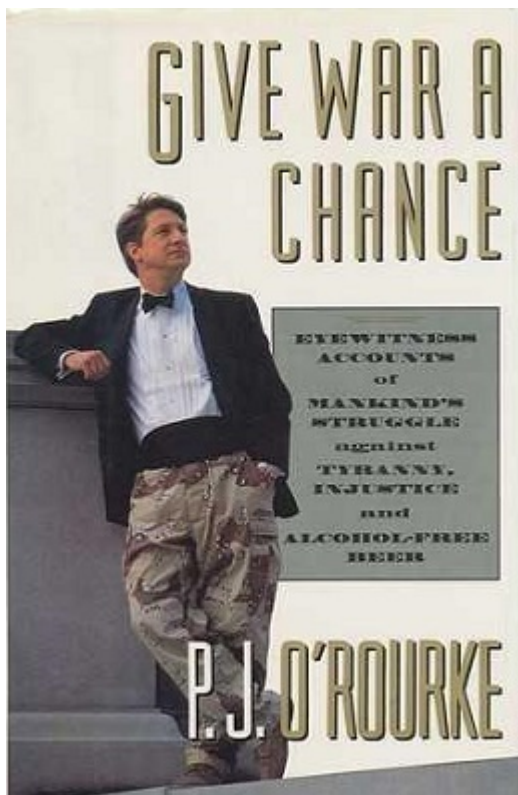


# New Nonfiction from Rob Bokkon: “The Last of the Gonzo Boys: P.J. O’Rourke, War, and the Evolution of a Political Mind”



*“We hear the Iraqi army is systematically blowing up buildings in downtown Kuwait City. If the architecture in Kuwait resembles the architecture in Saudi Arabia, the Iraqi army will have done one good deed, anyway. As soon as the Iraqis have all surrendered, let’s send them to New York and let them take a whack at Trump Tower.”—P. J. O’Rourke, February 25, 1991*

On February 15, 2022, Patrick Jake O’Rourke shuffled off this

mortal coil owing to lung cancer. If P.J.'s general demeanor was any indication, this probably left him pissed off and in need of a drink. It certainly did me.

Who was P.J. O'Rourke?

P.J. O'Rourke was a dick.

"Gadfly" isn't really evocative enough. He fulfilled that function, but it wasn't his only schtick. "Curmudgeon" isn't right either, even though he tried a little too hard to be one, especially as he got older. But curmudgeons don't like anybody or anything, and P.J. had more than his share of joie de vivre. "Dick" pretty much sums it up—that one guy with an attitude problem and a drinking problem and possibly a coke problem, who says outrageous shit after his second bourbon that pisses off the whole room, and after the third one has everybody roaring with laughter.

He was a dick. But he was *our* dick, goddamnit.

And he was one hell of a writer.

At the risk of showing my age:

Back in the Grand Old Days of Print Media—in the misty, forgotten, sepia-toned era that is the late '80s and early '90s—everybody, and I mean everybody, read *Rolling Stone*. If you had the least pretension to musical hipness, you read *RS*. Your ex-hippie parents read *RS*. Your Atari-generation older siblings grew up on it, so there were always copies lying around the house. If your high school library was hip enough, they had it; college libraries *always* did, and so did record stores. We read it, we talked about what we read, we argued over the music reviews, we cut pics out to hang on our dorm room walls. It piled up under the coffee table, it stacked on the backs of toilets. It was everywhere.

*Rolling Stone* was fucking cool back then, too. They reviewed

shit you'd never, ever have heard of otherwise, especially if like me you grew up in a rural coal-mining area of the Upland South. My friends and I pestered the poor long-suffering employees at Disc Jockey in the one tiny mall in Owensboro with increasingly strange requests for shit we'd heard of but couldn't find in the bins, we kept lists of shit we wanted to hear in our pockets to offset the dread phenomenon known as Record Store Amnesia. Buying music was a big deal back then and we spent enormous amounts of the disposable income that we used to have so much more of on it. It was a feedback loop; read *Rolling Stone*, go to record store for shit you'd read about in *Rolling Stone*, buy the new *Rolling Stone* while you're there, repeat. And it wasn't just the music. They had great pieces on the entertainment industry, politics, global affairs.

But the really, really good times came when there was a P.J. O'Rourke article gracing the issue.

I've lost count of how many people have stared me down and said "YOU like P.J. O'Rourke? You, Rob BOKKON, Marxist and identity politics asshole and general leftist menace, actively buy his books?" Yeah, I do like P.J. O'Rourke. He's a great writer, he's funny as fuck, and he's also wrong about almost everything and often heinously offensive. Do yourself a favor and don't look up anything he ever wrote for *National Lampoon*. In fact, most of what was in *National Lampoon* is virtually unreadable to modern audiences and that's probably a good thing—they were never as funny as they thought they were, and that whole "shock comedy" thing is mad lame anyway. That's not to denigrate their impact culturally or whatever, but a bunch of white boys yelling the n-word because they can is not revolutionary and it wasn't then either. I dislike all of PJ's views on Marxism, not least because they're facile and, well, silly; I dislike his views on American imperialism; I especially dislike his defenses of capitalism, which are based on a grade-school understanding of economics and amount to not

much more than the “get rich while you can” ethos of Gordon Gekko or Patrick Bateman. There’s also the casual racism and sexism, which is to be expected from a Boomer white male straight Republican.

With that all said: I have rarely laughed harder than when reading P.J. go off on one of his tangents, especially when the target is his own party (which is frequent) or matters of foreign policy, with which he was well acquainted as an on-the-ground reporter, for ABC Radio, *RS*, and the egregious *American Spectator*. And his writing is valuable as historical documentation, of a particular political attitude that has vanished from the American intellectual landscape. Much, I would argue, to the detriment of that landscape.

I’m no big fan of “the discourse.” I don’t really regard engagement with today’s right-wingers as a useful or healthy activity. We have nothing in common other than citizenship, and I know that no amount of pleading on my part can convince anyone to stop being a terrible person. That falls firmly under the category of “personal development”, and people who think the government shouldn’t provide us with clean water but should have the authority to arrest LGBT+ people for existing are not, generally speaking, capable of much in the way of soul-searching. (You’re free to disagree with any of these statements as long as you know that you’re wrong.) I could give less of a shit what some KKK member in Indiana thinks of the economy or Black Lives Matter or socialism, because A: I already know what he thinks and B: what he thinks is shitty, so having a “dialogue” is going to benefit no one at all.

P.J. O’Rourke, of all the Republicans in the world, really just wasn’t like that. Sure, he was a plutocrat-fellating asshole and a warmonger and an apologist for the worst economic system the world ever created, but he would flat-out tell you that he was all those things and then smoke a joint

with you. Hunter Thompson didn't suffer fools gladly. Hunter Thompson liked P.J. So did Jann Wenner, the publisher of *Rolling Stone* for many decades, who's hardly what you'd call a right-wing ideologue. And so did a lot of (in those days) liberal kids like me who found reading P.J. a delicious sort of crime, the thrill of the forbidden making the humor even more sharp.

We saw ourselves in P.J., even if we didn't like what he had to say. He was a pure Boomer, but his attitude was so much more like that of Gen X: question everything, have an attitude about it, say what's on your mind. Be bold. Be very wrong, if you have to be, and then take the time to examine what you were wrong about. But above all, *say something*. If something annoys you, bring it up. Be the squeaky wheel. Be the gadfly. Stir some shit up.

And stir shit he did. Liberals hated him (probably because he turned that laser gaze onto the silliest aspects of American pseudo-leftism and proclaimed them to be exactly what they were); conservatives hated him too. He thought Reagan was a dunce and Bush Sr. an affable goofball who stumbled into all his political successes (both of these facts are categorically correct); he hated, but *hated*, the Drug War and called it out for its waste of public dollars and its human consequence, to say nothing of its impact on our civil liberties. As P.J. saw it, no strict constructionist could defend the unlawful search and seizure that was drug testing, nor the Fifth Amendment violation of self-incrimination it virtually guarantees. "Jail will screw up your life worse than a whole Glad bag full of daffy dust," he wrote, acknowledging something we're just now starting to talk about, the failure of the punitive system to address *anything* meaningful about drug use in America.

Imagine a Republican saying THAT now. Imagine a Republican questioning the importance of the prison-industrial complex. Fuck, imagine a Republican questioning anything his own party did.

And that is why P.J. was the last Republican on this planet with whom I would have, willingly, shared a whiskey. Because he didn't think the government needed to fuck with your private life. He didn't think there was anything particularly noble in politics or politicians in general, and regarded the cultish worship of people in the public sphere of government as both perverse and un-American; he didn't think people in a democracy were obliged to bow to anybody in particular, regardless of whether that somebody was JFK or Reagan. Plus, he is, to date, the only person to describe a landscape using the words "blood and diarrhea" in an article on American foreign policy, and that takes a certain amount of style. Audacity, anyway.

And nothing in this world succeeds like audacity. As P.J. himself might say, just look at Congress; right there you've got 535 people who work six months out of the year (maybe) for six-figure salaries, and the chief qualification for their job is saying things very loudly. Not only when they're right, but *especially* when they're wrong. Even the reasonably good ones have a huge dash of chutzpah, or they wouldn't be in politics. P.J. famously called Congress a "Parliament of whores" in the early '90s. I would argue that this situation, post-*Citizens United*, has only gotten worse.

The current debate on members of Congress and their ability to trade stocks is also extremely germane to his basic point: public servants enriching themselves at the public trough at public expense are not good for the Republic. He was right about that. He was often right. He was more often wrong. But somewhere in all this, there's a grain of something gone; that center we all hear about, the "core values" we're all supposed to share, the general idea that maybe, just maybe, we could in fact all get along again if we just sat down and talked. But that was before QAnon, and anti-vaxx nonsense, and people who think the Earth is flat actually being elected to Congress (something P.J. used to joke about a lot). It may sound like

I'm spreading the blame around equally here, and to some degree I am; the Democrats are largely useless. But they're not the ones who got us to this point, and the liberal silliness P.J. so often derides ain't got a patch on the festering pile of batshit crazy that is the modern Republican Party. P.J. thought book burnings were bad and wanted you to be able to snort all the coke you want. Marjorie Taylor Greene he wasn't.

*"She's wrong about absolutely everything, but she's wrong within normal parameters."—P.J. on why he voted for Hillary over Trump*



Original artwork for this essay by artist Tom Law at [moreorlesanimation@gmail.com](mailto:moreorlesanimation@gmail.com)

Speaking of coke: If you like Dr Hunter S. Thompson, you'll like P.J. It's the same basic thing; gonzo journalism, the writing of a serious piece as though it's a work of fiction, Truman Capote's nonfiction novel concept writ large (writ small?), the whole world filtered through style. A rejection of bland reportage in favor of commentary, a flat exposure of the lie of objectivity, an embrace of the good things about



writing in English. Just because it's news doesn't mean it can't be fun. There would never have been a Jon Stewart without gonzo journalism, nor a Colbert, nor a Jon Oliver, nor an Anthony Bourdain. There's something very true about it. Something honest. No bullshit other than the author's bullshit, which is a given when you write anything; when the reader *knows*, intimately, that what they're reading is opinion, they're much more likely to pay some attention to the content of what you say.

This is why smart people like shit like *The Daily Show* and stupid people watch Fox News. If you *know* you're consuming biased content, and act accordingly, at least you're thinking. If you consume biased content, and either don't know it's biased or, worse, defend it as unbiased, then you're doing the opposite of thinking. P.J. hated stupidity. He hated Trump. He held his nose and voted for Hillary Clinton because, as he said, "She's wrong about absolutely everything, but she's wrong within normal parameters." This would have made sense to Dr Thompson. It was, for a Republican, a very gonzo thing to do. It was...well, it was honest. And it added to the rich narrative thread that was P.J.'s life. At this point, he was a darling of NPR, a regular on *Wait Wait Don't Tell Me*, every Democrat's favorite Republican, the snide funny dude on your radio while you made lunch on Saturdays, if that's your sort of thing. His previous persona must have been shocked, but his capitalist soul liked the checks, so I guess it worked out, even if his bread and butter came from publicly-funded liberal media.

Imagine Lauren Boebert being on *Wait Wait Don't Tell Me*. Imagine Lauren Boebert on any quiz show at all. Fuck, imagine Lauren Boebert in high school academic team. Actually, don't do that, because that exact scenario is coming soon to a dank conference room near you, now that the GOP has discovered books exist and are doing their level best to do something about that.

## *P.J. at War*



*"Wherever there's injustice, oppression, and suffering, America will show up six months late and bomb the country next to where it's happening."*

P.J. was no stranger to world conflict. He'd been in Lebanon in 1984, in Seoul for the 1987 election of Roh Tae Woo that ended decades of authoritarianism. In '89 and '90, P.J. was assigned to cover the (often premature) collapse of various Communist regimes in Central America and Europe for both *Rolling Stone* and *American Spectator*, along with a few other global hot spots that were in turmoil outside of the realm of Marxism. There's a lot to like here, a lot to laugh at, and a lot of head-shaking. He advances the cause of the modern conservative narrative "liberals = socialists = supporters of totalitarianism", which is both silly and contains one small element of truth: the liberal-to-socialist pipeline is a thing, as anybody who started out as a James Carville Democrat and wound up a red-flag-waving socialist can tell you. (Author waves enthusiastically at the audience.)

Regardless of his silliness and eventually incorrect predictions about the "death of Communism", the articles were good. They took us to places that, as P.J. said, "the United States only cared about if we got our dope from them." The crowing over the defeat of the Sandinistas in 1990 is amusing in hindsight, given how long Danny Ortega has now been President of Nicaragua and also given the continuing Pink Tide in South and Central America. But the piece on Paraguay was particularly good, acknowledging as it did that U.S. allies in the Dirty War were also super-comfortable with Nazi expatriates and connections with apartheid South Africa, and flatly stating that our Cold War ally had tortured its own citizens. P.J. said that was a bad thing. He acknowledged U.S. complicity in bullshit, which wasn't even the focus of the article. He just said it and moved on. At the time of publication, it was barely noteworthy. Now it's revolutionary. P.J. wasn't always right, but he was consistent. He hated what he hated and he liked what he liked, and he didn't approve of torture. He didn't like it when Stroessner did it in Paraguay and he didn't like it when Saddam did it in Kuwait and he didn't like it when we did it in black sites. Conservatism once had limits.

Imagine, if you will, those days. Imagine conservatism with self-examination. Imagine conservatism being, well, conservatism.

The way I see it, it's a pretty philosophy on paper, but it never works in the real world.

*"H00000-AH!!!", as the Gulf troops say."*

In 1990, Saddam Hussein, perpetual ally/enemy/focus of American Middle East foreign policy, invaded Kuwait, and very shortly the United States wound up in its first proper shooting war since Vietnam, since everyone knows Grenada and

Panama don't officially count. Whatever, this was big, and more importantly it was on TV, and a bunch of people I know and you know were fucked up by it. It led directly to our continuing policy of interventionism in a region that was better left alone or influenced by diplomacy. It led to Bush Jr. and Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib and twenty fucking years in Afghanistan and more dead civilians than anyone knows how to count properly, and a bunch of American kids with lifelong PTSD and wounds that won't heal. It led to Bill Clinton bombing Iraq, on average, every two weeks of the eight years he was in the White House. It led to the attitude that perpetual war was the norm, not the exception.

Maybe it is. Maybe we can't function without it now. But in 1990, it was a fun new conceit and it didn't involve the Soviet Union, so we were fairly convinced it was an adventure that wouldn't precipitate The Big One. I guess it depends on what your definition of The Big One is. Regardless, ABC Radio (of all people) sent P.J. to the Middle East as a war correspondent on the strength of his global reporting of the last couple of years, and *Rolling Stone* decided to get in on the action too with print columns, and thus we got a *Rolling Stone* view of American foreign policy in the Bush years. Which is a weird sentence, no matter how you parse it.

P.J. was on the ground for most of the war, and his writings on the subject are still poignant, still relevant as a document of a time when the USA was in its ascendancy and the Soviet Union descending into chaos. We were flexing our global muscle against someone who'd been an ally as recently as two years ago; we were enforcing the Carter Doctrine; we were giving the finger to the planet, and weirdest of all—*almost no one objected*.

As P.J. said, "There don't seem to be a lot of celebrities protesting against this war. New Kid On the Block Donnie Wahlberg did wear a 'War Sucks' T-shirt at the Grammy awards, but that's about it. In fact, I've heard that Jane Fonda has

decided to maintain public silence on the subject of Desert Storm. Getting Jane Fonda to be quiet—this alone makes fighting Iraq worthwhile. ” It’s a cheap shot for P.J., an easy, misogynistic swing at a conservative target of ire so predictable that it should be beneath his notice, but it’s worth mentioning for a reason. The complete defeat of anti-war ideology in the US in those days was a very real thing, replaced by what P.J. called “kick-ass patriotism” and a general belief that what we were doing was just. P.J. certainly believed in the cause, but he also thought the whole thing was absurd and was happy to point out exactly how:

“You may wonder what the job of a Gulf War journalist is like. Well, we spend all day broadcasting on the radio and TV telling people back home what’s happening over here. And we learn what’s happening over here by spending all day monitoring the radio and TV broadcasts from back home. You may also wonder how any actual information ever gets into this loop. If you find out, please call.”

P.J. traveled through Jordan, Syria, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and wound up in Kuwait City just before US and coalition forces arrived, but after the Iraqis had trashed the place and headed for home. He embedded with troops (another first for that war) and got shot at, nearly arrested more than once, had Scuds lobbed at him and very nearly blew himself up when he, lit cigar firmly screwed in the side of his mouth, opened up an Iraqi demolition booby trap consisting of a pile of RPGs and a grenade with the pin out. Although he later said the most dangerous thing he did throughout the whole war was cook spaghetti sauce on a camp stove on the Hilton roof with his flak jacket off, because the Kuwaitis took that opportunity to celebrate the US victory by firing “every available weapon in the air, including the .50 caliber dual-mount machine guns on the Saudi and Qatari APCs...Finally, a Brit and a veteran of the Special Air Services could stand it no more and leaned over the roof parapet and bellowed at the trigger-crazed Kuwaiti

merrymakers 'STOP IT! STOP IT! STOP IT! PUT THOSE FUCKING GUNS AWAY AND GO GET A MOP AND A BROOM AND CLEAN THIS COUNTRY UP!'"

*"Peacenik types say there would be no war if people truly understood how horrible war is. They're wrong. People don't mind a little horror...but everybody hates to be bored and uncomfortable. If people truly understood how much sleeping on rocks, how much eating things rejected by high school cafeterias, how much washing small parts of the body in cold water and how much sheer sitting around in the dirt war entails, we might have world peace after all."*



*Kuwait City after the Iraqi withdrawal. "It looked like all the worst rock bands in the world had stayed there at the same time."*

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Here's the thing about P.J.

P.J. opened your mind to the possibility that ideologies could



be fluid. That you could believe a thing and maybe later change your mind. That you could evolve. He had.

A self-confessed “peace weenie” and “liberal goofball” in the ‘60s, P.J., like so many others of his generation, made the rightward swing in the late ‘70s and landed, not so much in the Reagan camp, but at some outpost of his own building, an ideological stronghold somewhere between classical liberalism and drug-legalization libertarianism, with a hearty dash of that countercultural anti-authoritarianism (and of course the dope) still firmly in the mix. He wasn’t tidy, in fact he could be absolutely all over the place and even self-contradictory. Good thinkers often are. Great writers usually are, because they say what they’re thinking when they’re thinking it and often live to regret it later.

Here’s why that’s important, at least to me: P.J., in his rejection of his former principles, gave me the courage to take the step away from moderate centrism and to embrace the leftist principles that truly evoke my core beliefs. I stopped caring about where people wanted me to be and reached out for the things I thought were right. It’s messy here sometimes, and it pisses people off. (Lord knows P.J. would think I was a weenie or worse. He would also be pleased that I don’t care.) But it’s mine. I thought it through, I stood up, I said something.

As I write this, Russia has invaded Ukraine. The world situation is dire in a way it hasn’t been in decades. Putin is rattling the nuclear saber, Zelenskyy is making himself into a world media icon, Ukrainian grandmas are becoming social media darlings by cussing out 18-year-old conscripts on video, there may or may not be thermobaric bombs dropping on civilians and nobody knows if the Ghost of Kyiv is real or not, but damn, it’s a story of kick-ass patriotism. And all over the world, people are standing up, people are saying something, people are trying to make a difference.

I just wish P.J. were here to give us his take. I wish Anthony Bourdain was here too. The world needs cynicism and humor, but also basic decency and compassion, when the shit gets too real. Oh, they'd probably hate each other, but I'd pay real money to see the two of them shout at each other over whiskey and cigars on CNN. Wherever you are, Gonzo Boys, we could use a dose of your realness right about now.

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## **New Nonfiction from Rob Bokkon: “Betrayal at Blair Mountain”**

There were 10,000 of them. Boys fresh back from the war in France, middle-aged guys who fought in Cuba with TR, and old men who'd only ever handled a rifle to shoot squirrels and rabbits. They were country boys from the hollers, both black and white, they were Italian and Polish, Hungarian and Slovak. Some had lost fingers, toes, or arms fighting the Kaiser. Far



more had lost them underground mining coal. Every one was lean from months of starvation rations and mad as hell. And they had nothing to lose. They had lost their jobs, they had lost their homes, they had all been condemned as radicals and communists (and to be fair, a good many of them were). All of this because they'd had the audacity to demand a day's wage for a day's work, paid in American currency, cash on the barrel head.



They marched under many banners: the flag of the UMWA, regimental banners from the Great War, an occasional Gadsden flag, but the most common was simply Old Glory. The ex-doughboys brought their old uniforms out of storage and pinned on their medals, but most wore overalls, shirts that had once been white, and old work boots. The real uniform was simple: a bright red bandanna tied around the neck, red for socialism and the union and the blood of the miners. Such a little thing, a piece of cloth, yet it could get you shot down like a dog on the streets of Mingo and Logan Counties. In the company towns, the mine operators' wives had started calling the insurrectionist coal miners "red necks" (*sic*) and the miners

quickly appropriated the name for themselves: The Red Neck Army.

The Red Neck Army marched together toward death, arrest, ignominy, unemployment and poverty, ready to take it all on for the right to unionize. For the right to be paid in United States dollars instead of coal-company scrip only accepted at a coal-company store. For the right to live somewhere other than a pineboard shack owned by a coal operator, who took the rent out of your pay for the privilege. For the right to assemble on the streets of their hometowns, unsupervised by armed guards who listened in on every conversation, who harassed their wives and sisters and daughters, who sometimes shot up the storefronts for fun.

They marched for the rights they were promised in the Constitution. Together they represented the largest armed uprising since the Civil War and the largest labor disturbance in the history of the United States.

Between the miners and their goal were a mountain, all the guns in the world, an army of trained thugs bought and paid for by big business, and the might of the United States military.

And chances are, you have never heard of any of it.

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This essay is not intended to be a full analysis of what happened at Blair Mountain. Rather, it is a meditation, if you will, on what Blair Mountain meant then and means now. It is an examination of why the story was buried for so long and why it is so important again, and why it will continue to be resonant as a post-COVID America reckons with the issues of labor and wealth and the rights of the working class.

The history of the labor movement in the USA goes back to the 1840s or before, and is fraught with tales of heartbreaking

injustice, illegality, and immorality. The right of working people to organize for better wages and safe treatment should never have been controversial, but from the very beginning, business owners derided labor organizers as foreign-born agitators, malcontents who came from abroad to destabilize our American way of life, Reds and anarchists and, later, "Bolsheviks" once that word meant anything to American ears. (The same rhetoric is used today to describe Antifa protestors, BLM activists, and anyone at all who is brave enough to suggest that we might do things differently.) From the Molly Maguires in the Pennsylvania driftmines of the 1870s through the Pullman workers' strike in the 1880s, the Colorado coal miners' strikes of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to Blair Mountain in 1921, organized labor was opposed at every turn by big business, the government, and the rantings of the popular press.

And yet the labor movement grew and grew. The American worker was often literate, and read voraciously; books became cheap in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and newspapers and magazines cheaper, and the works of Marx, Engels, Kropotkin, Emma Goldman, and Eugene Debs passed from hand to hand or were read aloud on shop floors for the benefit of those who could not read. Socialist journals and newspapers abounded; West Virginia alone boasted three socialist weeklies by the early 1920s, and the cities of the Northeast had hundreds. None of that, of course, was as important as grassroots organizing, and thousands of union organizers spread out from the coalfields of Pennsylvania and the stockyards of Chicago and the steel mills of Ohio to spread the good news, risking their livelihoods and their very lives to do so.

Their sacrifices were often in vain, and not only because of the beatings they received from sheriffs' deputies and armed guards. Many workers were too afraid to join the union, or believed it was some foreign plot, or had accepted the bosses' mythology that if they kept their heads down and worked hard,

the magic of rugged individualism would one day make them rich too. Yet the union organizers were able to recruit enough men to be a complete nuisance to big business, which reacted with increasing fury as the decades passed. Joining the union would get you fired, then it would get you thrown out of your company-owned house, and after a few years one of the collieries in West Virginia came up with the idea of the "blacklist": any miner who had signed his name to a UMWA card would never work again.

They had that power, because in West Virginia, the mine companies virtually owned the state and its government. Fifty years after its independence from slave state Virginia during the Civil War, the Mountain State arguably had less freedom than anywhere in the country. Mining towns were armed camps, patrolled by private detectives known as "gun thugs" who controlled every aspect of daily life. They worked closely with local police departments and sheriffs' offices to ensure that order, as the mine owners determined it should be, was maintained at the end of a rifle muzzle. All of the land had been bought up decades before by either the coal companies or the railroads that serviced the collieries, and what they didn't own the timber companies did. The miners were forced to live in company housing, which consisted of pineboard shacks built without insulation or even properly painted, so that the boards would pull apart and let in drafts after just a few months. Sanitation barely existed; the miners' outhouses were built over the same creeks where they were expected to gather their water for cooking, washing, and drinking, so outbreaks of typhoid and cholera were common. When petitioned for septic tanks or even better outhouses, the mine companies blamed the rampant disease on the "filthy habits of the miners" and did nothing, evicting families who had lost their breadwinners to the disease and hiring new people brought in from the Northeast with promises of a luxuriant lifestyle and ample pay (both of which were flat lies). The work was brutal and dangerous, and mine safety regulations, such as they were,

flouted regularly or ignored entirely.



Red Jacket Coal Camp, West Virginia, 1920s

The day of a typical coal miner started at 4 AM, because a miner's shift was sunup to sundown. It was dark when they went into the mine and dark when they came out. The miners ranged in age from 13 to 70 or older, if the elderly could still swing a pick or shovel coal. Prior to the child labor reforms instituted by Teddy Roosevelt, there were many boys as young as five working in the picking sheds, spending twelve hours a day sorting slate and other impurities from the coal as it came out of the mines. Boys of ten could go into the mines with their fathers, since their small size allowed them to go into "low coal" tunnels of 18 inches' height or less. It should be noted that more unscrupulous companies continued to utilize child labor well into the 1920s in open defiance of the law, a practice that only ended definitively when FDR came into office. Within the mines, conditions were horrific. No breathing apparatus was available, so the miners were forced to inhale every particle of rock dust and powdered coal they

encountered. Ventilation fans kept the air circulating but were often allowed to break down and remained unfixed for days or weeks; the heat in the mines often climbed over ninety degrees Fahrenheit and each miner had to rely on a canteen carried on his belt for water.

The work itself was wretched, taking a toll on the human body that cannot be imagined by the modern reader. All rock was dug by hand, with a pickaxe, often by men laying on their backs in tunnels two or three feet in height. Blasting of the coal face, done with dynamite, was an inexact science and cost many a miner a finger, a hand, his life. Once the coal was freed from the rock it had to be shovelled by hand into the mine carts with great care to ensure that no bits of slate or other non-coal matter were included. Roof-bolts, that kept the millions of tons of rock above from burying the workers, had to be hammered into place overhead. And the natural dangers were myriad.

The "black damp", a buildup of nitrogen, carbon dioxide, and water vapor, had no smell and could asphyxiate the unwary in seconds. Other gases were wildly flammable and could ignite from nothing more than the lamp on a miner's helmet or a struck match, exploding and filling miles of tunnels with a firestorm that few survived. Rockfalls were common, especially in areas where the miners had extracted all the coal from a seam and were closing the face by removing timbers for later re-use.

After enduring all this and far more than we can list here, the miner would emerge into the night, black from head to foot, aching in every joint, knowing that he had to be back at work in eight hours, knowing that there wasn't enough food to eat at home, knowing that his home was too hot or too cold or falling down, knowing that he had one day off per week to look forward to, knowing that he was being paid not a daily or even an hourly wage but by the tonnage of coal he had loaded that day. The going rate in 1921 for a non-union miner was 57 cents

a ton.

And yet, sometimes, you didn't get paid at all.

The coal came down from the mine in cars drawn by mules (automation was slow to reach the innovation-resistant coalfields of West Virginia) to the coal tipple, where "checkweighmen" would examine it for impurities. If a single piece of slate or rock, no matter how minute, was "found" in the car, the checkweighman marked it off and the miner received nothing at all for his work, to offset the company's "inconvenience" in removing impurities from the coal. This practice was regarded as not only legal but also perfectly fair by the mine owners and their well-paid friends in the West Virginia state legislature and the Governor's Mansion.

This was the life of a miner. This was the life that the union and any sensible person could see was unfair, unkind, unsustainable and unworthy of perpetuating. Yet the mine owners insisted that they were benevolent men. Did they not provide their workers with housing? Did they not provide them with food? Did they not pay them wages for their toil? Some of the more "enlightened" companies even organized baseball teams for the miners (since they weren't tired enough on Sundays) and gave them the use of company swimming pools and even libraries, with carefully selected reading lists, of course. The press were more than willing to repeat the mine owners' propaganda, portraying them as enlightened, educated men of breeding, offering the hand of kindness to the "primitive, backwards folk" of Appalachia, who were "near-morons" unable to survive in the modern world, and who should be grateful that they weren't ekeing out an existence farming tobacco on a hillside somewhere.

If this sounds extreme and unbelievable, the reader is invited to explore press coverage of labor disputes from the era, and will discover that the examples given here are mild. When labor agitation flared, the calls for brutal crackdowns and

strongarm tactics from papers as storied as the New York Times or the Washington Post occupied prominent front-page space, and were read by millions. Especially in the years of the first Red Scare in Wilson's last years in office (1918-1921) the rhetoric directed against working people and their aspirations was appalling.

And yet, membership in the union continued to grow. By 1920, the last bastion of completely non-union mining in the state of West Virginia lay in its extreme south, in Mingo, Logan, and McDowell counties. The vociferously anti-union sheriff of Logan County, a prominent Democrat by the name of Don Chafin, had been on the coal companies' payroll for years and had sworn that no organizer would ever walk the streets of "his" county unmolested. It is important to note that prior to the days of FDR, both of the major parties were reliably anti-union except when it suited them; Woodrow Wilson's Department of Labor had forged a convenient alliance with the UMWA for the duration of WWI, and then promptly turned on them as soon as coal production was no longer vital to make the world "safe for democracy".

When the powers that be arrested hundreds of miners in Mingo County without trial or warrant in 1921, the UMWA had finally had enough. Further inflamed by the murder of pro-union police chief Sid Hatfield at the hands of Baldwin-Felts detectives on the very steps of the McDowell County courthouse, the Red Neck Army began to coalesce just south of the state capitol at Charleston. Armed with rifles mostly obtained through legal means (UMWA members were encouraged to join the NRA), the Red Necks marched for Mingo, determined to unionize Logan County on the way. They sang "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" as they marched, changing one line of the chorus to "And we're gonna hang Don Chafin from a sour apple tree, our truth is marching on".

They never got anywhere near him, of course.





Logan County Sheriff Don Chafin, 1920s.

Don Chafin had thousands of volunteers, scabs from the mines, Baldwin-Felts gun thugs, and newly minted "deputies", all armed to the teeth, spread out along a twelve-mile-long perimeter ridge across the top of Blair Mountain on the border

of Logan and Boone Counties. He built barriers and dug trenches just like the ones the doughboys had faced in France. He had surplus Lewis guns from WWI emplaced everywhere. He had private planes armed with nail bombs and gas shells, a generous donation from the governor of Kentucky. He had the United States National Guard and the Army Air Corps and a chemical weapons unit on reserve. (These last were never used, but do not forget that Warren Harding's government was more than willing to deploy these resources on its own citizens.) The miners fought valiantly for five days, until the National Guard was deployed. Unwilling to fire on United States soldiers in uniform, the Red Neck Army finally disbanded and turned in its weapons for a promise of safe-conduct out of the region and of no further prosecution afterwards, which the mine owners promptly ignored. Hundreds were arrested in the weeks following the battle, thousands more would never work in the mines again, and the UMWA in West Virginia was completely decimated. Blair Mountain was an act of bravery. And it was a complete failure.

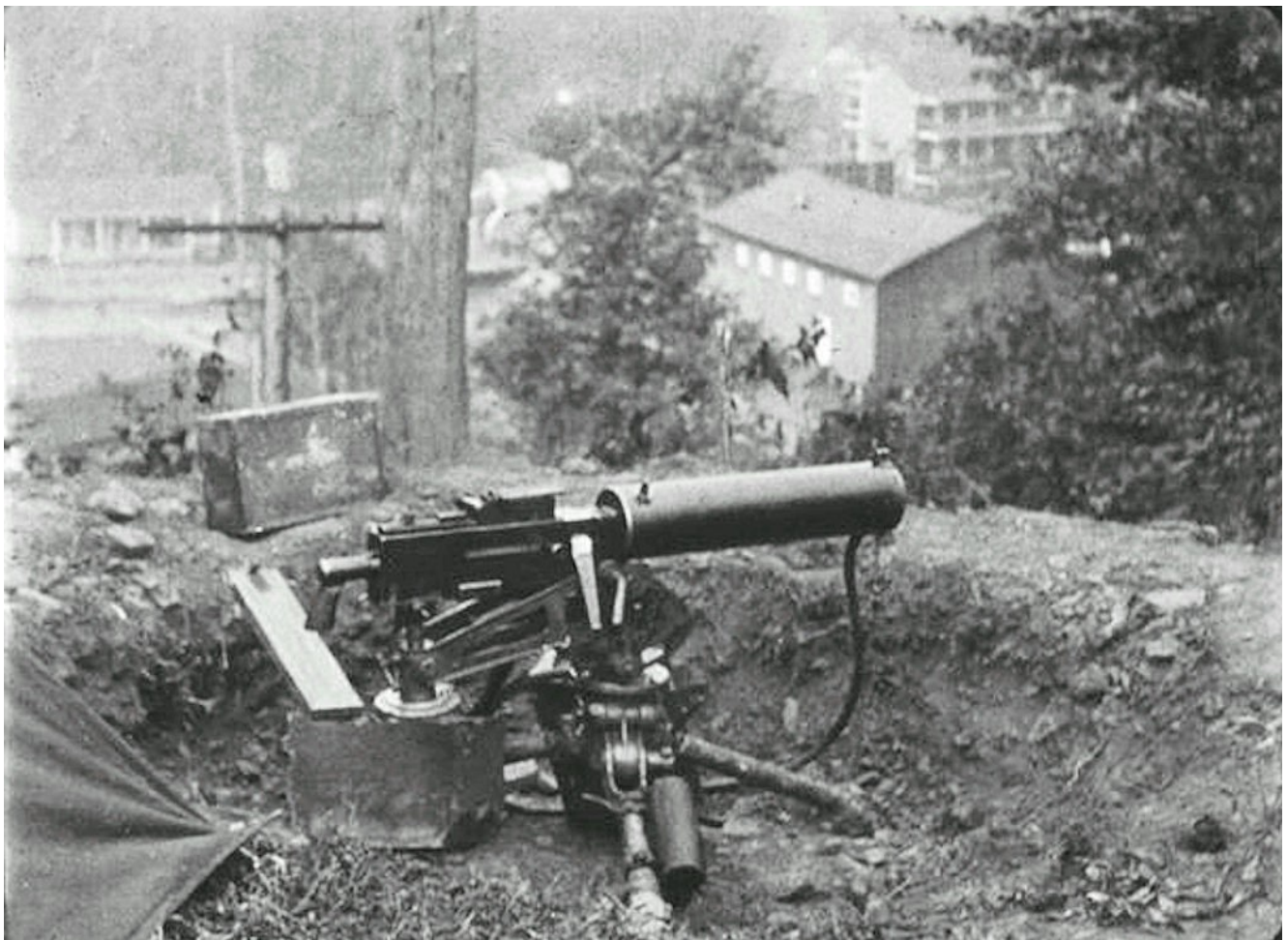
Not until 1933 would UMWA membership recover to pre-1921 levels.

\*

This isn't just history for me. This is personal.

My father, who passed away last year at the age of 94, was a lifelong UMWA member from Logan County, West Virginia, where the climactic battle of this forgotten story took place. Gazi Bokkon was the son of Hungarian immigrants, drafted out of high school in 1945, was a coal miner for decades, and then a federal mine inspector. He used to refer to his days in the Mine Safety and Health Administration as his "civil service" and was just as proud of that as he was his years on Saipan with the SeaBees in World War II. He'd been in the UMWA since his first day on the job and he remained an active member his entire life, faithfully paying his dues until he died. Growing

up, there were always histories of coal mining and the union on the bookshelves, coffee-ringed copies of the United Mine Workers' Journal on the tables, a little ugly statue of a slouched miner in his helmet and coveralls carved from a piece of coal on the mantelpiece. My older brother worked in the mines, and my brother-in-law, and a bunch of my uncles and my cousins and the fathers of half the kids at my school, and my dad's best friend that lived next door, and most of the men with whom we went to church.



Machine gun nest on Blair Mountain, Sept. 1921

The only reason any of those people earned a decent wage and were able to own houses and take their kids on vacations was the union. For the ones that were born before the 1940s, they had all grown up in poverty and seen their own lives transformed by their ability to organize, to negotiate for better wages and better working conditions, to have the power

to stand up to King Coal and demand what was due to them. Because make no mistake: the coal companies are unscrupulous, immoral, unethical, corrupt, and without the least shred of decency. They have always been that way and they will never, ever change. With the exception of the industry's acquiescence to FDR's labor reforms, they have steadfastly opposed any and all measures that would provide the slightest modicum of improvement to the livelihood or safety of their workers. This is all a matter of public record and is not, in any sense, a matter for debate. The only thing that has ever stood between the people who do the actual work of coal mining and the people who fatten themselves on that labor is the union.

For all the good it has done. Since the days of Ronald Reagan, the government has been either openly hostile or indifferent to organized labor, with even the Democratic administrations half-heartedly trying to undo the systemic damage that began with the breaking of the air traffic controllers' strike in 1981 and providing very little in the way of gains. Republican governors and state legislatures have successfully used the rhetoric of rugged individualism to sell their constituents on "right-to-work" legislation in dozens of states, leading to an inherently hostile environment for labor. Massive corporations like Walmart spend tens of millions of dollars per year on blatantly illegal anti-union messaging in their training, for which they are rarely cited or fined. Kroger, the famously unionized grocery store chain, recently hired Trump's former Secretary of Transportation, the notoriously anti-union Elaine Chao, to its board of directors. (You may recognize her as the spouse of the equally anti-labor Senator Mitch McConnell.)

When Dad was born in 1926, the events depicted herein were recent memories, raw and unresolved. The union was still illegal. Don Chafin, the quintessential devil of Blair Mountain, had only stepped down as sheriff two years before. And yet, the Battle of Blair Mountain was not discussed. It was not taught in school, it was not acknowledged by a single

roadside marker, it was not brought up at all except as a matter of local lore. Stories of the Mine Wars were shameful things, to be whispered about over a shared jar of moonshine when you were absolutely sure the mine guards or the sheriff's deputies weren't around.

By the time Dad went into the mines, after WWII, things had changed. FDR's Fabian socialism brought in the unions and gave them full recognition. John L. Lewis and his pro-business centrists had taken full control of the UMWA and thrown out all the "radicals" in the name of "Americanism", rewriting history to suggest a bland and bourgeois union that had always existed, a union free of Reds and Wobblies and anarchists. Better to pretend that miners had always been model citizens; better to pretend that a Red Neck Army of miners had never taken up arms and marched 10,000 strong against the forces of law and order. Blair Mountain faded away from legend to myth and from myth to rumor and finally to nothing at all, save in the memories of those who were there.

By the time anyone cared again, most of the voices had gone silent. Serious scholarship on the Mine Wars and Blair Mountain didn't really take off until the 1990s, when the few surviving members of the Red Neck Army were old, old men. Thanks to the tireless efforts of Appalachian historians and historians of labor, the situation today is very different. The 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Battle of Blair Mountain is being celebrated as I write this. There are dozens of books on the subject. And yet, the Mine Wars remain an obscure footnote to American history.

The reasons for this are many, and they are not due to casual neglect or a poor understanding of history. They are because of deliberate erasure. This essay is being published on Labor Day weekend; the very institution of Labor Day in the United States is a sham, held on a day determined by the Federal government instead of on May 1, International Worker's Day.

(That day is “Loyalty Day” and “Law Day” in the USA. Imagine celebrating either one.) May Day is of course too socialist for the USA, too closely connected with the actual Marxist roots of labor. And it must be said that unions in the USA have been all too willing to go along with the ruse; for generations, the myth of the polite bourgeois union has grown so pervasive that right-wing, politically conservative supporters of capitalism have been and remain enthusiastic union members, more than happy to enjoy the benefits of organizing while opposing everything labor ever stood for. No one wants to talk about the Wobblies, who were instrumental in getting us the things we hold so dear like the eight-hour workday and the weekend; no one wants to talk about the anarchists, who started the whole national conversation about labor with the Haymarket Riots in Chicago, and no one at all wants to talk about socialism, that dirtiest of dirty words in the American political discourse, yet labor comes from and is defined by its socialist roots.

As for Blair Mountain itself, a few years ago Arch Coal, who owned most of the land comprising the battle site, sued the federal government and won, getting the site de-listed from the National Register of Historic Places. Their reason? They wanted to mine it. Using mountaintop removal, a rapacious technique that involves clear-cutting all the trees, blasting away all the layers of the mountain from the top down until the coal is exposed, dumping the resultant debris in the nearby valleys and streams, and then leaving the mess once the coal is all gone. Thanks to the efforts of historians and the UMWA and other labor activists and a good many environmentalists, in 2018 the site was restored to its status on the National Register and is safe for now. But the mere fact that the coal operators, all these years later, were more than willing to literally erase history in search of more profits, should tell you all you need to know about a business that has forever been dirty and will always be dirty.

Lest the reader be left feeling hopeless, things are changing. More and more young people are learning the history of labor in the United States. More and more people view direct action and strikes favorably. More people quit their jobs in the first quarter of 2021 than at any time since figures have been kept on the subject. Even without marked growth in organized labor, a sort of “soft revolution” is taking place. The American worker took advantage of COVID to network, to reach out for better opportunities, to decide that they were no longer going to accept poor wages and worse treatment. The current “labor shortage” is anything but; it is, in fact, a wage shortage. People are fed up. They know from experience that their workplaces, especially in anti-union “at-will” states, will fire them for less than no reason, and they are unwilling to extend their loyalty to those who do not offer them the same consideration. If the pandemic has taught us anything, it is that we must learn again to listen to the American working class, because if we do not hear them when they ask politely, we will certainly hear them when they start to shout.

Solidarity Forever.

“Pray for the dead and fight like hell for the living.”  
—Mother Jones

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## **Mr. Mendes’ War: Film Review, ‘1917’**

*“You have to construct a journey for the camera that’s every bit as interesting as the journey of the actor. What I wanted was one ribbon, like a snake, moving forward, in which the*



*information that you needed happened to fall in front of where the camera was pointing."*

*-Sam Mendes*



It is a glorious thing to live in an age that is learning to



remember the Great War.

Once the Centennial passed, I started to worry that WWI would fade back into obscurity.

There would be nothing more to it than the occasional badly-produced documentary, rehashing all the basic facts. Or the once-a-decade feature film composed primarily of maudlin melodrama and scenery-chewing. Great War geeks would be reduced, finally, to re-reading what little their local library has on the subject (invariably, a shelf or two perched on the edge of the vast glacier of paper that is EVERY BOOK ABOUT WWII EVER PUBLISHED, which even the most modest county library is guaranteed to have).

We'd keep on of course, as we have for decades, finding solitary joy in studying the minutiae of this defining moment of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, only telegraphing our interests by posting Siegfried Sassoon's "Survivors" on social media every Armistice Day. We know how to live like this.

And it may yet come to that again, in ten years or so. But for now, the Great War retains a prominent place in scholarship and the public eye. Peter Jackson's *They Shall Not Grow Old* (see my [review](#) for WBT last year) was the first great post-Centennial media event, generating accolades, controversy and awards, and proving so popular it was re-released in theaters twice in one year.

Sam Mendes' masterful *1917* carries on this legacy, and in my honest and no doubt potentially unpopular opinion, surpasses Jackson's film in almost every way. I know, we're talking about two fairly dissimilar things here. The statement stands. *1917* evokes the character of the Great War, it contains the soul of the War, and it conveys these ideas to the audience in a way that documentary cannot do. In short, were you forced to show someone who had never heard of the Great War only one film that evoked the nature of the War, you would choose *1917*

over *They Shall Not Grow Old*.

For one thing, it is shorter; for another, it is much more compelling; finally, it is free from the glaring flaws of Jackson's film. *They Shall Not Grow Old* suffers from low-key jingoism and Jackson's bizarre visual insistence on depicting only white British infantrymen (it turns out there were other people there).

*1917* is the WWI movie I've been waiting for my whole life.

Yet after I saw it, and then read more than a few reviews of *1917*, I was left with one major question:

What movie did y'all see?

Because the *1917* I've encountered in the criticism is not in any sense the film that I watched.

For example, Manohla Dargis writing for the [NYT](#) describes a film containing "next to no history" and refers to the entire piece as "a carefully organized and sanitized war picture from Sam Mendes that turns one of the most catastrophic episodes in modern times into an exercise in preening showmanship."

Justin Chang on *Fresh Air* was generally more positive, but like many other reviewers spent ages decrying the film's technical skill. (If you're somehow unaware, the major conceit of Mendes' film is its use of a simulated single tracking shot, actually achieved through a variety of cinematic tricks—if you're interested you can see exactly how it was done on YouTube.) In fact, the most persistent line of bitching about this movie has been that it's "too perfect", with the NYT reviewer even throwing out an offhand line about the movie spending too much time on getting the buttons on the uniforms right.

To which I have to respond: have you ever MET a Great War geek? Get the buttons wrong on the uniforms and you will quite

literally never hear the end of it on the Internet. And anyway, maybe I'm missing something here with this whole "sure, it's technically magnificent, BUT" angle. People WANT it to be sloppy?

This film is the opposite of sloppy. This is theater, ready for any contingency. This is opera, or better yet a musical, with sets and costumes meticulously and obsessively constructed. This is in every sense a careful production. I'm really missing why this is a problem. With that said:

Sam Mendes gets this a lot.

Fifteen years ago, people said the same shit about *Jarhead*.

Fie on the critics (for now, anyway). If you haven't seen this movie, you need to understand what it was really like to dive into it on the big screen. Because this film is beyond epic. It's beyond "a good film", beyond even the proverbial "good war film"—it is an *experience*.

It is immediate.

Overwhelming.

Shocking.

The success of this film lies in the concept of cinema-as-immersion. Toss the viewer straight into the milieu and drag them along, whether they will or no, through all the horror and the madness and the despair that was the soldier's lot in 1917. Of course it doesn't dwell on politics or slap you in the face with the grade-school primer on the whys and wherefores of alliances and Archdukes. There is, quite simply, no time for that.

The plot of the film centers on two Lance Corporals of the East Surrey Regiment, Blake and Schofield, played by Dean-Charles Chapman and George MacKay. Fans of *Game of Thrones* will recognize Chapman as an all-grown-up version of King

Tommen Baratheon, First of His Name\*.

\*The fact of his starring role in this film prompted the following exchange. While we were on the way to the cinema, my wife said to me "Who's directing this?"

ME: Sam Mendes.

MARY: What else has he done besides James Bond?

ME: *American Beauty. Revolutionary Road. Jarhead.*

MARY: Oh. Oh God.

ME: What?

MARY: I just got this incredibly clear picture of Tommen dancing around with a Santa hat on his junk, to a tinny clarinet-and-piano '20s jazz version of "O.P.P."

ME: <inarticulate with laughter>

MARY (*imitating Cab Calloway*): Ya down with O.P.P? Yeah, you know me!

At that point I nearly wrecked the car.

I digress (but you laughed). Blake and Schofield are first seen on their backs in an unspoiled field, trying to get in one of the naps that soldiers everywhere can manage at the drop of any hat, when they're interrupted and summoned back to HQ in the trenches. Along their way, they pass by any number of black British soldiers from the West Indies Regiment.

Jackson's film made no acknowledgement whatsoever of the service these people made during the war. Mendes, whose Trinidadian grandfather was a messenger serving in much the same capacity as Blake or Schofield, is careful to honor the sacrifices of these brave people who served despite the racist and classist treatment they suffered while doing their duty. All of this is accomplished in the first five minutes.

Awaiting them is General Erinmore, portrayed by an extra-gruff-and-crusty Colin Firth. Our Heroes are informed that there is a mission of extreme importance that must be undertaken immediately; the German "retreat" to the Hindenburg Line has been revealed through aerial reconnaissance to be anything but, and their comrades in the 2<sup>nd</sup> under Colonel Mackenzie are walking into a deathtrap. Their orders to attack will ensure the deaths of 1600 men. As Blake's brother is a lieutenant in the 2<sup>nd</sup>, Blake is chosen for this mission and entrusted with orders from General Erinmore to call off the attack, and as he is allowed to choose one man to go with him, of course he chooses his best mate Schofield.

These are literally the only moments of peace the film has until its end. From this moment forward, everything is propulsive, violent, and fast. Even the scenes of relative inaction are fraught, with the promise of calamity never further away than the next street or the next trench.

From here, the camera follows Blake and Schofield with all the obsession of a stalker. Through the use of wildly varying color palettes, Mendes carefully establishes "chapters" in the film. The British trenches they leave are orderly, earth-colored, dusty but tidy. Their entry into No Man's Land, with its foul slurry of churned mud, discarded boots, and body parts, is clearly Chapter Two: a sudden break with the imagery seen before reveals a landscape riddled with the grey of rotting flesh, the brown of human shit, the occasional burst of gold or green to remind one that this was once a place where people lived with their families, farmed, tended their business.

The initial shots of No Man's Land are strikingly reminiscent of Max Ernst's *Europe After the Rain II*:



Max Ernst. Europe After Rain II: 1940-42.

There is a moment of dark Great War humor when the two encounter Lieutenant Leslie (Andrew Scott, familiar to viewers of *Sherlock* as Moriarty) who lends them flare guns (“Throw them back when you’re done, we’re forever out of these”) and reminds them that on the way to their destination, they should “mind the bowing chap”. The Bowing Chap is revealed to be a decaying corpse suspended from barbed wire, a shoutout to the works of the inimitable Otto Dix, whose “Corpse on Barbed Wire” is one of the most memorable pieces of art from the War.

Further, a lingering shot on the corpses of two horses evokes the work of Dix, whose art provided an inspiration for Jackson’s *They Shall Not Grow Old* as well. “Horse Cadaver” is apparently every WWI movie director’s favorite; in both movies, the shots of dead and decaying horses are arranged precisely in the same aspect and POV as Dix’s picture.

Stomach-turning images of this kind can and should be employed by those who would make movies about war; *1917* pulls no punches here. During their dangerous sojourn in No Man’s Land and the German trenches, rats swarm everywhere and flies infest all surfaces, including *inside* a gaping wound on a corpse. Lance Corporal Schofield cuts his hand on barbed wire and then trips, firmly inserting his wounded fist into the bacteria-laden hole where rats were feasting not moments before. It is both disgusting and entirely realistic; the



chief cause of death in every war before the First World War was from infectious disease, not combat. If one were feeling particularly apocalyptic, one could definitely argue that the number of people felled by the Spanish flu during and after the conflict showcases the continuing role of Pestilence following along in the wake of War.



Otto Dix. Horse Cadaver, Plate 5 from 'Der Krieg' (The War), 1924.

From the German trench (where Schofield is nearly killed, only saved by the valiant efforts of Blake) they proceed to a bombed-out French farmstead. Here the plot takes an unexpected turn, as the corporals observe a dogfight between the Boche and two English pilots, which ends with the German plane crashing mere yards from the broken-down barn where Blake and Schofield have taken shelter.

And it is now where things begin to go horribly awry.

The German fighter plane crashes and catches fire. The pilot screams for help. Blake and Schofield don't wait for moral considerations or strategic concerns: they pull him from the wreckage as though he were their own comrade. He is burned and wounded, and Schofield suggest they employ the *coup de grace*, but Blake demurs.

Moments later, Blake is stabbed in the gut by the ungrateful recipient of his kindness.

Schofield shoots the German pilot over and over again, enraged at his perfidy, but Blake is mortally wounded. Schofield holds him as he dies, promising to write to his family back in Britain. "Don't tell them I was scared," Blake says, as he dies in agony.

From now on the story is Schofield's. In service both to his comrades in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and his fallen companion, he will not be denied in his obsessive focus on the completion of The Quest.

The frenetic pace increases. Schofield manages to catch a ride further into German territory from a group of British soldiers on their way into the battle zone. Among them is a Sikh, a figure common in the British soldiery, but one whose presence in this film inspired ridiculous accusations of "forced diversity" by racist English actor [Laurence Fox](#). To briefly address Fox's "concerns": one in every six British soldiers who served in WWI originated from the Indian subcontinent. Sikhs, Malays, Sepoys and others served proudly in many capacities during the War. In fact, there is a famous photograph of Indian lancers proceeding into the now-abandoned No Man's Land during the German retreat to the Hindenburg Line:





Later, Schofield is shot at by a German sniper while making a perilous crossing over the blasted-out girders of a destroyed bridge. He survives and kills his opponent, only to be knocked out by a ricocheting bullet. When he awakens, he is forced to flee through a bombed-out cityscape of arches and dark passageways lit only by flares and the roaring fires from bombing, which scene makes clear reference to the disturbing cityscapes of De Chirico.



“Melancholy and the mystery of the street” – Painting by George de Chirico, 1914.

The existential horror of solitude. The dread and horror of war, The War, any war. All are displayed here, experienced by the viewer in real time as the protagonist experiences them. As Schofield continues on his journey, the color palette changes again and again and again, from yellow to orange to blue.

At one point, Schofield falls into a river, ending up floating in a pool laden with cherry blossoms, creating a scene that is clearly a sort of genderswapped *Lady of Shalott* or Ophelia:



John Everett Millais, "Ophelia," 1851-2.

At long last, Schofield finds the 2<sup>nd</sup>, only to realize that they are already in the process of going over the top. In his efforts to reach Colonel MacKenzie with his letter calling off the attack, Schofield, gripped with the madness of obsession, runs across No Man's Land as the shells fall around him, perpendicular to the line of battle, knocking over his comrades and nearly getting killed over and over again. He reaches his goal, delivers his message, and while he is too late to save the first wave of men cut down by German machine guns, he does manage to convince Mackenzie (played by an particularly intense and mustachioed Benedict Cumberbatch) to call off the attack. In the aftermath, he locates Blake's brother, played by none other than *Game of Thrones*' Richard Madden (the irony of a Stark playing the brother of a Baratheon will not be lost on fans of the series) and delivers the news of Blake's death. "I am so glad you were with him," Madden says, as he shakes Schofield's hand and tries and fails



to prevent the tears from falling.

At the end, we discover that Schofield has a wife and child at home, whose picture he regards lovingly as he finally gets a few moments of rest beneath a twisted tree, still standing despite the bombardment and destruction all around.

In a last response to the critics, I have this to say. Yes, it was technically perfect. But this movie also had *soul*. This was a film that portrayed the horrors and the despair of the Great War realistically, that depicted soldiers who were anything but gung-ho, soldiers who questioned where they were and what they were doing. It could not have been set at any other time than 1917, when the German “retreat” freed up more land than the Allies had been able to recapture since August of 1914. The date displayed at the beginning of the movie is no coincidence either: April 6, 1917 is the day the United States entered the war. In its last moments, the film depicts a figure at rest, able to finally hope, to consider a future. This reflects the actual attitudes and emotions felt by the beleaguered British and French who had fought themselves into exhaustion and madness in the three years prior.

*1917* is a masterpiece. It is the Great War movie that everyone can love. If the theater we viewed it in was any indication—it was so crowded I couldn’t even sit with my family—it is reaching people. *1917* has accomplished what so many other films and television series produced over the last six years could not: it has engaged the general public with WWI. Mendes’ triumph is thus not just one of aesthetics or skill or “polish”; it is a triumph of thought. If only we could have a film like this every year, the world might well reconsider its addiction to war.

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# Mr. Tolkien's War: A Review of Peter Jackson's 'They Shall Not Grow Old,' by Rob Bokkon

Anyone who knows me at all well can tell you that I don't really have a personality, per se: what I have instead is a gigantic amalgamation of obsessions. Fandoms. Things like the life and work of Prince Rogers Nelson. Hungarian cuisine. The history of Jim Jones and Peoples Temple. The films of Peter Jackson. The Great War.

So, obviously, when word came through that those last two things were colliding, in the form of a documentary commissioned by the Imperial War Museums, I was nearly beside myself. If anyone could capture the horror and the bravery of the Great War, it's the guy who gave us the Pellenor Fields and the Battle of Five Armies on the big screen. I counted the days until the release date. I jabbered about it to all three people I know who love WWI as much as I do. I was, to put it mildly, stoked.

Which remained my default state right up until I sat down in the theater to absorb what I truly hoped would be a modern masterpiece. The truth, as always, was rather more complicated.

The version we saw was bookended by both an introduction, and making-of featurette, from Mr Jackson himself. It is my current understanding that the greater theatrical release of the film will not include these, which is a pity, as the film loses much of its impact when one is unaware of the sheer labor of love involved in the restoration of the old footage. And, of course, consider yourselves warned that SPOILERS

ABOUND, both for the film and for the works of J.R.R. Tolkien.

The theater was almost three-quarters full, which surprised us; the crowd was fairly diverse, but included a high proportion of fit middle-aged guys in outdoor-pursuits gear, who by their conversation seemed mostly to be veterans. We live in a university town, so the history dorks (us) were also well-represented. The former dean of the college of arts and letters was there. Enthusiasm was high.

And then we fucking sat there for thirty solid minutes. Not thirty minutes of previews, mind you, but some “edutainment” compiled by Fathom Features that consisted of an “interactive” quiz, six multiple-choice questions about the Great War—“Did the Great War take place in A: 1914-1918, B: 1861-1865, C: Never, D: Last Week” and “Was Baron Von Richtoven, aka the ‘Red Baron’, a A: toilet cleaner in Bournemouth, B: your mom, C: a famous WWI flying ace with 80 confirmed kills or D: the inventor of owls?”—designed for people who have never heard of the Great War.

But when the film finally began, and the rowdy high-schoolers three rows back finally shut up, absolutely everyone in the room was transfixed.

Because this movie is *stunning*.

It begins and ends with images of the war with which we are familiar, in shades of silver and black and white, complete with the sound effect of an antique projector. The voice-overs are the voices of old men, disconnected from their source, joined to past time and image only by association. Jackson’s decision to jettison traditional narration in favor of archival recordings from Great War veterans is meant to grant immediacy to the film by immersing the viewer in direct experience rather than received history.

The question that must be asked is, “Does this work?” And the answer is, yes and no. While my socialist soul champions the

decision to represent the War exclusively from the perspective of the people who actually fought the damn thing, the narrative feels tailored nonetheless. Blame it perhaps on the source material, as the archival audio was taken from something like 600 hours of interviews done in the '50s and '60s by the Imperial War Museums, who clearly have their own version of the War they wish to promote. A version of the war where the sun still has not set on the British Empire, George V regards us all favorably from the wall of every post office, the tea is hot and everyone knows their place.



Still from Peter Jackson's 'They Shall Not Grow Old.'

There are moments—a few—in the voice-overs where a note of fatalism or horror or even protest will arise. Mild moments, expressed with little fervor, which seem to be included only to evoke veracity. At the end, we get a series of voices reminding us that war is useless, pointless, a waste. A series of voices that feels tacked-on, as though we as an audience of modern sensibilities expect to hear this condemnation. Overall, throughout the film we hear the stories of Tommies who were happy to be there, who'd "go over again," who missed

it when they left, who saw it as “a job of work that had to be done.” Is this the overarching experience of the average British soldier in the war?

My reading has told me otherwise. Robert Graves’ *Good-Bye to All That* certainly seems to indicate otherwise. Siegfried Sassoon would undoubtedly curl his lovely aristocratic lip at the very notion. Is it worthwhile to hear these voices, these stories? Absolutely. Is it honest? This I cannot answer, but I have doubts.

But never mind that. You’ll forget all your criticism, all your doubt, if just for a moment, when that color footage hits the screen.

Jackson has always directed with a cinematographer’s eye, and this film is no exception. The first few shots of Tommies arriving in France, clad in khaki (a very authentic shade of khaki, as it turns out; Jackson spent weeks getting the color exactly right from uniforms *in his private collection*, since Peter Jackson is the world’s biggest World War I geek), baring their very British smiles for the camera: these are enough to make you forget that this footage ever existed in another form. The color used is not the bright and hyper-real shading of a modern film. The tones are very much those of a color photograph from 1914, which just serves to make the images seem more immediate and real.

The soundtrack at this point becomes a thing of pure artifice, but what artifice—Jackson’s otaku devotion to detail has never been showcased to greater effect. As revealed in the making-of featurette at the end, lip-readers were employed to pore over the footage and to reconstruct all possible dialogue. Then, by identifying uniforms or cap-badges, Jackson was able to place the regiments, and based on their origins (Royal Welch, Lancashire, &c.) actually found actors from the appropriate locales and hired them to do the voice-overs. Further, every boot hitting the mud, every rustle of a rucksack, every clank



of a helmet being thrown to the ground is there.

My jaw stayed on the floor for a long while. It is beautiful, there's no denying that. It is a labor of love. And in true Peter Jackson style, the camaraderie of camp life, the minor inconveniences and sanitary arrangements, or rather the lack thereof, the cheerful bitching about the cheap beer and wretched cigarettes lasts only a little while, to be replaced by the screaming terror of battle and its stomach-turning consequences. Jackson has never pulled his punches when it comes to revolting images (if you've ever seen [Dead Alive](#) or [Meet the Feebles](#) you'll know what I'm talking about) and this film is no exception. Popcorn went untouched when the images of trench foot, bloated corpses, maggots and rats swarm across the screen.

And yet, it is here that the film reaches its greatest artistic heights. Again and again I was reminded of the works of Otto Dix. For those who don't know him, Dix was an enthusiastic volunteer for the German army in 1914, whose drawings from the front remain a poignant and disturbing testament to the aesthetic impact of conflict. His true fame came during Weimar Berlin, which earned him the enmity of the Nazis, who denounced him as a "degenerate artist."

In *They Shall Not Grow Old*, a shot of a disemboweled cavalry horse strongly recalled Dix's *Horse Cadaver*, the animal's ruined body a testament to the service of all the animals who aided in the war effort.



Otto Dix, "Horse Cadaver from the War."

Many times Jackson shows bodies dangling, untended and ignored, from barbed wire, akin to those from the *War Triptych* or the obviously named but no less striking *Corpse on Barbed Wire*.





Otto Dix, "Near Langemarck (February 1918)."





Otto Dix, "Corpse on Barbed Wire."

A group of Tommies, exhausted, huddled together in their trench, are positioned almost exactly like Dix's *Resting Company*, the only difference their uniforms. The parallels were too obvious to ignore; Jackson, in his years of searching through the footage provided by the War Museums, had clearly



searched for and found footage that matched the works of Dix. Otto Dix, perhaps more than any other artist, truly captured the soul-killing dread and visceral, bleak reality of this war. Jackson, in his deep and thorough understanding of his subject, chose images echoic of Dix's in order to evoke in the viewer that same sense of despair, of resignation, of trauma. This conscious homage is my favorite takeaway from Jackson's film.

Whether conscious or not, however, Jackson's most prominent homage, and ultimately the film's downfall, lies in its obvious parallels to his most famous subject matter: the works of Tolkien.

J.R.R. Tolkien served in the Lancashire Fusilliers, as a signal-officer. He saw action at the Somme and lost two of his closest school friends to the War.

The narrative structure of *They Shall Not Grow Old* is, almost exactly, that of *Lord of the Rings*. A group of brave, innocent Englishmen/hobbits, inadvertently forced away from the comforts of hearth and home, reluctantly but bravely sally forth to do their duty in the face of certain destruction. Along the way, their innocence is lost. They confront unimaginable evil and emerge scarred, only to return home to a land unwelcoming, hostile, entirely changed from the one they left.

Of course, Jackson cannot be blamed for telling the truths of the War; this narrative, though romanticized and muddled, parallels the experience of many Englishmen during the War. It was certainly Tolkien's narrative. It is the very Englishness of the narrative that presents us with the film's biggest problem, one Andria Williams (of the Military Spouse Book Review, and a Wrath-Bearing Tree editor) also covered extensively in [her review](#), which is that of representation.

To the casual viewer, seeing *They Shall Not Grow Old* leaves

one with the clear impression that the entire Great War was fought by the British infantry and artillery, more or less single-handed. The French of course are mentioned, and even seen in a few shots, but overall the collection of images on the screen is of British, Welsh, Scots and Irish troops, every face a white face. The British West Indies Reserves are never seen. The film is innocent of a single Sepoy, there are no Gurkhas, no Malays.

In the featurette at the end of the film, Jackson addresses these concerns with a literal wave of the hand and a dismissive remark about the focus of the picture and the material available to him, while the screen actually shows unused footage of black troops, giving the lie to his explanation even as he offers it. What really pissed off your humble reviewer was the sentence Jackson used to cap this segment of the featurette: "This is a film by a non-scholar, for non-scholars."

Wow. OK. Certainly it's not an academic film, but to suggest that giving representation only to white British troops on-screen is in some way justifiable because the film is "by a non-scholar" rubbed me the wrong way. Mr Jackson, you're going to tell us that you, the man who owns a closetful of original WWI uniforms—the man who literally minutes before was showing off his collection of *actual Great War artillery pieces*—the man who admitted to owning every issue of *The War Illustrated* magazine—you, of all people, would offer this lame excuse?

I think the issue here is not an actual dishonesty on Jackson's part, however. I believe that his inability to see his own biases stems from a long association with the works of Tolkien, in which the War of the Ring is fought and won by the Men of the West, the people of Gondor and Rohan. (Although as noted by other viewers of this film, even Tolkien's coalition was more diverse than the one shown in *They Shall Not Grow Old*—at least the Fellowship included elves and dwarves).

The issue of Tolkien's source material, and whether or not it is actively or casually racist, is one that encompasses far too great a scope for this review. Certainly Tolkien did not think himself a racist, and was a vocal opponent of Nazi racialist theories, even going so far as to send a series of nasty letters to a German publisher who wanted to reprint *The Hobbit* in the late '30s but only after confirming if Tolkien was "arisch"—that is, Aryan. He also hated apartheid, having been born in South Africa, and was similarly vocal in his condemnation of the practice.



J.R.R. Tolkien in  
WWI uniform.

Yet there are Tolkien's own works, which reflect the unthinking cultural biases of a man born in the Victorian era who came of age in the Edwardian. The nations of the East (Rhun, Harad, &c.) are all populated by dark-skinned Men who are under the thrall of Sauron. Tolkien's own remarks about the appearance of Orcs (found in his letters) include a distressing description of them as like "the unlovliest of the Mongol-types," and he explicitly stated that the gold-loving Dwarves were based on the Jewish people, for whom he nurtured a public admiration his whole life, but the association is an uncomfortable one to modern thought.

In conclusion: should you see this film? Absolutely. Should you see it with caveats and reservations? Clearly. Beautiful

but flawed, *They Shall Not Grow Old* is a necessary film, but an incomplete one.

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# **Election Special: To Hell With Civility by Rob Bokkon**

I'm so tired of re-writing this article.

The drafts kept piling up and piling up and piling up, one after the other. I'd think I was done, and then—here comes the goddamn news again.

Shock. Anger. Horror.

And again.

And again.

And again, but way worse this time.

I'm beginning to feel like a character in a Borges story, or a Lev Grossman novel. A chronicler fated to write the same story over and over again, only to find that he has to begin it all over, once more, as soon as he reaches the end.

Because the atrocities just *will not stop*.

As of this writing, bombs are still traveling through the mail to “the enemy of the people,” the media. You know, like the headquarters of CNN. Those are words, you may recall, said by the sitting President of the United States. You probably forgot that quote, given the torrent of appalling things he says daily. This most recent bomb came on the heels of many other potentially deadly packages sent to the leaders of the Democratic Party, including two former Presidents.





Poster found on Purdue campus this past week. Photo: Patrick Johanns.

As of this writing, two black grandparents are dead in my home state of Kentucky, shot down in the produce section of a Kroger by an avowed white supremacist who was heard telling another person of his race, "whites don't kill whites." The shooter was a white supremacist who had attempted to gain access to an African-American church just minutes before shooting up the grocery store.

As of this writing, a synagogue in Pittsburgh has lost eleven of its congregation. They were shot, by a Nazi, in the United States of America, in the year 2018.

The worst thing is: by now you're almost OK with it.

Stop. I don't mean you condone it. I don't even mean you accept it. But I do mean that you're becoming, more and more each day, *used to it*.

The nature of fascist violence, fascist politics, fascist ideology, is not insidious. It is not subtle. It is not clever.

Fascism is brassy. Loud. Bombastic.

Overwhelming.

Eventually, you start to tune it out. Whether from compassion fatigue or a sincere desire to protect your own mental health or just sheer exhaustion, you start to push it aside. Ignore it. Convince yourself that someone else is doing something about it, just so you can focus on the important stuff like getting dinner ready or taking out the garbage or your kid's grades.

Which is, unfortunately, exactly what fascists want.

They are counting on you to be overwhelmed. They are counting on you to change the channel. They are counting on you to see so much hateful rhetoric, so much ethnic violence, so much anti-LGBT+ legislation that you just can't anymore.

And so this, gentle reader, is where we are. We have actual Nazis marching the streets. We have a government that refuses to do anything about it, that is known to cultivate them for votes and political support, that only makes the most terse and backhanded of statements "condemning" them.

We have a Supreme Court likely to deliver the death knell to the last vestiges of a woman's right to choose, in the United States of America.

We have an executive branch making determined and deliberate assaults on LGBT+ rights on a scale literally never before seen. The rabble-rousing polemics of the George W. Bush administration, the casual hatred of Reagan: these are nothing compared to the systemic offenses committed by Trump, Pence and their evangelical cronies. The transgender military ban,

the attacks on title IX, the effort to ban the same-sex spouses of diplomats from entering the USA—all a product of Trump's America.

See? You're tired already. You've heard it all, or if you haven't, you're not surprised.

There are worse things than being tired, though.

Actively encouraging this stuff, for example. Those people, though—the ones who still support Trump, the ones who think his plan to end birthright citizenship (and with it the Fourteenth Amendment) is a great idea, the ones who believed the Democrats actually mailed bombs to themselves—those people are lost to any rational appeal. We can't count on them anymore. They've been given the opportunity to regret their decision, to show some basic decency, and they're not going to do it.

And yet, we have among us those who are, to my mind, even worse than the Trumpites. That would be the legions of people standing around wringing their hands and wondering aloud why we can't all get along. The people yelling about “the discourse.” The people who inevitably seem to lecture the left on something called “civility” while utterly ignoring the actual fascists marching in the streets.

These would be that lofty political class known as “the moderates.” I say “lofty” because every single last one of them will tell you, at some length, about their moral superiority to “extremists.” They “don't vote party, they vote for candidates.” They “refuse to condemn someone over something as trivial as politics.” They “remember when there was a spirit of bipartisanship in this country.” And what's more, they will tell you in no uncertain terms why you're what's wrong with this nation, and how it doesn't help to call Nazis what they are, and...I'm making myself sick writing this.

I just don't understand. Twenty or thirty years ago, maybe, I

could see that sort of thinking. Back when the GOP wasn't entirely composed of homophobes and plutocrats. Back when the Democratic Party still nurtured a few nasty Dixiecrat types. Back when neither party much cared about LGBT rights. Back when the GOP still believed in the social safety net. But now?

Now, in this day and age, you're telling me "you vote candidate over party" when the party platform of the GOP is explicitly anti-LGBT? You're telling me that you're sometimes OK with taking away a woman's right to choose? You're telling me that you're sometimes OK with dismantling the entirety of the New Deal and the Great Society? You're telling me that you're sometimes OK with a brutal and xenophobic, to say nothing of racist, immigration policy?

You're *sometimes* OK with the guy who was endorsed by Nazis?

Fuck that. And fuck the calls for "civility" from these very same, amoral people. These people will tie themselves in knots over Mitch McConnell getting his dinner interrupted, but then blithely ignore the fact that he is actively seeking to remove health care from millions upon millions of aged and poor people. They get upset when people shout at Sarah Sanders, but ignore the fact that she lies for, and repeats the lies of, a man who is actively placing children in cages because their parents had the audacity to seek asylum in the United States of America.

When they say "civility" they don't even know what they mean by it. They think they're calling for politeness. They think they're calling for decorum. But you cannot be polite to someone who is actively seeking to disenfranchise, dehumanize or otherwise harm you through the apparatus of the state. You cannot afford common social graces to people who, through their hateful rhetoric, inspire acts of terror against marginalized groups. You cannot extend greater consideration for those who would oppress you than they would extend to you.

Because to do so is to cede power. To do so is to say, "You are deserving of better treatment than I am." To do so is to prop up the very power structures that are currently aimed at us like weapons, to be complicit in our own ruin.

Martin Luther King did not sit down with the leaders of the KKK. Gandhi did not concede that the British Raj "had some ideas worth considering". And Marsha P. Johnson was not worried about respect, or civility, or decorum when she threw the first brick at the NYPD during the Stonewall riots. She was worried about her survival. Her right to exist. Her right to be a fully recognized human being.

So no, I won't be civil to these fascists. Not now. Not ever. And you shouldn't either.