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Prashad on Colombia Activism



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Why the United States has Blood on its Hands in Palestine

By Medea Benjamin
and Nicolas J. S. Davies

The U.S. corporate media usually report on Israeli military assaults in occupied Palestine as if the United States is an innocent neutral party to the conflict. In fact, large majorities of Americans have told pollsters for decades that they want the United States to be neutral in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

But U.S. media and politicians betray their own lack of neutrality by blaming Palestinians for nearly all the violence and framing flagrantly disproportionate, indiscriminate and therefore illegal Israeli attacks as a justifiable response to Palestinian actions. The classic formulation from U.S. officials and commentators is that “Israel has the right to defend itself,” never “Palestinians have the right to defend themselves,” even as the Israelis massacre

hundreds of Palestinian civilians, destroy thousands of Palestinian homes and seize ever more Palestinian land.

The disparity in casualties in Israeli assaults on Gaza speaks for itself.

- At the time of writing, the current Israeli assault on Gaza has killed at least 200 people, including 59 children and 35 women, while rockets fired from Gaza have killed 10 people in Israel, including 2 children.
- In the 2008-9 assault on Gaza, Israel killed 1,417 Palestinians, while their meagre efforts to defend themselves killed 9 Israelis.
- In 2014, 2,251 Palestinians and 72 Israelis (mostly soldiers invading Gaza) were killed, as U.S.-built F-16s dropped at least 5,000 bombs and missiles on Gaza and Israeli tanks and artillery fired 49,500 shells, mostly massive 6-inch shells from U.S.-built M-109 howitzers.
- In response to largely peaceful “March of Return” protests at the Israel-Gaza border in 2018, Israeli snipers killed 183 Palestinians and wounded over 6,100, including 122 that required amputations, 21 paralyzed by spinal cord injuries and 9

permanently blinded.

As with the Saudi-led war on Yemen and other serious foreign policy problems, biased and distorted news coverage by U.S. corporate media leaves many Americans not knowing what to think. Many simply give up trying to sort out the rights and wrongs of what is happening and instead blame both sides, and then focus their attention closer to home, where the problems of society impact them more directly and are easier to understand and do something about.

So how should Americans respond to horrific images of bleeding, dying children and homes reduced to rubble in Gaza? The tragic relevance of this crisis for Americans is that, behind the fog of war, propaganda and commercialized, biased media coverage, the United States bears an overwhelming share of responsibility for the carnage taking place in Palestine.

U.S. policy has perpetuated the crisis and atrocities of the Israeli occupation by unconditionally supporting Israel in three distinct ways: militarily, diplomatically and politically.

On the military front, since the creation of the Israeli state, the United States has provided \$146 billion in foreign aid, nearly all of it military-related. It currently pro-

vides \$3.8 billion per year in military aid to Israel.

In addition, the United States is the largest seller of weapons to Israel, whose military arsenal now includes 362 U.S.-built F-16 warplanes and 100 other U.S. military aircraft, including a growing fleet of the new F-35s; at least 45 Apache attack helicopters; 600 M-109 howitzers and 64 M270 rocket-launchers. At this very moment, Israel is using many of these U.S.-supplied weapons in its devastating bombardment of Gaza.

The U.S. military alliance with Israel also involves joint military exercises and joint production of Arrow missiles and other weapons systems. The U.S. and Israeli militaries have collaborated on drone technologies tested by the Israelis in Gaza. In 2004, the United States called on Israeli forces with experience in the Occupied Territories to give tactical training to U.S. Special Operations Forces as they confronted popular resistance to the United States' hostile military occupation of Iraq.

The U.S. military also maintains a \$1.8 billion stockpile of weapons at 6 locations in Israel, pre-positioned for use in future U.S. wars in the Middle East. During the Israeli assault on Gaza in 2014, even as the U.S. Congress

suspended some weapons deliveries to Israel, it approved handing over stocks of 120mm mortar shells and 40mm grenade launcher ammunition from the U.S. stockpile for Israel to use against Palestinians in Gaza.

Diplomatically, the United States has exercised its veto in the UN Security Council 82 times, and 44 of those vetoes have been to shield Israel from accountability for war crimes or human rights violations. In every single case, the United States has been the lone vote against the resolution, although a few other countries have occasionally abstained.

It is only the United States' privileged position as a veto-wielding Permanent Member of the Security Council, and its willingness to abuse that privilege to shield its ally Israel, that gives it this unique power to stymie international efforts to hold the Israeli government accountable for its actions under international law.

The result of this unconditional U.S. diplomatic shielding of Israel has been to encourage increasingly barbaric Israeli treatment of the Palestinians. With the United States blocking any accountability in the Security Council, Israel has seized ever more Palestinian land in the West Bank and East Je-

rusalem, uprooted more and more Palestinians from their homes and responded to the resistance of largely unarmed people with ever-increasing violence, detentions and restrictions on day-to-day life.

Thirdly, on the political front, despite most Americans supporting neutrality in the conflict, AIPAC and other pro-Israel lobbying groups have exercised an extraordinary role in bribing and intimidating U.S. politicians to provide unconditional support for Israel.

The roles of campaign contributors and lobbyists in the corrupt U.S. political system make the United States uniquely vulnerable to this kind of influence peddling and intimidation, whether it is by monopolistic corporations and industry groups like the Military-Industrial Complex and Big Pharma, or well-funded interest groups like the NRA, AIPAC and, in recent years, lobbyists for Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

On April 22, just weeks before this latest assault on Gaza, the overwhelming majority of congresspeople, 330 out of 435, signed a letter to the chair and ranking member of the House Appropriations Committee opposing any reduction or conditioning of US monies to Israel. The letter represented a show of force

from AIPAC and a repudiation of calls from some progressives in the Democratic Party to condition or otherwise restrict aid to Israel.

President Joe Biden, who has a long history of supporting Israeli crimes, responded to the latest massacre by insisting on Israel's "right to defend itself" and inanely hoping that "this will be closing down sooner than later." His UN ambassador also shamefully blocked a call for a ceasefire at the UN Security Council.

The silence and worse from President Biden and most of our representatives in Congress at the massacre of civilians and mass destruction of Gaza is unconscionable. The independent voices speaking out forcefully for Palestinians, including Senator Sanders and Representatives Tlaib, Omar and Ocasio-Cortez, show us what real democracy looks like, as do the massive protests that have filled U.S. streets all over the country.

U.S. policy must be reversed to reflect international law and the shifting U.S. opinion in favor of Palestinian rights. Every Member of Congress must be pushed to sign the bill introduced by Rep. Betty McCollum insisting that U.S. funds to Israel are not used "to support the military detention of Palestinian children, the unlawful

seizure, appropriation, and destruction of Palestinian property and forcible transfer of civilians in the West Bank, or further annexation of Palestinian land in violation of international law."

Congress must also be pressured to quickly enforce the Arms Export Control Act and the Leahy Laws to stop supplying any more U.S. weapons to Israel until it stops using them to attack and kill civilians.

The United States has played a vital and instrumental role in the decades-long catastrophe that has engulfed the people of Palestine. U.S. leaders and politicians must now confront their country's and, in many cases, their own personal complicity in this catastrophe, and act urgently and decisively to reverse U.S. policy to support full human rights for all Palestinians. **Z**

Medea Benjamin is cofounder of CODEPINK for Peace, and author of several books, including *Inside Iran: The Real History and Politics of the Islamic Republic of Iran*.

Nicolas J. S. Davies is an independent journalist, a researcher with CODEPINK and the author of *Blood On Our Hands: the American Invasion and Destruction of Iraq*.

Walking For Our Grandchild

By Ted Glick

A little more than three weeks from now, my wife Jane Califf and I will head west to Scranton, Pennsylvania to join with others in the eight-day, 2021 Walk For Our Grandchildren and Mother Earth: Elders and Youth on the Road to Climate Justice. The Walk begins in Scranton on June 20, Father's Day, and will end in Wilmington, Delaware on June 28. On that day we will take nonviolent direct action at a major corporate headquarters of Chase Bank, the world's leading financial supporter of the fossil fuel industry.

Eight years ago I helped to organize the 2013 Walk For Our Grandchildren, from Camp David in Maryland to the White House via Harpers Ferry. That one ended with about 60 people being arrested at the offices of Energy Resources Management, the greenwashing company that did the KXL oil pipeline's

official environmental impact statement.

Many of the people who I met and walked with in 2013 ended up joining together the next year to take nonviolent direct action at the headquarters of FERC, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, out of which emerged the organization Beyond Extreme Energy. BXE is still going strong, supporting frontline groups fighting new fracked gas infrastructure and advocating with increasing effectiveness for FERC to be replaced by FREC, a Federal Renewable Energy Commission.

For Jane and me this year's walk will have one very big difference: as distinct from back then, today we are actual grandparents. Earlier this month, with the pandemic thankfully receding, we spent time in Montana with our four-month-old grandson Rio and our son and daughter-in-law, and, unsurprisingly, we fell deeply in love with him.

It helps to personalize why we are working and struggling and fighting, day after day, for a very different future than the one we are facing absent very big societal changes.

Many years ago, in 2006, I did this personalization as I climbed up a ladder onto a ledge about 25 feet above the DC area entrance to NOAA,

the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. I did so as part of a campaign being conducted by the Chesapeake Climate Action Network the year after Hurricane Katrina, calling upon NOAA to release a study they had done of the connections between global heating and stronger and more destructive hurricanes.

In preparation for this action I practiced climbing up a 32-foot ladder behind the CCAN office. Doing so wasn't easy because I have a fear of heights. I had to figure out a way of keeping down my fear as I climbed those rungs, and what I did was to think about my two great nieces, 1 and 4 years old at the time, and how I needed to overcome my fear so that, hopefully, their world would be a much better one than today's. I ended up writing a poem about this experience, "The Ladders, Then and Now, and Abby and Ellie."

I am sure that as we move from Joe Biden's birthplace to his Wilmington home town on this year's Walk, Jane and I will be thinking often about Rio, gaining energy to keep walking in the expected summer heat. But if we weren't actual grandparents, we would still be taking part.

Right now is a critical time for visible action to demand that President Biden and Democrats in Congress take

seriously their responsibility to act now, this summer, as part of the American Jobs Plan, to accelerate the urgently needed shift off of fossil fuels to renewables—solar, wind, moving water and geothermal. It's time to put a stop to the construction of Line 3 and the building of any new fossil fuel infrastructure, which even the International Energy Agency just last week said must be done if we are to reach the world's Paris Climate Agreement goals and prevent worldwide climate catastrophe. It's time to step it up. **Z**

For information on the Walk For Our Grandchildren and to sign up, go to About I 4ourgrandchildren (wixsite.com).

Ted Glick is a volunteer organizer with Beyond Extreme Energy and author of *Burglar for Peace: Lessons Learned in the Catholic Left's Resistance to the Vietnam War*, published last year. Past writings and other information can be found at <https://tedglick.com>, and he can be followed on Twitter at <https://jtlick.com>.

Does the U.S. Really Need Another Oil Pipeline?

By Sonali Kolhatkar

A decades-old pipeline called Line 3, run by the Canadian company Enbridge, is in the midst of a controversial upgrade sparking fierce resistance from Indigenous communities living along the route. Line 3 is being replaced in order to enable the transport of nearly 800,000 barrels of dirty tar sands crude oil per day from Calgary, Canada, to Wisconsin. The majority of the pipeline cuts across northern Minnesota through the heart of lands where the Anishinaabe people have treaty rights to hunt, fish and harvest wild rice and maple syrup.

Line 3 joins a growing list of controversial oil pipeline projects targeted by the burgeoning Indigenous-led climate justice movement. In his last year in office, President Barack Obama responded to the powerful and internationally hailed convergence at Standing Rock in South Dakota by halting work on the Dakota Access Pipeline project. Almost a year earlier, he had canceled the Keystone XL pipeline—which was another major target of climate protesters. Entering office in January 2017, President Donald Trump promptly revived both projects and eventually greenlit the Line 3 pipeline.

Once Joe Biden entered the White House in early 2021, he canceled the doomed Keystone Pipeline but has yet to take action on reversing Trump's approval of DAPL or canceling the Line 3 project.

Indigenous leaders, embodying the spirit of Standing Rock five years ago, have been resisting the Line 3 replacement project and are now calling on all Americans, including those who are not Indigenous, to join them for what is being called a "Treaty People Gathering" from June 5 through 8 to demand an end to the project. One of them is Nancy Beaulieu, co-founder of the Resilient Indigenous Sisters Engaging (RISE) Coalition, and the northern Minnesota organizer for 350.org. Beaulieu explained to me in an interview that, "as Indigenous people, we have the inherent responsibility to protect the waters and all that is sacred. And as settlers—people who signed those treaties with our ancestors—they have an obligation to uphold those treaties." In other words, "everyone has a responsibility to the treaties" signed with tribal nations.

Non-Indigenous Americans have largely forgotten not only that we have treaty obligations, but also that we live in a nation with a bloody history of settler colonialism.

Former Republican Senator Rick Santorum demonstrated that ignorance in his tone-deaf comments on CNN—which later got him fired—when he said, "We birthed a nation from nothing. Yes, there were Native Americans, but there isn't much Native American culture in American culture."

Leaders like Beaulieu are determined to fight such erasure by reviving the conversations around treaty obligations and how the fight against pipelines and climate change is central to Indigenous stewardship of the natural world. She sees the June gathering as building on the Standing Rock mobilization and the Keystone pipeline activism, saying it is "the same exact thing but with different tribes."

According to Beaulieu, President Biden could cancel the Line 3 project with "the stroke of a pen," and she is perplexed about why he doesn't just do so. When the president convened a virtual climate summit in April with dozens of world leaders, he pledged to slash the U.S.'s greenhouse gas emissions by 50 percent in less than a decade. That is an enormously ambitious goal—one that would only be helped by a cancellation of the Line 3 pipeline project.

"Not only should Biden stop Line 3 but he should also step

in and stop these corporate giants responsible for the mess they're leaving us in in this beautiful country of ours," said Beaulieu. Instead, she worries that "corporations are just buying their way through lobbying our politicians."

When politicians do stand in their way, companies like Enbridge respond with shocking impunity. Take the case of Michigan where Gov. Gretchen Whitmer last year demanded the closure of another decades-old pipeline run by Enbridge called Line 5. That pipeline, first built in 1953, carries more than half a million barrels of crude oil per day under the Great Lakes and has had dozens of leaks over the years, spilling more than a million barrels across its length. Michigan's Great Lakes hold more than a fifth of the entire world's fresh surface water and remain in jeopardy as the aging Line 5 pipeline continues to operate. Rather than comply with Gov. Whitmer's order, Enbridge, backed by the Canadian government, simply refused to shut it down.

Enbridge is taking a similarly defiant position in northern Minnesota with its continuation of the Line 3 replacement project in the face of mass opposition. Shockingly, the company is even going as far as anticipating police responses to protest-

ers by paying into an escrow account to reimburse local Minnesota law enforcement departments for costs related to policing the resistance. In other words, a Canadian fossil fuel corporation is essentially hiring public servants to protect their private financial interests against the public.

Pipelines leak. That fact is as inevitable as greenhouse gas emissions fueling climate change. The United States has the largest number of pipelines, both existing and planned, than any other nation on the planet. According to Greenpeace, Enbridge's pipelines have leaked hundreds of times, spilled millions of gallons of hazardous material, and contaminated water at least 30 times. The original Line 3 project suffered the largest inland oil spill in the nation's history in Minnesota in 1991, and Enbridge's Michigan Line 5 pipeline dumped hundreds of thousands of barrels of tar sands into the Kalamazoo River in 2010. So, when Indigenous leaders like Beaulieu say their treaty rights to pristine land and water are threatened by Line 3, the facts are on their side.

While the fate of our planet and human life remains precarious in the face of ongoing emissions and a changing climate, fossil fuel companies have been laughing all the

way to the bank. According to one analysis, since 1990, when the impact of emissions on the climate was well established, the top four largest oil and gas companies on the planet accumulated nearly \$2 trillion in profits. "It's about power," said Beaulieu. "It's about the 1 percent and who's going to be in charge of our government."

However, the climate justice movement is slowly winning. A Dutch court recently ordered Royal Dutch Shell—one of those top four profitable companies—to slash its emissions by 45 percent by the year 2030 in a remarkable and historic case that could inspire similar legal challenges to other oil and gas companies. Another one of the big four—ExxonMobil, which is the U.S.'s most profitable oil corporation—is being challenged internally by an investor shareholder who ousted two board members over the company's climate policies. It was the first time such a thing happened, prompting one analyst to exclaim, "Investors have sent a shot across the bow of Exxon, but its impact will ricochet across the boards of every major fossil fuel company."

Joining such efforts are on-the-ground movements like the one opposing the Line 3 pipeline in Minnesota. As she prepares for the mass gather-

ing in June, Beaulieu told me, “we are going to peacefully resist this pipeline, and we’re calling on all our allies across Turtle Island to come here to northern Minnesota,” using the Native American term for North America. “Treaties don’t only protect us as Native people. They protect those people that signed the treaties as well,” she added. **Z**

This article was produced by Economy for All, a project of the Independent Media Institute.

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Art Against Drones

By Kathy Kelly

At the High Line, a popular tourist attraction in New York City, visitors to the West side of Lower Manhattan ascend above street level to what was once an elevated freight train line and is now a tranquil and architecturally intriguing promenade. Here

walkers enjoy a park-like openness; with fellow strollers they experience urban beauty, art and the wonder of comradeship.

In late May, a Predator drone replica, appearing suddenly above the High Line promenade at 30th Street, might seem to scrutinize people below. The “gaze” of the sleek, white sculpture by Sam Durant, called “Untitled, (drone),” in the shape of the U.S. military’s Predator killer drone, will sweep unpredictably over the people below, rotating atop its 25-foot-high steel pole, its direction guided by the wind.

Unlike the real Predator, it won’t carry two Hellfire missiles and a surveillance camera. The drone’s death-delivering features are omitted from Durant’s sculpture. Nevertheless, he hopes it will generate discussion.

“Untitled (drone)” is meant to animate questions “about the use of drones, surveillance, and targeted killings in places far and near,” said Durant in a statement “and whether as a society we agree with and want to continue these practices.”

Durant regards art as a place for exploring possibilities and alternatives.

In 2007, a similar desire to raise questions about remote killing motivated New York artist, Wafaa Bilal, now

a professor at NYU’s Tisch Gallery, to lock himself in a cubicle where, for a month, and at any hour of the day, he could be remotely targeted by a paint-ball gun blast. Anyone on the internet who chose to could shoot at him.

He was shot at more than 60,000 times by people from 128 different countries. Bilal called the project “Domestic Tension.” In a resulting book, *Shoot an Iraqi: Art Life and Resistance Under the Gun*, Bilal and co-author Kary Lydersen chronicled the remarkable outcome of the “Domestic Tension” project.

Along with descriptions of constant paint-ball attacks against Bilal, they wrote of the internet participants who instead wrestled with the controls to keep Bilal from being shot. And they described the death of Bilal’s brother, Hajj, who was killed by a U.S. air to ground missile killed Hajj in 2004.

Grappling with the terrible vulnerability to sudden death felt by people all across Iraq, Bilal, who grew up in Iraq, with this exhibit chose to partly experience the pervasive fear of being suddenly, and without warning, attacked remotely. He made himself vulnerable to people who might wish him harm.

Three years later, in June of 2010, Bilal developed the “And Counting” art work in

which a tattoo artist inked the names of Iraq's major cities on Bilal's back. The tattoo artist then used his needle to place "dots of ink, thousands and thousands of them—each representing a casualty of the Iraq war. The dots are tattooed near the city where the person died: red ink for the American soldiers, ultraviolet ink for the Iraqi civilians, invisible unless seen under black light."

Bilal, Durant and other artists who help us think about U.S. colonial warfare against the people of Iraq and other nations should surely be thanked. It's helpful to compare Bilal's and Durant's projects.

The pristine, unsullied drone may be an apt metaphor for 21st century U.S. warfare which can be entirely remote. Before driving home to dinner with their own loved ones, soldiers on another side of the world can kill suspected militants miles from any battlefield. The people assassinated by drone attacks may themselves be driving along a road, possibly headed toward their family homes.

U.S. technicians analyze miles of surveillance footage from drone cameras, but such surveillance doesn't disclose information about the people a drone operator targets.

In fact, as Andrew Cockburn wrote in the *London*

Review of Books: "the laws of physics impose inherent restrictions of picture quality from distant drones that no amount of money can overcome. Unless pictured from low altitude and in clear weather, individuals appear as dots, cars as blurry blobs."

On the other hand, Bilal's exploration is deeply personal, connoting the anguish of victims. Bilal took great pains, including the pain of tattooing, to name the people whose dots appear on his back, people who had been killed.

Contemplating "Untitled (drone)," it's unsettling to recall that no one in the U.S. can name the 30 Afghan laborers killed by a U.S. drone in 2019. A U.S. drone operator fired a missile into an encampment of migrant workers resting after a day of harvesting pine nuts in Afghanistan's Nangarhar province. An additional 40 people were injured. To U.S. drone pilots, such victims may appear only as dots.

In many war zones, incredibly brave human rights documentarians risk their lives to record the testimonies of people suffering war-related human rights violations, including drone attacks striking civilians. Mwatana for Human Rights, based in Yemen, researches human rights abuses committed by all sides

to the war in Yemen. In their report, "Death Falling from the Sky, Civilian Harm from the United States' Use of Lethal Force in Yemen," they examine 12 U.S. aerial attacks in Yemen, 10 of them U.S. drone strikes, between 2017 and 2019.

They report at least 38 Yemeni civilians—19 men, 13 children, and 6 women—were killed and 7 others were injured in the attacks.

From the report, we learn of important roles the slain victims played as family and community members. We read of families bereft of income after the killing of wage earners, including beekeepers, fishers, laborers and drivers. Students described one of the men killed as a beloved teacher. Also among the dead were university students and housewives. Loved ones who mourn the deaths of those killed still fear hearing the hum of a drone.

Now it's clear that the Houthis in Yemen have been able to use 3-D models to create their own drones which they have fired across a border, hitting targets in Saudi Arabia. This kind of proliferation has been entirely predictable.

The U.S. recently announced it plans to sell the United Arab Emirates 50 F-35 fighter jets, 18 Reaper drones, and various missiles,

bombs and munitions. The UAE has used its weapons against its own people and has run ghastly clandestine prisons in Yemen where people are tortured and broken as human beings, a fate awaiting any Yemeni critic of their power.

The installation of a drone overlooking people in Manhattan can bring them into the larger discussion.

Outside of many military bases safely within the U.S.—from which drones are piloted to deal death over Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen, Somalia, Syria and other lands, activists have repeatedly staged artistic events. In 2011, at Hancock Field in Syracuse, 38 activists were arrested for a “die-in” during which they simply lay down, at the gate, covering themselves with bloodied sheets.

The title of Sam Durant’s sculpture—“Untitled (drone)” —means that in a sense it is officially nameless, like so many of the victims of the U.S. Predator drones it is designed to resemble.

People in many parts of the world can’t speak up. Comparatively, we don’t face torture or death for protesting. We can tell the stories of the people being killed now by our drones, or watching the skies in terror of them.

We should tell those stories, those realities, to our

elected representatives, to faith-based communities, to academics, to media and to our family and friends. And if you know anyone in New York City, please tell them to be on the lookout for a Predator drone in lower Manhattan. This pretend drone could help us grapple with reality and accelerate an international push to ban killer drones. **Z**

Kathy Kelly (Kathy.vcnv@gmail.com) is a peace activist and author working to end U.S. military and economic wars. At times, her activism has led her to war zones and prisons.

Peace in Colombia Should Mean Land Reform and an End to Hunger

By Vijay Prashad and

Zoe Alexandra

Since the end of April, Colombia’s streets have smelled of tear gas. The government of Colombian President Iván Duque imposed policies that put the costs of the pandemic on the working class and the peasantry and tried to suffocate any advancement of the Havana peace accords of 2016. Discontent led to street protests, which were repressed harshly by the government. These protests, Rodrigo Granda of Colombia’s Comunes party told us in an interview, “are defined by the wide participation of youth, women, artists, religious people, the Indigenous, Afro-Colombians, unions and organizations from neighborhoods of the poor and the working class. Practically the whole of Colombia is part of the struggle.” A range of concrete demands defines the protest: running water and schools, the disbandment of the riot police (ESMAD), and the expansion of democratic possibilities.

The Comunes party was formed in 2017 by members of the FARC-EP (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People’s Army). Granda, who is known internationally

for his former role as the foreign minister of the FARC, is now in the national board of the Comunes party. As a legal political party, Comunes is a direct product of the 2016 Havana peace accords signed by the Colombian government and the FARC. Over the past two years, members of the Comunes have been on the streets alongside their fellow Colombians who are fighting to bring democracy to the country's economy and politics. Granda spoke to us about the ongoing protests and helped to put these protests in the context of the long history of struggle in Colombia.

Colombia's Violent Oligarchy

The current protests remind Granda of the 1977 national civic strike that he participated in, with one difference: then, he says, there was “no international solidarity,” while now the global media attention to Colombia's struggle allows the people in his country “not to lose heart” during a difficult fight. The 1977 strike emerged out of a long struggle against the country's oligarchy.

Years before the strike, Granda looked forward to the Colombian elections of

April 1970. He hoped that the former president and general Gustavo Rojas Pinilla of the National Popular Alliance (ANAPO) would win. Rojas Pinilla was not a leftist, but he offered the country a way out of the grip of Colombia's oligarchy. Young people like Granda hoped that an ANAPO victory in Colombia and then, later in the year, the victory of Salvador Allende's Popular Unity in Chile would help change the character of South America's politics. But Rojas Pinilla's victory was embroiled in fraud, and while Allende won the election, he was ejected from power in 1973 in a coup. Looking back over these 50 years, Granda told us that he feels an “internal frustration” with the theft of that election in 1970 and the tortuous path his country has had to take since then.

The fight has been difficult because the ruling bloc of Colombia, including Duque, is unwilling to honestly participate in a democratic agenda. None of the major political parties that have controlled the state since 1948 have been eager for any kind of change. Suffocation of politics since then and the routine assassination of political leaders moved the left—through the FARC and other groups—into armed struggle in 1964. The FARC regularly called upon the ruling bloc to open

negotiations, but with little success. However, talks with President Belisario Betancur in 1982 opened the way to the 1984 La Uribe Agreement, which resulted in a ceasefire from 1984 to 1987. Members of the FARC joined with others on the left to create Union Patriótica (UP) as a legal political party. Attempts to move a reform agenda by the UP came alongside a policy of assassinations by the state against the left. No genuine liberal sentiment pervades the Colombian ruling bloc, which refuses to share even a modicum of power with other groups.

The situation deteriorated under President Andrés Pastrana—who was in power from 1998 to 2002—and U.S. President Bill Clinton, who both signed Plan Colombia, which proved to be the beginning of a policy to define the FARC as “narco-terrorists” and conduct a war of extermination against the rebels. Incidentally, it was Pastrana's father who stole the election of 1970 from Rojas Pinilla. Brutality characterized the Colombian state's approach toward the FARC and toward anyone else who questioned its policies. Gradually, the ruling bloc was led by more and more ruthless men, none more so than President Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010). Uribe, Granda told us, “promised to

exterminate us [the FARC] in four years, but he could not.”

Peace Accords

Granda understands why peace had to define the agenda a decade ago. “After the failure of Plan Colombia and a stalemate in the war,” he told us, “we could not defeat the Colombian army in a short time, and the Colombian army could not defeat the guerrillas in a short time either. Therefore, a political solution through dialogue was necessary.” President Juan Manuel Santos (2010-2018) wrote a letter to the FARC saying that he recognized the internal problems in Colombia and also recognized that the FARC was a political organization and not a narco-terrorist organization. This set in motion the negotiation in Havana that resulted in the accords.

The accords put in place a plan for integrated agrarian reform and democracy, as well as restitution for the victims of the long war. “We put down our arms,” Granda said, “but we did not disarm ourselves from an ideological point of view.” The signing of the accords is only one part of the FARC’s plan toward peace, since their implementation is key before other kinds

of meaningful change can be made. But the Colombian oligarchy, Granda said, has an entirely different view of what peace would mean. For the oligarchy, peace means that the guns of the FARC are silent. “For us,” he says, “peace means an attack on the factors that generate the violence in the first place.” These include factors like hunger, dispossession and the frustration with the oligarchy and the harsh violence by the state against which the people of Colombia continue to protest. **Z**

This article was produced by Globetrotter.

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Protests Unleashed by Murder of George Floyd Exceed All in U.S. History

Noam Chomsky interviewed by George Yancy

There has been “nothing comparable in American history” to the huge outpouring of protest unleashed by the murder of George Floyd, says world-renowned intellectual Noam Chomsky. Even at the very peak of Martin Luther King Jr.’s popularity, the mass protests that King led and inspired “didn’t come anywhere close” to the massive racial justice protests that have erupted over this past year, Chomsky adds.

As the anniversary of Floyd’s murder approaches, I invited Chomsky—a brilliant thinker who combines deep and unbelievable historical breadth, critical conceptual sharpness, and profound passion in his analysis of political and existential issues—to talk with me about George Floyd’s death and the guilty verdict against Derek Chauvin, as well as anti-Black violence in North America and how the U.S. fomented a “gun culture.”

Chomsky is an intellectual whom I have come to greatly appreciate, to admire and to think of as a friend. Through his example, I have learned how to practice disobedience

and dissent in a world that is filled with indoctrination. As a rule of thumb, he has taught me that when everybody agrees on something more complicated than “two plus two equals four,” we should question it.

George Yancy: For some of us, witnessing the killing of George Floyd and hearing him say that he couldn’t breathe brought back memories of 43-year-old Black male Eric Garner’s death back in 2014, though he said, “I can’t breathe” 11 times. When you think about what happened to George Floyd within the larger historical context of white racism within the U.S., how does Floyd’s death speak to you? For me, it was not anomalous, but how did it speak to you?

Noam Chomsky: His death dramatically symbolized 400 years of hideous crimes and atrocities, and evidently it meant that to a large part of the population. It is quite striking what happened after his assassination, as we should call it. There was a huge outpouring, nothing

comparable in American history. There were huge demonstrations; there was a sense of dedicated solidarity of Black and white people marching together. They were nonviolent overwhelmingly, though the right wing would like you to believe otherwise. There was also enormous public support, with two-thirds of the population supportive of protest. There is nothing remotely like that in U.S. history.

Protests led by Martin Luther King Jr., at the very peak of his popularity, didn't come anywhere close to that. That's the result, I think, of a lot of work that's been done on the ground by Black Lives Matter and other groups which have raised the level of consciousness and awareness to the point where when this thing happened it just lit a spark, and the kindling was ready to burn. And it's had a long-time impact. I think it's changed perception and understanding considerably, and not undermined by the fact that police-perpetrated killings continue almost daily.

As I was watching the guilty verdict of Derek Chauvin, I'm sure that Floyd's family had experienced some sense of relief and perhaps they could breathe again as well. Yet, it also occurred to me that in the case of finding Chauvin guilty on all three charges, there was such a low threshold to demonstrate his guilt. He had knelt on him for 9 minutes and 29 seconds. I don't want to come across as pessimistic or cynical, but what do you see as "triumphant" or "progressive" regarding the guilty verdict?

You know, there had been an atmosphere in the past, as you know, better than I do, in which Black lives just didn't matter. The sentiment was that if a white person was brought to trial after killing a Black person, the reasoning was that they probably had a "good reason." So, just free them. Of course, there

were even worse cases where whites carried out murders and lynchings and were praised. Well, fortunately, we're past that.

But not so far in the past, Black Panther leader Fred Hampton, for example, was assassinated in a Gestapo-style murder, set-up by the FBI, who fed to the Chicago police fake stories about guns being stashed in his apartment. The police raided his apartment at about 4:00 in the morning and murdered him and his friend, Mark Clark. Just murdered them. The reason for killing Hampton was very simple. He was the most important of the Black Panther organizers. The FBI wanted to go after the successful organizers and Hampton was the peak of them; he had to be killed. In fact, it was the last of a long series of efforts where the FBI tried to instigate a feud between the Black Panthers and the criminal group, Blackstone Rangers, which were in Chicago.

The FBI sent fake letters to the Rangers written in fake Black dialect saying that the Panthers had a contract out on their leaders. But they were closely enough integrated, so they knew what was going on. In the case of Hampton, however, they had an FBI infiltrator, who was his bodyguard. The point is that there was a long FBI plot not just against the Panthers, but against the Black movements altogether. It took years of dedicated work by some great young lawyers, Flint Taylor and Jeffrey Haas, working on the case for years to finally get a kind of civil settlement.

This one case vastly outweighs anything that was charged against Richard Nixon. Was he charged for his use of national political police carrying out murder and assassination campaigns against Black organizers? And regarding your question, that's a big difference between then and now. Now at least circumstances are such that a jury can convict someone for the perfectly obvious murder of a Black man. But if you turn on Fox News,

notice the reaction. Listen to Tucker Carlson, who claims that the trial of Derek Chauvin wasn't legitimate because the jury was intimidated, they were terrified that Black people were going to come and destroy their houses and kill them all. Alan Dershowitz, the so-called civil libertarian who likes to present himself as that, also claimed that the trial was illegitimate because the jury was intimidated.

We haven't freed ourselves. There's a lot of distance to go, but the killing of George Floyd did bring out something very positive in the society, namely the beginnings of understanding that there's something really hideous at the core of our history. It has come up in other ways, like the 1619 Project published by *The New York Times*. Some historians are carping about it, "You got this wrong; you've got that wrong." But it's not even relevant when, finally, we have a recognition in the main media and the country that we've had 400 years of hideous atrocities experienced by Black people. So, let's take a look at it, ask who we are and what we are. This is not something irrelevant to American history. It's the basis of U.S. economic prosperity; that's why I'm privileged.

Cotton was the oil of the 19th century. The large part of the wealth of the United States, and also Britain, and to a lesser extent the continent, was based on cheap cotton. How do you get cheap cotton? Well, by the most hideous, atrocious system of slavery that ever existed. A lot of this is just coming to light. Edward E. Baptist's book, *The Half Has Never Been Told*, provides an astonishing picture of things that maybe professional historians knew something about, but certainly the general public, even the informed public, wasn't informed about. I didn't know a lot of the things he described; they were way beyond the horrors that I knew about. A lot of this is just beginning to come out after hundreds of years. It's about time.

Most certainly.

And we have to look at a lot of other things. For example, why do so few Black people have access to wealth? There are many reasons. One reason is the New Deal measures, which determined that federal housing had to be segregated. And in the 1950s, for the first time, a Black man had a chance to get a decent job in an auto union job at an auto plant, to make some money and perhaps buy a house. But he couldn't buy a house, because the Federal Housing Projects (Levittown, in Long Island, New York, for example) kept Black people out.

In the U.S., wealth and housing are very closely related. A lot of people's wealth is in their house. Once Black workers finally got just a little bit of emancipation, a chance to get a job, they were told, "Sorry folks, but you can't buy a house here because we have racist laws." This ran into the later 1960s, which was finally overturned by the popular activism in the 1960s. I should say that the liberal Democratic senators who voted for this law were strongly opposed to segregation. They were not racists. They wanted nonsegregated housing, but they couldn't get anything through the Southern Democrats, who dominated the Senate. This is very similar in our own time when you can't get anything through unless you somehow get the Republican Party, which is dedicated to wealth and power, to agree. And this is a big problem in this country.

In the past few months, we have heard about shooting after shooting. Could you talk about the escalating danger of gun violence? My sense is that there are profound cultural myths regarding gun ownership. Could you speak to this as well?

Gun violence is increasing not just here, but

one of the worst effects of the U.S. gun culture is in Mexico and Latin America. They're flooded with American guns, which are killing people at a hideous rate. Mexico is a killing field with largely American guns. In Central America, there is the same thing. You flood areas with guns where there are plenty of tensions and crises and you're going to get killings. Instead of people shouting at each other, they'll shoot each other. And it's shocking that somebody like me, for example, who doesn't know which end of the gun to hold, could go into a store in Arizona, where I live, and pick up a fancy gun and hand it over to somebody from a Mexican cartel. Basically, things like that are a curse for the world. And it just has to be cured.

The history of this is worth remembering. In the 19th century, there was no gun culture. People had guns. After all, it was an agricultural country, so farmers had old muskets to chase coyotes away and so on, but there was no gun culture. What happened apparently—and there is a good study of this by historian Pamela Haag, who has examined this in some detail—is that gun manufacturers were facing an economic crisis.

The American Civil War provided a huge market for fancy modern guns. European states were at war, they were buying up guns. But the Civil War ended, and Europe went into a temporary quiescent state. There were not a lot of wars and fighting and so the market dried up. So, they hit on the idea of trying to create a market through advertising. The first great advertising campaign began with concocting an image of the “Wild West,” the kind of thing that I grew up with. There was Wyatt Earp, a sheriff who was quick on the draw, or there was the Lone Ranger who would ride to the rescue. There was nothing remotely like this in the West, but it was invented and had a big effect. I can remember it from my childhood, and we all believed it.

Of course, the bottom line of all of this was that you better buy your son a fancy rifle, or he won't be a “real man.” Well, that established the basis for a kind of gun culture, and it was copied by other advertising campaigns. We all remember the Marlboro Man. You know, you want to poison yourself with cigarettes and be like a cowboy who runs to the rescue. And it turned out to be very effective. The tobacco campaign killed—though nobody knows, probably millions of people—and the gun culture is still killing people at a horrific rate, which was all escalated by the Supreme Court in 2008—the *District of Columbia v. Heller*—where Justice Antonin Scalia reversed 100 years of precedent and reinterpreted the Second Amendment to grant free access to guns by individuals. Scalia was an originalist, a textualist.

The idea here is that you don't pay attention to what the people who introduced the legislation meant by it; you're not allowed to do that. You just have to look at the text, not what it meant to the people who wrote it. That's illegitimate, not true scholarship.

So, he looked at the text and tried to show that somebody living in the 18th century would have interpreted the Second Amendment to mean disregard for militias. True or false, it's totally irrelevant. We know exactly why the founders instituted the Second Amendment. One reason was the British Army. They were the main force in the world. The U.S. barely had an army, and the British might come right back. In fact, they did a few years later, and one had to have militias to call up to protect oneself against the British.

The second reason was slavery. In places like South Carolina, enslaved Black people outnumbered white people. And there were slave rebellions going on all over the Caribbean, and they could spread here. In fact, they did. So, white people decided they needed guns for militias. But the main reason was

aggression and genocide. One of the main reasons for the American Revolution was that King George III had instituted a royal proclamation which banned the colonists from going to the territory of the Indian Nations. They were not supposed to invade them. Colonists were supposed to stay east of the Appalachians, but they didn't want that. They wanted to kill and displace the American Indian people. They could then settle out there. Land speculators like George Washington wanted to move out. As soon as the British were gone, well, the white settlers needed militias, they needed guns.

Later on, the army was created, the cavalry took care of it, and through the 19th century, Indigenous nations were destroyed, attacked and expelled. They needed lots of guns for that. You see, that's why the founders needed guns, but we're not allowed to talk about that. Instead, we generally say what someone like Scalia thinks someone would've understood by the Second Amendment. And now that has become holy writ. Most people in the U.S., if you ask them what's in the Constitution, the first thing they'll say is the Second Amendment. It has just become a dominant part of the culture. **Z**

Littlefield in 2020.

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Debt as a Weapon to Exploit Other Countries

By Rod Driver

As of 2020, the total amount of debt owed by developing countries was \$11 trillion. The cost of interest on this debt was hundreds of billions of dollars per year, or over \$1 billion per day. This is many times greater than the aid given by rich countries. This post summarises the main reasons why countries should not have to repay all of their debts.

Borrowing Money for Weapons: Paying For Your Corrupt Boss' Crimes

A close look at the reasons for lending in specific cases highlights the unfairness of the system. It has been estimated that from 1960-1987, developing countries borrowed \$400 billion to spend on weapons. Much of Iraq's debt was due to money lent to finance Saddam Hussein's war with Iran in the 1980s. We saw in earlier posts that most money spent

on weapons by the poorest countries comes straight back to much richer countries, lining the pockets of shareholders and executives of weapons companies. The Indonesian dictator, Suharto, received loans for tanks and warplanes that were used to slaughter hundreds of thousands of people. The Indonesian people are expected to repay those loans. The same is true of many countries that used to be run by dictators. Britain and the U.S. helped to keep these dictators in power, against the wishes of their people, yet the people are still expected to repay their dictators' debts.

We saw in an earlier post that sanctions (depriving a country of basic essentials) can cause devastation, yet people from many countries, including Iraq, Panama and Vietnam, have been expected to repay loans whilst suffering from sanctions imposed by rich nations.

White Elephants—The money goes to companies and

consultants from rich countries

Large amounts of money has been lent to finance huge projects that are of little value to ordinary people. These are known as white elephants. The most obvious of these would be nuclear power plants that were finished 20 years behind schedule and cost many times their original estimate, producing some of the most expensive energy on Earth. Forty-five thousand dams have been built, displacing 50 million people and costing \$2 trillion. Many went way over budget, such as a South American dam that was expected to cost \$3.6 billion but ended up costing \$21 billion. It was described by the former Paraguayan minister of energy as “possibly the largest fraud in the history of capitalism.” Some dams were designed so badly that they unexpectedly flooded thousands of square miles of land, and produce much less energy than expected. Where private contractors are running these powerplants, governments have ended up with contracts where they have to pay for energy that is not used.

Railroads have been constructed that run “from no place to nowhere.” Again, many of the loans for these projects went into the pockets of wealthy shareholders and executives of construction companies in rich countries, together with consultants from those countries. There is even a capital city in Nigeria called Abuja that was built in the middle of nowhere and seemed for many years to have no purpose. The Nigerian people have a joke about the city. They ask God if ordinary people will ever see the benefits of Abuja. He responds “Not in my lifetime.”

The System Is Rigged Against Borrowing Coun-

When a developing country borrows money from international lenders, it usually does so using an established currency, such as U.S. dollars. The exchange rate with its own currency can fluctuate. Some borrowing countries are actually encouraged to change their exchange rate (this is known as devaluing their currency) making loans more expensive to repay. The interest rate is often high and can also fluctuate.

Some loans are used to grow crops for export, but the price of these crops also varies. In 1999, Nicaraguan coffee sold for \$1.44 per pound. By 2002, this price had dropped to \$0.40 per pound. This means they have to sell three times as much coffee to pay their debts. All three of these factors, exchange rate, interest rate and prices, are beyond the control of the borrowing country—they are controlled by traders and banks in rich countries. In theory these rates can go either way, but in practice poor countries have repeatedly lost out. Conditions can easily change sufficiently that poor countries can no longer afford to repay debts, through no fault of their own.

If the price of coffee drops below the price of production, then it does not matter how much coffee is sold—there is zero profit, and coffee sales cannot be used to repay the debt. Most developing countries have provided enough coffee, cocoa, cotton, cobalt, gold, oil and diamonds (and everything else that they export) to pay back their original loans many times over, yet they still have huge debts. Unlike businesses, countries cannot declare bankruptcy. Banks try not to write-off debts, so they keep lending ever-more money to borrowers to pay off their earlier debts, together with the interest on those debts. The debt just keeps getting bigger. An observer in Nigeria pointed out: “We borrowed \$5 billion. We have paid back \$16 billion, but we still owe

\$28 billion.”

Rich People Keep Stealing the Money

Nigeria provides a good case study of debt and capital flight. The best estimate of the total wealth stolen by corrupt dictators and their cronies since 1960 in Nigeria is \$120 billion. This is enough to repay their debts many times over. The same is true in many poor countries. Two leading experts wrote: “Of the money borrowed by African governments in recent decades, more than half departed in the same year, with a significant portion of it winding up in private accounts at the very banks that provided the loans in the first place”

The Destructive Power of Compound Interest

The effect of compound interest on loans to developing countries is extremely important. If a country borrowed \$1 million in 1980 at 7% interest, the total debt would now be approximately \$16 million. When interest rates are very high, the debt increases more rapidly. If we re-do the same calculation at 14% interest, the total debt would be \$250 million. If the interest rate on a loan is even one percent too high, then the borrower pays a considerable amount of extra interest over a long period of time.

The system of excessive interest on international loans is a deliberate mechanism to transfer wealth from poor countries to rich ones, or from governments to rich people. In the 1980s and 1990s, many South American countries experienced serious problems due to excessive interest on their debts. In an extreme example, the Argentinian government

was paying 45% interest on loans (known as dollar bonds). Many of these bonds were owned by wealthy Argentinians. The leading expert on the system, Michael Hudson, has explained that these bonds are actually a complex mechanism to help the rich take their money out of the country.

It's All About Conditions

Most people think of loans as having two parts, the capital and the interest. In the international world there is a third part—the conditions that come with the loan. This is arguably the most important part. Countries that want to borrow can be more easily persuaded to follow the guidance of advisors from rich countries, to privatize their industries, and to open up their markets for further exploitation by big corporations. In order to qualify to have the debts written off, countries have to implement these same policies. The manipulation of these debts is a means of helping rich countries and their corporations take control of resources and trade in poor countries. Many of these countries have effectively been conquered economically.

Governments from developing countries have been advised to decrease spending on basic necessities (known as austerity), but at the same time they have been forced to keep paying their debts. Nicaragua spends four times as much on debt as on education. One expert on Mozambique said: “A large share of the government revenues of Mozambique have to be spent on servicing the debt. Little is left for health, education and water provision.”

The interests of banks and investors are considered more important than the lives and health of billions of people.

Debts Can, and Should, Be Written Off

If we write off all debts that were spent on weapons, that were used to support murderous dictators, that were stashed in personal offshore bank accounts in tax havens, that were spent on grand schemes of little benefit to the population, that lined the pockets of Western consultants, or that have grown enormously due to excessive compound interest, the amount outstanding would be very much less than the amount that rich countries still want repaid. If we then deduct the amount already repaid, it would almost certainly be less than zero. Governments and banks in rich countries do not want to do these calculations, because they do not want to admit that the whole system is so corrupt. When researchers examine in detail what happened to the original money that was loaned to specific countries, they conclude that much of the outstanding debt should be canceled. For example, when loans to Ecuador were analysed, some of them violated international law, as well as domestic laws in lending countries, and laws in Ecuador. In total, \$3 billion of Ecuador's debt was illegitimate. The technical term for this is odious debt.

Writing off debts is nothing new. This has been a regular process for thousands of years, and various multi-billion dollar loans to the U.S. and Europe have been written off over the years. Our politicians occasionally write off some of the debts of the poorest countries, but they are rarely as generous as they claim. In some cases, aid is reduced by the same amount as the debt written off, so poor countries get no real benefit. Some schemes do not end debts altogether. They merely reduce them to a level that rich countries consider

“sustainable.” What this really means is the greatest amount of interest that can be extorted each year without quite tipping a country into revolution and civil war. The debt written off in recent years is just a small fraction of the amount owed.

The propaganda related to debt is very powerful. Most people have been conditioned to believe that we all have a moral obligation to repay debts. The idea that debts are a powerful mechanism for controlling or exploiting others is rarely discussed. We need to change the whole framework of discussions around debts, and force lenders to accept responsibility for their criminal or unethical practices. In business, it is accepted that debts can be written off. Lenders accept that when they make a loan, there is a risk that they will not get their money back. The same should be true of international lending.

This is a Huge Problem for Some Rich Countries Too

These issues became much more apparent to people in rich countries, when Greece was forced to pursue austerity, in 2010, as a condition of its debt arrangements. Portugal, Ireland, Italy and Spain also suffered. This had devastating consequences for the people of these countries, particularly the poor. Their situation is particularly difficult as they use the Euro as their currency, which gives them much less control over their finances.

A golden rule for all countries should be to borrow as little as possible in foreign currencies. If a country can create its own currency, it can be used to pay local people to do most of the things needed for development. It is straightforward to set up a national healthcare network, to set up a national system of

schools and universities, to train doctors and engineers, to build a country's infrastructure, or to begin the process of industrialization. It has been done successfully even in very poor countries. Forcing countries to borrow money denominated in U.S. dollars is a deliberate strategy by the U.S. to maintain its power. Z

Rod Driver is a part-time academic who is particularly interested in de-bunking modern-day US and British propaganda, and explaining war, terrorism, economics and poverty, without the nonsense in the mainstream media. This article was first posted at medium.com/elephantsintheroom.