of it totally illegal. They have these fusion centers across the U.S.A., which collect domestic [police] information. They love creating these centers, and then they have more centers and then suddenly they are tapping every phone conversation in the United States. Abusive FBI intelligence operations. Thousands of violations of the law. The assault after Wikileaks. Bradley Manning. Denial of right to publish pictures of U.S. soldiers abusing prisoners. Use of state secrets to shield government and others from review – the concept of state secrets – that was when they didn’t want the rendition stuff to get out. So, they say, “It’s a state secret” – but they got a Lear jet and they stuff five people in it with hoods on their heads and flew them off to Poland and had them tortured by our chaps. Punishing whistleblowers. Obama’s been the worst – absolutely the worst. Don’t be a whistleblower and get caught under the Obama administration.

Assuming the best optional future, it will take 50, 100 years to try to claw our way back from this constitutional nightmare. On the economics – the terrible injustices, which we see everyday ... I’m glad to hear Mike’s thinking the economy is getting a little up – he said toward continuing stagnation – I guess that was the silver lining. I know in my hometown of Eureka the place is not looking good. You see it in the building yards. My computer store – which I’ve gone to for 20 years – just went down. I started there taking my Underwood manual typewriter. I came late to civilization, as it’s now called, insisted on driving everybody mad by using my Underwood 10. I think the only other person in the United States who uses an Underwood 10 is Ralph Nader. I said, “Ralph, I use an Underwood.” “You do?” I said, “How much for the spare parts, Ralph?” I think he would have given me absolutely anything – he’s a terrible skinflint ... you never get a dime out of him – but I could probably sell it to him.

The computer store gone, my favorite cleaner is “temporarily closed.” You just see these gaps in the street, like teeth falling out of a jaw. It’s heartbreaking.

There are ways forward. We have these living wage campaigns. States are now saying, “enough already.” Yesterday, April 16, Bloomberg, which I believe is favorable to capitalism, said the minimum wage has got to go up. It’s not gone in real terms in many years. For one

thing, they won’t hook it to inflation.

One of the worse betrayals of Obama, was in 2008, before he became president – just after he was elected, when he pledged to the worst-paid people in America that he would immediately work to inaugurate the \$9.25 minimum wage. He never did. One of his worst betrayals.

I think these struggles are the way of just saying, in state after state, “this is no way to go.” This is what the Occupy people are doing. It can widen out and it can be very specific. It’s what has to be done. Obama will spend a billion dollars on his election campaign. Romney will spend a billion dollars. There will be the usual campaign crap. You can follow the show. “Romney will get in and he’ll turn us into a police state.” We *are* a police state! Oh, – one less thing to worry about.

So, *CounterPunch* has always taken that independent stance, really. I think it’s what gives us energy and gives us edge, and I think it brings people to the site. We don’t hitch our wagon to some star and say, this is it, this is the way to go. So, now I think, having uttered these various heresies and the brisk endorsement of capital punishment and other crimes too numerous to mention, I’ll make way for the floor. Thank you. CP

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solid. They’re weighty. And ours are some of the weightiest books that have ever been written. You can read them. You can re-read them and absorb their messages, and then, as Edward Abbey once advised, heave them at something big and glassy. Try that with your iPad.

Now, I don’t know if any of you saw this, but the other day on ESPN they showed a clip of Sasha Obama playing point guard for girls basketball team at Sidwell Friends school. As I watched that clip, I noticed that her game is a lot like her father’s. Every time she gets the ball in her hands, she banks to the left and then drives to the right. It was funny to me, but then, I’m from Indiana.

The Obama campaign, as you know, is very concerned about losing elderly voters. So, apparently they’ve come up with a brand new candy that’s being distributed at nursing homes across America, and they’re calling the candy disappointments. Speaking of relics, it’s probably a sign of my advancing decrepitude that few of you in this room recall the early

1970s funk of the Motown legend Stevie Wonder. But I'm old enough to have bought 45 rpm records when he was known as Little Stevie – he's not so little anymore. Stevie plays often enough at the White House, and Obama claims to have a number of his songs on his iPod, but probably not this one from 1974, which reminds me of the Obama administration. Apologies to Stevie Wonder – it goes something like this: "it's not too cool to be ridiculed, but you brought this upon yourself. The world is tired of pacifiers – we want the truth and nothing else and we're sick and tired of hearing your song – tell me how you're gonna change right from wrong – 'cause if you really want to hear our views, you haven't done nothing." Jackson Five sing-a-long–scratch that Jackson Four...

Tonight, I want to take you back to almost a year ago in March. The scene is Brazilia. March 19. Barack Obama announces, with limited fanfare, the latest war of his young presidency. The bombing of Libya had begun with a hail of cruise missile attacks and air strikes. It was something it seemed of an impromptu intervention. It was orchestrated largely by Hillary Clinton, Susan Rice and that Diva of Vengeance, Samantha Powers – always hot for a saturation bombing in the name of human rights. Then Obama himself had to up the ante by suggestion it was time for Gaddafi to go. The empire had run out of patience with the mercurial colonel. The objectives of that Libyan war had moved ominously from enforcing a no-fly zone to seeking a regime change. Bombing raids soon targeted Gaddafi and his family. Coming in the wake of the extrajudicial assassination of Osama bin Laden, in a blood-splattered home invasion, Gaddafi rightly feared Obama wanted his body in a bag as well. In the end, Gaddafi's butchered corpse was put on public display in a Misrata meat locker.

Absent any mass protest against the impending disruption of Tripoli, it fell to Congress to take some tentative steps to challenge the latest, unauthorized and unprovoked war. Now, in an earlier time in the history of our republic, Obama's arrogant defiance of Congress and the War Powers Act of 1973 and the Constitution itself might have provoked a constitutional crisis, but these are duller and more attenuated times, where such minor matters have been rendered down

into a kind of political theater. All the players duly act their parts, but everyone – even the cable news audience – realizes it's just for show. The wars will proceed. Congress will fund them. The people will have no say in the matter. As Oscar Wilde once quipped, "All the world's a stage, badly cast."

When Obama was confronted with the unconstitutionality of his war, he said, with a chill touch of the surreal, that the 14,000 plus sorties flown over Libya didn't amount to a war. This is Barack Obama. The political moralist. The change agent. The Constitutional

Obama's a master of gesture politics, but he tends to flinch in nearly every pitched battle. Even when the odds and the public seem to be behind him, his political instincts tend to move him to seek cover on a middle ground.

scholar. Listen to his voice when he talks on these matters. It's petulant. It's dismissive. Some might say it's peevish, like a whine of a talented student caught cheating on a final exam. Yes, all the political players were playing their parts, but what role exactly had Barack Obama assumed?

Barack Obama is the Nobel Laureate. He cast himself as a new internationalist. A chief executive of the global empire, more eager to consult with European heads of state than members of Congress – even members of his own party. You begin to see why Obama sparks such a virulent reaction among the more histrionic precincts of the Libertarian right. He has a majestic sense of his own certitude. The president is captivated by the nobility of his own intentions. Offering himself up as a kind of savior of the American Imperial enterprise. While Obama sells pristine idealism to the masses, he is at heart a calculating pragmatist, especially when it comes to advancing his own ambitions. Obama doesn't want to be stained with defeat. It's one reason he walked away from pushing a Palestinian state after his Middle East envoy George Mitchell had

resigned in frustration. It's why Obama stubbornly refused to insist on a public option for his otherwise atrocious health care bill. It's why he backed off cap-and-trade and organized labor's hardship bill and the DREAM Act.

Obama's a master of gesture politics, but he tends to flinch in nearly every pitched battle. Even when the odds and the public seem to be behind him, his political instincts tend to move him to seek cover in the middle ground.

Perhaps Obama had never confronted quite this level of toxic hostility he'd seen from this new generation of Republicans. After all, he led something of a charmed life, the life of a star child: coddled and pampered; encouraged and adulated from Indonesia to China. Obama was the physical and psychic embodiment of the new multiculturalism: lean, affable, assured, nonthreatening. His vaguely liberal political ideology remains opaque at the core. Instead of an overarching agenda, Obama delivered facile jingoisms for claiming a post-racial, post-partisan America. Instead of radical change, Obama simply offered managerial competence. This, naturally, the Beserkers of the right interpreted as hubris and arrogance, and such hollow homilies served only to exacerbate their rage. The virulent right had profiled Obama and found his homilies to be the perfect target for their accreted animus. And even better, they had zeroed in on an enemy so innately conflict-averse that even when pummeled with racist slurs, he wouldn't punch back.

Of course, Obama's most grievous political wounds were self-inflicted, starting even before his election, when he rushed back to Washington to help rescue Bush's Wall Street bailout. Alex was the first among many columnists on the left to have x-ray vision of that void into Obama's soul – as early as 2006 – that there was something hollow and inauthentic about him. This was perhaps the first real indication that the luminous campaign speeches about generational and systemic change masked the servile psyche of a man who was desperately yearning to be embraced by the nation's political and financial elites. Instead of meeting with the victims of Wall Street predators or their advocates, like Elizabeth Warren and Ralph Nader, Obama fist-bumped with the brain trust of Goldman Sachs and schmoozed with

return service requested

the crème de la crème of K Street corporate lobbyists. In the end, Obama helped salvage some of the most venal and corrupt enterprises on Wall Street, agreed to shield their executives from prosecution for their financial crimes, and, predictably, later got repaid with their scorn.

Thus the Obama revolution, such as it was, was over before it started, guttered by the politician's overweening desire to prove himself to the grandees of the establishment. And perhaps most critically of all is Afghanistan. By 2009, even the most calloused Washington hands had grown weary over how deeply entangled the U.S. occupation of Afghanistan had become. The savage rhythms of that war there had backfired. Too many broken promises, too many bombed weddings. Too many assassinations, too many dead and mutilated children, too much cowardice and corruption in the puppet satrapy in Kabul. The tide had irrevocably turned against the U.S. and its squalid policies. Far from being terminally crippled, the Taliban was now stronger than it had been at any time since 2001. But instead of capitalizing on this tectonic shift of sentiment by draw-

ing down American troops, Obama, in a cynical ploy to provide his martial mettle, journeyed to West Point and announced in a somber speech that he was raising the stakes in Afghanistan by injecting a Petraeus-sanctioned surge of forces into the country and unleashing a new campaign of operations that would track and target suspected insurgents across the Hindu Kush and into Pakistan itself.

That night Obama spoke in a stern cadence, studded with imperious pauses, as if to suggest that he, unlike the fickle George W. Bush, was going to wage the Afghan war until it was won. But he knew better. And so did his advisors. There was nothing to win in Afghanistan. Out in that distant rim in the world, there weren't even any standards to gauge military success. This was meant to be a punitive war, pure and simple, designed to draw as much blood as possible, an obscene war fought largely by remote-controlled drones attacking peasant villages with murderous indiscretion.

Afterward, the American peace movement could only bray in impotent outrage. But as Obama's wars spread – from Afghanistan and Iraq to Pakistan and

Yemen, Somalia and Libya – outside of the redoubtable Catholic Workers, a few Unitarians, the Quakers and few Code Pinkers – the last flickering moral lights in the nation – even those empty yawps of protest dissipated in the American Liberal sector into whispered lamentations, hushed murmurs of disillusionment. Could it be that the American left had gone extinct as any kind of potent political force and it took the election of Barack Obama to prove it?

And what of Obama's spellbound followers, those youthful crusaders who saw him illumined in the sacral glow of this ethereal rhetoric and cleaved to him during the hard slog of two campaigns with a near-religious devotion? What was running through their minds when the mists finally parted to reveal that Obama was implementing cunning tracing of Bush-era policies on everything, from the indefinite detention of uncharged prisoners in the war on terror to raids on medical marijuana distributors in states where medical pot has been legalized? What, indeed? Illusions die hard, especially when shattered by drones and cruise missiles. **CP**