

New Poetry by D.R. James: “Surreal Expulsion”

New poem by DR James: Surreal Expulsion

New Poetry by Damian White: “Alabaster Clouds”

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New Poetry by Steve Gerson: “Our Prayers”



TEETH MUZZLE SPIT / *image by Amalie
Flynn*

Our Prayers

where are the shields
/we need/
to stop the blast
of bullets Glock
and AK
assaults?
that overwhelm the blue

in our veins?
that enter our brains our
schools the bodies
of children with unicorn
backpacks?
that enter
our workplaces inundated
with anger our streets
with late-night drivebys?
church service blood spattered
bibles shredded
commandments torn
as if by raptor teeth
muzzle spit?
while senators say
our prayers are with you?

New Poetry by Todd Heldt: “This Is A Drill, This Is Only A Drill” and “Suffer The Children”



ACTION IS PRETTY / *image by Amalie Flynn*

This is a drill. This is only a drill.

They voted to abolish history.

There had been no commercials.
We didn't know which wrong to fear most,
and nobody got the joke.
When the polls ran out of ballots,
somebody hurled a beer bottle
through a church's stained-glass window.
Peace officers deployed
pepper spray for the white kids
and bullets for the black.
You should expect to see things
like this in democracy. Because
the cost is always
what the market will bear.
We all went home or to jail,
or to hospital or morgue, grateful.
America in action is pretty,
the Blue Angels swooping in for the kill
as spectators cheer from the beaches below.
We don't even know who we are fighting.
Someone is crossing himself.
Someone is crossing the border.
War is just how we learn geography,
and someone scaled a wall
to pick your corn. Good people
are unarmed and
defenseless in church,
and no one will tell us straight
which group of not us we should bomb.

Suffer the Children

12000 kids in detention
300 shot dead in their schools
200 bombed by drones
the ones we don't know to mention
and the ones the future will starve

my two who are safe in their bedroom
who cry when they are scared

New Review: BRAVO! Ben Fountain Scores a Touchdown on Reality



Americans do not genuinely support the troops. This is the impression Ben Fountain's 2012 war novel *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* left me with. Though American society supports their military in theory, they don't care beyond their own comfort zones. And by comfort zones I mean luxurious "La-Z-Boy's" close to the remote for changing the channel as soon as it gets uncomfortable. I am aware that this is a broad and exaggerated statement to make, but Fountain's novel made me question America's supposedly infinite support for its veterans and challenged my assumptions about American patriotism.

When the novel opens, it is Thanksgiving Day at Dallas Cowboy Stadium. The 19-year old Billy Lynn and his fellow Bravo squad members have just finished two weeks of special leave from Iraq for an act of heroism caught on film by a FOX News camera crew. They have been paraded throughout the country to reinforce America's faith in the war, and they will now spend their final day, and the entire novel, at a uniquely American holiday celebrating a uniquely American sport. When the day is over, the eight "Bravo Squad" Soldiers will return to Iraq.

Unless—again in uniquely American fashion—they can land a movie deal first. Right away, Fountain's plot reveals how, for America's entertainment elite, the true battle has nothing to do with Iraq. FOX News producers, Cowboy Stadium CEOs, and Hollywood directors do not really want to celebrate these soldiers for who they are or what they did. They would rather celebrate capitalism by fighting each other over who can make most money off these soldiers' traumatic experiences.

Through a close third-person narrative, Fountain gives unfiltered access to an impressive amount of tangled emotions and interactions happening over the course of one single day. Streams of consciousness collide with word-clouds emphasizing words in uncommon ways (e.g., "nina leven", "currj," and "terrRist"). This creates confusion and distracts from things happening outside of Billy's head, but, at the same time, Billy's intimate and honest inner monologues tied me to the novel. It felt voyeuristic, allowing insight into thoughts far from my reality. Imagining the "overcaffeinated tag teams of grateful citizens trampoline right down the middle of his hangover," I got the feeling I knew his moods and opinions better than the overcaffeinated "grateful" citizens. Yes, I even almost felt his headache worsen as the manager kept forgetting to get a real twenty-first century "hero"—Advil.

Fountain's decision to name the squad "Bravo" points to the endless thanks given to veterans, handed out as effortlessly as clapping your hands and yelling "Bravo" at overworked stage stars. Like actors, these soldiers wear costumes to fit expectations and re-appear for encores despite being tired after the big show. This thread of superficial gratitude stretches throughout the entire novel, pointing out not only the civilian crowd's thirst for sensation but also their longing for justification. "It was worth it?" they ask Billy. "Don't you think? We had to do it, don't you think?" Billy, having seen the reality, wishes that "just once somebody would call him baby-killer." While doubting the legitimacy of his

duties to patrol, shoot and kill, he experiences how society glorifies a soldiers' violent agency. Being celebrated for "the worst day of his life," Billy questions whether the U.S. Army's actions abroad are fully understood and if his fellow citizens even desire to do so. This impression gets reaffirmed when the squad is expected to march onstage unprepared during the Halftime Show. "The explosions start," Billy says, "and they all flinch, boom boom boom, lum rounds are shooting off from somewhere backstage, smokers that explode with the arid crackle of cluster bombs scattering over a wheat field." These cheering fans fail to notice that fireworks might not be as entertaining to veterans as they are to civilians. Nobody bothers to wake Bravo Squad up from this PTSD nightmare.

In addition to the stream of consciousness and word clouds, Fountain provides flashbacks to round out Billy's character. We find out that Billy might not have even joined the military voluntarily. The reader re-experiences his many moral challenges and choices, and Fountain manages to convey the unfamiliar situation of a teenager who survived frontline battles while still being unsure if he had adequate alternatives besides enlisting. Furthermore, Fountain digs up emotions merely hidden underneath layers of stereotypical masculinity. Lacking role models in his father and community, Billy looks up to his fallen supervisor, the NCO "Shroom," who shared not only advice, but also his final moments with Billy.

Fountain satirizes themes of masculinity and femininity in other moments too. He provocatively reduces manhood to muscles and materialism while minimizing womanhood to sexual temptations. Billy and the other soldiers objectify every female in the novel, infusing the war-hero-trope with the thirsty testosterone of a sexually deprived teenager. Additionally, Fountain critiques America's second biggest source of pride (next to its military): football. When Billy sees the football players' excessive protective equipment, he reasons: "They are among the best-cared for creatures in the

history of the planet.” So why not “send them just as they are at this moment, well rested, suited up, psyched for brutal combat?” “Send the entire NFL!” he shouts—“Mere bombs and bullets bounce off their bones of steel. Submit, lest our awesome NFL show you straight to the flaming gates of hell.” Obviously, Billy, a soldier who has fought for life and death rather than for a championship, does not want autographs.

The author creates a tornado of national pride, suppressed emotions, consumerism, and trauma, and leaves the reader both speechless and yet also asking, “how should we treat veterans?” This, in addition to the jumps from reality to flashback and Billy’s constant hangover, makes *Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk* a stressful read. Fountain provides long build-ups to multiple dramatic turning points, including the movie deal, the return to war, the need for intimacy and the official “Halftime Show” climax. As a reader, I constantly hoped for success while suspecting failure. Eventually, I began to question society as a whole. I asked myself, if this is true, if society does use solidarity to hide self-absorption, what’s the point of this book? Why put ourselves through this? But Ben Fountain assists the reader at the right moment. He leads us through Billy’s twisted experiences, making sure we stay with the novel, understand its message, and take heart from the experience. Toward the end, Fountain has Billy observe that “his reality is their reality’s bitch.” Those words kicked in like the Advil Billy never got. They made me rethink the fake, oversaturated, and questionable life America and maybe even I call reality, what Fountain describes in another work as the “Fantasy Industrial Complex.”

This book is a stressful one. But this is exactly what makes Billy Lynn a page turner. We bond with Billy faster. His thoughts and feelings stick with us after turning the last page. A worthwhile read, *Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk* changes our perspective of the world, which is what, in my opinion, a war novel should do.

“Daily Exercise”, “America”, “I Tell My Children”



SPACES BETWEEN US / *image by Amalie Flynn*

daily

exercise (haiku)

my morning poems
have begun to sound like Tweets
fragments of bird song

America

we
best reflect

the
spaces between us

when
we stand
together

I tell my children

to clean their own rooms
to play fair and make right
to always do
the best they can.

And then I apologize
that I am not leaving them
a better world
than my own.

New Poetry: “Layla’s first buck” by Denise Jarrott



her father said it was his favorite thing about her, that she was a hunter, like he is. she holds its head up for the picture. she wears an orange hat. now the deer unfolds from itself like the fortune telling paper folded and labeled with possible outcomes. the deer’s eyes dark and its body flat. I was not so calm

at death as she. she is twelve now. I remember when I was twelve, when I began to take notice of men, thought if I was pure enough they could never touch me, that I’d float away on quiet feet if they got too close. I’d just go upward, and utterly silent. some animals piss on themselves to deter predators, I didn’t brush my hair, I wore ugly underwear my

mother purchased

for me in plastic bulk, I focused my gaze upward with my heart hot in my throat.

Layla, it is around this time you discover the existence of horrible people,

men with gray lips with spit foaming at the edge of their mouths,

the looks on the faces of girls you know that will feel like acid, their laughter

will eat at you the same way acid does and they are casual with it. You will begin to recognize the wedge-faced boys with big teeth and a sour smell, like sweat and milk,

you will learn that everything you do feeds their hunger.

I wonder if you will want to be far away, just somewhere else on the other side of the world, or perhaps in a forest where you

wake in a tent or in a shelter of branches. I wonder if you will

want to be in a city, in an all-white apartment of your own, those

apartments that I know don't exist that look like the netsuke one sees

now and again in museums, those little curls of bone. I wonder if you will

want to wake in your blue bedroom with a glass of water next to you, full of still

bubbles where the air got in. Layla, I will not tell you to freeze yourself as you are, to preserve time for anyone to spoon out your youth into a jar and graze against time with your feet. You will grow, you will come to know your own capabilities as some people come to know the positions of stars, or how to speak another language.

It is not for me to whisper to you across this divide.

New Poetry: “What Great Grief Has Made the Civilian Mute” by Jennifer Murphy



To watch soldiers load into planes on television
To ignore veterans who manage to make it home

To cry out when an airman murders four of your friends
To never question the valiance of combatants

To have visions of your father stabbing you to death
To lose your sight in vodka and cigarettes

To flee the western night for that big bright eastern city
To discover there is no such thing as relief in escape

To forget the names of the slain from your hazy youth
To remember in excruciating detail the site of their wounds

To learn there is nothing you can do to raise the dead
To spend your life writing the killed into existence

To read the greatest fear for men is being embarrassed
To understand that for women it's being murdered

To be the only female in the room of camouflaged men
To befriend the lonely fighter in the city of civilians

To love a Marine who became a decorated firefighter
To lose him in the North Tower that blue September

To watch soldiers load into planes on television
To embrace veterans who manage to make it home

*for Deborah, Amy, Melissa, and Heather Anderson
and Captain Patrick "Paddy" Brown*

**Photo Credit: U.S. Army photo by Maj. Adam Weece, 3rd CR PAO,
1st Cav. Div.**

Scrabble Can Build or Break Friendship

My Sunday morning began with a Wall Street Journal article about Scrabble. The story, which featured scrappy young Nigerian players, underdog victories, and applications driving the most rigorous systematic analysis of the game to date, decided that the future of Scrabble lay in defensive play. It was one of the saddest, most depressing articles I've encountered this week—and utterly in keeping with social trends toward cynicism and narrow self-interest.

We haven't always played Scrabble in our house, but it's always been around. I grew up poor—the kind of poor where you eat meat twice a week, and beans are a good source of protein, and you get invisible Christmas presents, and your black and white television craps out when you're five years old and you don't get a replacement until you're ten—a 12-inch screen. No cable, just antennae, which would pick up signals better in

certain areas than in others.

I grew up “poor” rather than “in poverty.” My parents were both well educated artists. Our (small) apartment was filled with books and wooden blocks and board games like Scrabble. And poetry (my mother was a poet) and music (my father was a classical guitarist). Furthermore, during the day, my surroundings were safe and engaging—we lived in a rural area, on the Connecticut shore. There are crucial differences between being poor and living in poverty, and one of the most important is the sense of limitation or despair that attends impoverished conditions—I did not see my world as being bounded or limited by possibility.

Still, the lack of toys, television, and infinite disposable physical energy meant that our family tended to play board and card games or listen to music as a means of recreation. And so as soon as my sister and I were old enough, we played Scrabble with our parents.



Playing Scrabble
together opens up
space for
competition within a
framework of
cooperation

Our first games weren't great—low-scoring contests normally won by my father or mother, who'd routinely net over 200 points. Nothing impressive. We rarely exceeded 450 points total. Breaking 100 was considered good for me or my sister. We didn't know how to play, didn't know the words, the techniques, the strategies. Too, the game began to grow unpleasantly competitive when I and then my sister reached High School—we became invested in winning, to the detriment of the game itself.

When I hit college, though, Scrabble came into its own as the family game par excellence. This was due to an observation made by a girlfriend at the time. Following a victory of mine, she pointed out that because the group had failed to break 500 points, collectively we had all lost. At first I thought this was motivated by spite. Later, though, she directed my attention to the inside of the box, upon which the rules were printed. Sure enough, the language on the box stated quite clearly that 500 points was the score four average, amateur Scrabble players should reasonably be expected to achieve.

This changed the game for me, and for my family and friends. The implication was clear: playing Scrabble, which I'd always viewed as a winner-take all, zero-sum game, had a team component. If one player scored 496 points and the other three each managed (somehow) to score 1, and that one player won, but the combined total for the game was 499, then collectively, the group had failed to measure up to the "average" for a game of four players: 500. This meant that according to the game's own logic, while one should be aiming for the best score possible, one should also be looking to ensure everyone else was maximizing their scores, up to a certain point. In other words: Scrabble is a game about competition within a framework of cooperation. The essence of Scrabble is not doing everything one can to defeat one's opponents, but rather to defeat them within a matrix of collaboration. It would not be an exaggeration to point out that this lesson, which I first understood playing Scrabble as a young man, has been salutary for other areas of my life. Winning a friendly post-prandial competition or losing in a broader winning effort became equally enjoyable pursuits.

Our scores quickly reflected this. From struggling to break 500, my family routinely scored in the 600-750 point range. The winner was the person who played the best words in the best places—but that distinction applied more or less equally to myself, my parents, and my sister. We learned more words

through competition, and were able to push the boundaries of the game, while blossoming within its framework. Risking more in the context of succeeding at the game was elevating our individual and collective game to new heights—we weren't risking less in an effort to dominate, or to win. By cooperating, all of our scores were increasing. All of us were winning. One might view that as sportsmanship.

I'm glad that Nigerian iconoclasts have demonstrated that they can defeat their former colonial occupiers in an equal contest of wits. That seems important on its own, a useful lesson for all who might erroneously believe in an essential cultural or social hierarchy. As an American, I'm not a huge fan of Great Britain—not in the past, not in the present—and usually happy to watch them lose to the people they exploited for so long, under almost any circumstances. I will say this: Scrabble is best as a pedagogical tool encouraging friendship and mutually-supportive growth, not as a means of recreating intellectual trench warfare. I hope these Nigerian Scrabble players continue to win—but also that this victory does not come at the expense of Scrabble's best and finest attributes: its capacity to encourage a conception of the common good.

The Bloodiest American War Many Americans Have Never Heard Of

The title, which I selected myself, is a trick. Most citizens of the United States of America know their war history. There's even a [popular television brand](#) dedicated to educating US citizens about war, and their country's role in it. So

while it may surprise some to learn that the greatest loss of life during a single battle occurred in World War I rather than the Civil War or World War II, it is not as though people are unaware of those three wars, or the basic context: North versus South, Allies versus Germany, Allies versus Nazi Germany.

But “American” refers to the Americas, as a whole. And there’s one war of which few outside South America have heard. A war that occurred during the modern era, and was unlike anything seen during recorded, post-enlightenment history, before or since. While the scope and scale differs from that of the first and second World Wars, the loss of life and culture is comparable in relative terms—even, perhaps, exceeds that inflicted on Germany at the end of that conflict.

This war shares something else in common with World War II—a type of dictator that one sees only occasionally in the world. A visionary tyrant, a leader inspired by some overarching idea that compels everyone around him (or her) to attempt a drastic overhaul of society along moral, ethical, or scientific lines.

The Paraguayan War (or “The War of the Triple Alliance”) pitted Paraguay (substantially larger then than it is today) against Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay. It was a battle of ideologies—on one side, a group of countries (the Triple Alliance) made up of what we would now call repressive authoritarian regimes. On the other, Paraguay, which was run by an absolutist dictator. Something that all the participants had in common was that all had recently declared their independence from Spain or Portugal as a consequence of the Napoleonic Wars, and were coming into their own as nation-states.

Paraguay had a population of 525,000 at the war's outset. The combined population of the Triple Alliance was around 11,000,000. Paraguay was the aggressor, attacking Uruguay, Brazil, and then Argentina in succession until all three nations were united. The war lasted from 1864-1870, and by its end, Paraguay was completely defeated. 70% of the male population of Paraguay died, including its dictator. Paraguay lost large swaths of its territory to Brazil and Argentina, and its population decreased by over half. It took decades for the small country to recover.

This type of destruction is rare in modern warfare—a harrowing of one's enemies so deep that it creates generational disruption. It seems that quite apart from Paraguay's role of aggressor in the war, a source of hatred for Paraguay and unwillingness on the part of the Triple Alliance to negotiate with them was the nature of Paraguay's dictatorship, and its history. The Triple Alliance all had similar forms of government—authoritarian aristocracy-based systems, recently liberated from a similarly aristocratic Europe, run primarily by European elites drawn from the country that had originally colonized them (Spain in Argentina's case, Portugal in the case of Brazil). They all condoned slavery to varying degrees.



Attempted to
create in
Paraguay a
racial utopia
based on
Rousseau's
ideas

Paraguay was different—almost unique in world history. In the

wake of its independence from Spain during the Napoleonic wars, Paraguay was ruled by a heavily centralized government that obeyed [the despotic but charismatic progressive leader](#) Jose Gaspar Rodriguez de Francia. De Francia closed Paraguay's borders and instituted a radical set of social and political reforms, ruling until his death in 1840. Following that, his [successor and acolyte \(a nephew\)](#) Carlos Antonio Lopez ruled from 1842 until he died in 1862. While slavery was not abolished until after the fall of the dictatorship in 1870, it operated somewhat differently than in neighboring countries, in that after 1842, children of slaves were automatically emancipated upon reaching the age of 25.

De Francia and his successor, Carlos Antonion Lopez, took long views of Paraguay's development. Under their harsh direction, Paraguay industrialized, fielded a series of schools that catapulted it to the highest level of education in South America at the time, achieved independence in terms of food production, organized their military along European (Prussian) lines, and created the country's first constitution. They also attempted to create in Paraguay a—wait for it—*real racial utopia* based on enlightenment (Rousseau, specifically) principles, wherein whites could not marry one another, but were compelled to marry darker-skinned people. Paraguay was run by nepotistic despots, but was less nation-state than an aspiration toward just and equal society. Its leadership seemed legitimately to desire a distinct, enlightened culture wherein elitism occurred only through a honest competition. When de Francia died, for example, he'd doubled Paraguay's wealth—furthermore, it was discovered that he had neglected to collect his full salary, several years' worth of which he returned to swell Paraguay's coffers. The nepotistic aspect of the Paraguayan state seemed more a product of access to education and ideological committment than any egotistical desire on the part of de Francia to perpetuate his blood in

leadership roles.

When the dictator's nephew's [son](#) (Francisco Solano Lopez) took over in 1862, he opened the borders and began a serious attempt to organize the smaller South American nations into an alliance that would be capable of resisting larger neighbors like Argentina and Brazil. Lopez also fell in love with the [bad-ass Irish wife](#) of a French officer—this heroine subsequently moved to Paraguay and bore multiple children. The first country Lopez sought to influence was Paraguay's neighbor Uruguay—this country had (at the time) a government friendly to Paraguay's, and enthusiastic about creating a bulwark against South America's traditional powerhouses. Uruguay also controlled access to the Atlantic Ocean, key to expanding trade.

Brazil had other ideas. They succeeded in replacing Uruguay's pro-Paraguay government with a pro-Brazil government, backed by a Brazilian invasion, and Lopez decided the time was right to push back. Despite its small population and relative lack of equipment, Paraguay's militarized society was able to mobilize large portions of its population quickly, and Lopez took the upper hand against its much larger but less-well organized northern neighbor and its Uruguayan puppet. Following a setback against Brazil's superior navy in 1865, and a rebuke from Argentina, Paraguay expanded the war to include its southern neighbor. After this year, the war became a series of catastrophes for Paraguay, punctuated by the occasional defensive victory.

For more details on Paraguay's earliest days of development as an independent nation (which itself offers several fascinating historical lessons and much intellectual food for thought), I


recommend the Wikipedia articles that form the backbone of my own research, [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#). Suffice it to say, Paraguay's racial and social utopian dream (or nightmare) was destroyed by Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay working in concert whose superior equipment and population told in the long run. Lopez led a guerilla war but was killed in 1870 in the jungle, his family's dream in ruins. Still, as with many such widespread and creatively ambitious social experiments, the legacy of Paraguay's innovations live on. Paraguay has one of the most homogenous populations in South America—in part a product of that early intermingling of Europeans with black, native, and mixed-race populations—and an unusually long life expectancy (especially given their poverty), along with relatively broad education and literacy rates.

I'm not sure what lesson to draw from the Triple War. On the one hand, I'd like to think that real dialogue between different ideologies and nations should be possible. On the other hand, that "dialogue" always seems to find its purest expression through warfare. And one cannot discount that it's always the purest, most radical believers in progress (the Hitlers, the Stalins, the Lopezs) that seem to initiate these struggles.

We live in a day and age when people casually employ terms like "fascist," "communist," and "dictator," (as I have to a certain extent in this essay), and extrapolate a great deal from those words' associations. Jose Gaspar Rodriguez de Francia lived a frugal life that he seemed unattached to, so much so that his substantial inheritance went to enriching Paraguay. Nevertheless, his nephew's son was a belligerent war-hawk who brought ruin to his neighbors, and, ultimately, to Paraguay itself. I wonder—countries, societies like that of newly-independent, 19th century Paraguay don't attempt to

mask their intentions—they telegraph them to the outside world. The tyrant, the dictator, boldly and proudly tells all who will listen: "this is how society should be—this is how **all** society should be." Are there any nations today that can honestly claim to resemble tiny Paraguay, dreaming of dominion?

Bernie Sanders Wins in Iowa!

Photo Credit: J. David  Ake, AP. Senator Bernie Sanders and his wife, Jane.

Regardless of what the official results might say, Bernie Sanders won the night in Iowa. The margin reported by most media outlets shows Hillary Clinton at 49.8% and Sanders at 49.6%, but there have been enough reports of [shenanigans](#), [voter fraud](#), and [missing results](#) from various precincts to call into question the value of the caucus process in showing the people's choice for the Democratic nominee. What is abundantly clear, however, is that Bernie Sanders is no fringe candidate. The showing by the Sanders campaign in Iowa could be exactly what Bernie Sanders needs to [shake and bake](#) right past Hillary Clinton in the race to be the Democratic Party's nominee.

So without further ado, here are the top three reasons why Bernie Sanders was the real winner in the Iowa Caucus.

Bernie Sanders Has All the Momentum

Clinton gained nothing of value, and Sanders won the surprise of pundits and coverage from the mainstream media machine. Bernie Sanders was expected to lose, but his campaign is

[energized](#) and Clinton's campaign is [scared](#). She may have won by 0.02% according to most mainstream reports, but Hillary Clinton won a [Pyrrhic](#) victory, and it's one she will not easily recover from.

Sanders and Clinton virtually tied, and Iowa's delegates are not awarded on a winner-take-all basis, so the tie goes to the candidate who exceeded expectations, clearly Sanders. At the Democratic National Convention, Sanders and Clinton will receive the [same number of delegates](#) from the state of Iowa, so Sanders has lost nothing. Clinton, on the other hand, has lost the air of invincibility that carried her months ago.

Bernie Sanders will now move into New Hampshire as an even stronger favorite. Sanders is out of the gate garnering nearly 50% of the vote in Iowa when just months ago Sanders was in [single digits](#) in the polls. A tie in Iowa and a win in New Hampshire just may give Sanders the momentum he needs to gain the backing of more establishment Democrats.

Bernie Sanders Showed the Nation that Hillary Clinton Can Lose

[Ruth Marcus](#) asked the perfect question when trying to decide who won the tie: "Which campaign was celebrating Monday night, and which was trying to figure out what went wrong?" Hillary Clinton has long been the presumptive nominee, and the mainstream media has viewed Bernie Sanders as nothing more than a modern-day Ross Perot. Far from being an outlier to shake up the political conversation, Bernie Sanders demonstrated his mass appeal and ability to contend.

At best, the media made it seem like Bernie Sanders was simply pulling Hillary Clinton [further left](#), but he had no chance to actually win the nomination. In Iowa last night, Bernie Sanders showed the world that [Hillary Clinton can be beaten](#). Considering many have shied away from Bernie Sanders because they view him as unelectable, the clear fallibility Clinton exhibited in her "win" will do nothing but give reluctant

Sanders supporters the push they need to really feel the Bern.

Bernie Sanders Established Himself as the Voice of the Future

In a bit of an ironic turn, the old white man gained the most votes from the younger and more progressive generation. Among the Democratic voter age groups, Sanders pulled the following [overwhelming numbers](#):

- Under 25: Sanders won 86% of the vote.
- 25-39: Sanders won 81% of the vote.
- 31-39: Sanders won 65% of the vote.

Just as the younger voters carried Barack Obama in crushing Hillary Clinton's presidential dreams, there is no reason younger voters won't do the same for Bernie Sanders. John Cassidy summed it up perfectly in [The New Yorker](#): "When you are so heavily reliant on support from older voters, it is tricky to project yourself as the voice of the future."

The thing is, Sanders wants voters to have the power—as they should. As such, he's demonstrated integrity no one in our younger generation has ever seen from a politician, refusing to take money from PACs and big businesses. His reward has manifested itself in [broken fundraising records](#) that show no sign of slowing. His fundraising has come from individual donors, which means far more voters are personally invested in Bernie Sanders than in any other candidate. Win or lose, it shows that there is hope yet for our system of democracy.

Matt Shuham wrote in [The Independent](#), "In a post-*Citizens United* era...the Sanders camp is placing a bet that rarely pays off in American politics: that absent mega-donors, PACs or the support of a party establishment, the machinery of public opinion can run on conviction alone." Even with a technical loss in Iowa, Sanders won the Iowa caucus. In a democratic-republic in which the voting public shows up en masse and ensures the system runs on conviction alone and not on the whims of mega-donors and media moguls, everyone wins.

Thoughts on the Zombie Apocalypse

A piece about who finds zombie narratives compelling and why.

Against Obvious Racism

Let's be honest about racism. It's here. And it's not going anywhere. But its prevalence is surprising, again, if we're being honest: we've been under the mistaken impression, for some time, now, outside the ghetto, outside poverty-stricken areas and urban centers (I'm using white code for places that black people live) that America is a fundamentally just society. We thought that we had judicial mechanisms sufficient to satisfy all segments of the population – if not *equally*, at least on some kind of sliding scale. We thought racism was on the downswing. Black comedians, rappers, and religious authorities seemed to be ministering to the disproportionate attention young black men attracted from police. Culturally, we'd accepted, on a broad level, that being black meant that you were more likely to go to prison or have trouble with law enforcement. We accepted similar things about the Hispanic population, and rarely thought anything about the Native American communities – they were wisely placed on reservations many years ago, and given responsibility over themselves, which meant that what happened to them was their fault, and not ours. Recently, the proverbial chickens have come home to roost. We've seen behind the curtain. And the truth is this:

while the punishment and social opprobrium have discouraged certain obvious forms of racism, racism itself is as thick on American life as pond scum on a still pond.

When I was in Afghanistan, one of the most remarkable lessons was that justice, and governance, were largely arbitrary – matters of aesthetics. One village would be ruled by a pro-government militia (Afghan Police and Army rarely patrolled, much of what we called “government controlled” land in Afghanistan was, in fact, militia controlled). The militia would collect taxes of 10% or 15% from the population, and would take responsibility for adjudicating tribal disputes. In other words, they acted like the Police, and tribal mechanisms (elders, etc.) acted like our judiciary. Another village, across a road, or some other terrain feature, would be ruled by the Taliban. The Taliban would collect taxes of 10% or 15% from the population, and would take responsibility for adjudicating tribal disputes using Sharia law – a Mullah would interpret crimes and, having established guilt or innocence, would impose punishment based on the Koran.

Whether a village accepted militia or Taliban rule was a combination of self-interest, security, group preference, and other variables that I do not claim to have understood, as an outsider. The important takeaway, for the purposes of this article, and understanding the role justice plays in our own society, is that *literally any* mechanism was preferable to none, and that the role of “justice” was to keep the peace, was to ensure social stability, and an absence of strife or struggle within a given community. Otherwise, war resulted. Without justice, tribes would go to war against one another over disputed resources, in a heartbeat. This was the situation on the border of Pakistan, territory the government didn't even have the strength to dispute in 2007, let alone manage.

Our American justice system has been failing for a while, now, and the only reason it hasn't been more obvious is that it's

only been failing certain portions of the population. For those individuals who are angry about this fact – that it took the well-publicized deaths of three consecutive black men under suspicious circumstances, and the refusal of a Grand Jury to acknowledge what our eyes and ears have shown reasonable people to be true – all I can say is that one knows what one knows. I can't take responsibility for the past, but I can acknowledge the present, and agree with the obvious, logical assessment that things are not correct, things are not just. The system is creating unrest where it should be resolving unrest. The American justice system – and American society in general – is, in as fundamental a way as one can imagine, broken.

The problem is not the police. I take great exception to the wealth of anger and opprobrium heaped upon our policemen and policewomen. The police are here to enforce our social standards, and they do so, quite effectively. Instead, we should be observing our own actions, and looking in the mirror to assess whether or not the problem lies within ourselves, the people of America. When you see a group of young black men, does part of you worry, does it provoke some nameless anxiety that is not felt when you're around a group of young white men? When you're sitting at a bar and a black man walks in, do you react differently from when a white man enters? Do you see a group of Hispanic people at a bus stop or in a parking lot and immediately draw conclusions about them, their motivations, their histories?

Of course you do. And when a young black man who stole a \$5 pack of swisher sweets cigarillos from a convenience store is shot by the police, when you breathe a silent sigh of relief: "one less scumbag who might get rape my wife and blast rap music loudly," that's not an indictment of the police, that's the police doing what you hoped they'd do. Ditto the hell-kid with the pistol replica, and the criminal giant who was blackly and horribly selling loose cigarettes for profit,

illegally, on a street corner. *Not in my town, you think. Motherfucking property value killing monkeys.*

You can lie to me all you want, and you can also lie to yourself, if that's important to maintaining whatever fiction you're perpetuating. But a lie is a lie, and the truth is this: you're fine with the police hassling black people, because you think black people are criminals, and you want the police to hassle criminals. I feel the same way. We're in a safe place here, we can be honest with each other. I'm scared on the train when black and Hispanic people get on board on Bridgeport or Stamford – they rarely have tickets, and always have some cock-and-bull story about misplacing it, or moving seats, or who knows what. My hypothesis? They're on the train to rob employed (this is white code for "white") people of their money and tickets.

So – but it's too obvious, now, that's the real problem with Ferguson and Eric Garner and "I can't breathe." The jig's up – people know who we are (white people, and specifically white men), and they know what we want, because they see our desires accomplished through our police. We need to make a change, so people stop rioting and burning the franchises that white people own, like CVS and Rite Aid and Family Dollar. We need to give the blacks justice – even if that means occasionally sacrificing a police officer to a kangaroo court. After all, this is really about *our* safety, and our ability to hold onto the grudges and stereotypes we cherish. If we don't feed the occasional officer to the wolves, it'll all be too obvious, and we'll actually have to change how we think about black people, and women, and Mexicans, and Chinese, and homosexuals. Police officers understand why they get paid overtime and hazardous duty – it's not so they should be safe – they're keeping *us* safe. And sometimes that means we have to hang a police officer up high, by the neck, to prevent the rabble from rioting, from getting on the train and stealing and looting and burning.

America and Iran: The Great Post-Persia Hangover

We never meant things to get out of hand the way they did in Iran. Let's agree about that to begin with, let's agree that the CIA's role in [replacing a democratically elected but left-leaning leader](#) in the 1950s with a dictator, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, was understandable in the context of Persia's vast oil fields, and the widespread belief at the time that we were on the strategic defensive against an ascendent and nuclear Soviet Union. Let's agree that yes, there were excesses, as there often are, even in our society today. There was CIA-condoned torture – a lot of it – so much so that if you were to ask an Iranian immigrant from that time about the Shah, he or she would likely tell you that life under the Shah was about as bad as it later became under the Clerics – but Persia was right next to the Soviet Union, and this was an existential fight. Sometimes you have to break a few eggs to make an omelet, especially when the free world is on the line.

Iran was supposed to be a lock, for us, like it had been for the British. And the thing about America is that it's better than Britain – in many ways, it's just Britain 2.0. More freedom. Better PR. Hotter chicks, with better teeth. That's the promise of America – bigger, beefier, less nonsense, and we can tell the difference between a bad guy and a good guy. Above all, the implicit bargain between America and its overseas pals is simple: you love us, we've got your back.

The type of revolution that occurred in Persia, coming when it did, after Vietnam, was unthinkable. A safely pro-US country turned its back on us, and started calling us "The Great Satan." Worse than couching its rhetoric in a language we

shared, the language of religion, they didn't even ally with the Soviet Union. A defection along rational lines from our system to that of the Soviet Union would have stung, but was also easy to rationalize – we'd just allowed ourselves to get beat by the Vietnamese, because of weak and liberal politicians. In other words, had Persia gone Red like everyone else, well, that's because we were beating ourselves. We were too weak. That was the national narrative at the time. And when you're losing due to some decision you made, when you're losing due to omission, it's almost like you didn't lose at all, right? It's not like fighting fair, *mano e mano*, and getting slapped down by someone stronger.



But Persia went for something new, and pre-enlightenment. They went in the opposite direction of the Soviet Union. They rejected Western systems entirely, and embraced a pre-colonial, theology-based organization instead. It's pointless to debate the merits of their system – anyone who'd claim Iran ended up better off as a theocratic despotism is either an extremist, an ideologue, or a buffoon. They slapped our hand away, *and* that of the Soviet Union. They said, essentially, that they hated us so much, they were willing to invent their own model, to hell with our science, to hell with a better life, to hell with all of it. If they were going to torture their own citizens, they were going to do it their own way, by god, and they did. The smack from that hand-slap has resonated, awfully, throughout our foreign policy ever since.

The greatest sin you can make against the United States of America is to hate us. Is to reject our love. Iran compounded that sin doubly – by threatening Israel, which is still a part of their official rhetoric, and by the aforementioned bad timing of their revolution occurring on the heels of our defeat in Vietnam.

It doesn't take a genius to draw parallels with the current

situation in Iraq and Syria. In ISIS (or ISIL, or IS, or Daesh) we see a similar impulse: a group of people who have discounted and rejected American assistance, save in a way that is supremely irritating (taking the plundered ammunition, vehicles, and weapons of our fallen proxies). To a certain constituent group with which we've become acquainted these last two decades, that we never suspected existed before, ISIS and Iran represent a clean break with the West, a positivist assertion of a moment in history when ethnic and religious social groups could exist outside a post-enlightenment, post-rational framework, and the colonialism and exploitation that went along with it. To ISIS and Iran, there's no fundamental difference between America and the Soviet Union.

I'm against intervening militarily in Iraq and Syria, and have written why at length elsewhere. Regardless of whether you think I'm full of s*** or not – many feel that way – one has to acknowledge that America's behavior in the Middle East has been desultory, reactionary, and short-sighted, which is why, in part, we keep encountering groups that profess to hate us. Once we begin to acknowledge that we were partly (although again, understandably) responsible for creating the conditions where a thing like Iran or ISIS could exist in the first place, we will have taken the first necessary step toward avoiding the mistakes that we will, left to our own devices and current foreign policy, create again in ten or twenty years, and then again after that. The lesson of Iran shouldn't be that we must be at loggerheads with an entire people – but that time heals all wounds, and it's okay for a group to not love us without America going ballistic in response.